

REWRITING

Ten Pages At A Time

By Kate Tremills

Rewriting. The word strikes terror into the heart of the most seasoned writer. How do you get a handle on all of those pages? Where do you start? This article explores using the strengths of a short script to rewrite your feature—ten pages at a time. Make your scenes tight, your characters memorable, and your plot seamless with these principles of rewriting.

CHALLENGES OF REWRITING

Tackling the rewrite of a feature script is a daunting process. With so many elements woven together, it can be hard to make sense of such an intricate web. Do you spend an entire rewrite on character? And then dive in again to fix the structure? Then move on to the plot? No wonder so many writers see rewriting as a frightening and lengthy process. And what if pulling one little thread ends up unraveling the whole thing?

Rewriting a feature script is a big project. Contrary to writer's lore, however, it doesn't need to be a painful one. Knowing the weaknesses of

your script and then having a manageable approach to the rewrite can actually make the process enjoyable. Even fun!

BEAUTY OF SHORT SCRIPTS

Short film scripts are an excellent model for screenwriting. They are the epitome of efficiency and tight writing. In only ten pages, you must create an intimate connection with the characters and tell a compelling story—all with an original and imaginative style.

With such limited space, every line must count. Whether that line is dialogue or scene description, not a word can be wasted. You have only ten pages to establish your theme, create layers of subtext, draw the audience into your world, and still leave a director room to interpret your script stylistically. Shorts are the ultimate blueprint. Best of all, the writing principles that make an excellent short script can be applied to rewriting a feature film script.

TEN PAGE APPROACH

Rewriting your script ten pages at a time is a straightforward and sequential process. Before

you get started, you need to have done due diligence on assessing the issues with your script. Get a variety of opinions on what's working and what isn't. Make a checklist of what you need to address. Make a second list of what you think is working well. Keep both lists close by as a reminder of the big picture.

The biggest advantage to this approach is that it makes rewriting manageable. You tackle the rewrite literally ten pages at a time. When you start, you are only dealing with pages one through ten. Forget about pages eleven to one hundred. Give all of your attention to those first ten pages, as though they were a short script unto themselves. By doing this, you can plunge into your story and your characters without that panicky feeling of thinking you will get lost in the details. Once you've finished with the first ten pages, you move on to the second ten and so on.

This method creates an intensity of focus to your writing that brings every page and every scene into high relief. When only dealing with ten pages, you can break your script down line by line. Use this approach to be brutal

about the necessity of every line. Does your character really need to say that extra sentence? Or is it a waste of valuable space that could be better used elsewhere? Thinking in ten page increments makes every line precious without making the process overwhelming.

As you work with each ten-page increment, keep in mind the key principles of a solid short script. These principles are: tight scene descriptions, immediate connection with the characters, crucial dialogue only, a strong writing style, and subtext is everything. This may seem like a lot to grasp, but when you are only dealing with ten pages, the process is remarkably easy. The best part is that you get to revel in the true joy of being a writer: savoring every word. Even when you are cutting it from your script.

PRINCIPLE ONE: TIGHT DESCRIPTIONS

Scene descriptions in a script are a key part of your style as a writer. They set the mood, establish the setting, and introduce the audience to the characters. But they don't have to be effusive. In fact, the tighter

these descriptions are, the more flexibility a director (and every other crew member) has when working with your words. Simplicity conveys the key information and leaves the audience room for their own imagination.

This room also creates space on your pages. Okay, I know. Space shouldn't matter to the story. But it does influence the read. The cleaner your scene descriptions, the faster a reader is pulled through the story. And rhythm dramatically influences the cadence of a read. Your scenes should flow easily from one to the next. Even if you are playing with a shocking writing style. You need to keep the audience engaged and connected to the story. Do this by keeping the scene descriptions efficient. Remember that, in principle, you only have ten pages to tell your story. Make the most of the words you keep.

PRINCIPLE TWO: IMMEDIATE CONNECTION

In a short script, the audience must connect to the characters by the end of the first scene. If they don't, odds are they'll spend the rest of the story desperately trying to make a connection. Lack of connection to the main character is also one of the most common issues with feature film scripts. We tend to assume that the audience has one hundred pages to get connected to the character. This approach leaves an audience frustrated and unfulfilled. They are searching for an immediate connection. One that will invest them in following this character anywhere s/he goes.

Ask yourself this question. If you only had ten pages to tell your story, what would you write so that your audience understood your character immediately? This doesn't mean resorting to stereotypes.

But every character has a universal element or predicament that you want the audience to relate to. Otherwise they won't be interested. In reality, you will have another ninety-nine pages to fill in the internal depth and contradictions of your character. Use the first page to make an impact. You only get one introduction.

PRINCIPLE THREE: CRUCIAL DIALOGUE ONLY

When writers talk about "killing your darlings," they are talking about dialogue. We may feel particularly attached to an adjective in our scene

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description, but we don't want to murder the editor who suggests that it isn't necessary. Dialogue is the screenwriter's Achilles heel.

The remedy to this sensitive issue is to put on your ten-page-only glasses. Why waste a line on saying, "Hello" if your character can use that space for maximum impact? Every line of every scene is crucial. That doesn't mean that every line is an emotional climax. The line may be a throwaway laugh that alleviates the tension in your scene. And sets up the next emotional crescendo.

When you are only dealing with ten pages, cutting dialogue is remarkably easy. Each scene has a specific purpose in building the story. Dialogue that doesn't ring true or wastes space suddenly becomes glaringly obvious. You'll find yourself writing lines that have a lot more impact, giving your

characters more edge and your turning points more meaning.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: SUBTEXT IS EVERYTHING

To keep a short script from being prosaic, the real story lies in the subtext. Characters can't say or do what they truly mean without looking painfully unreal. The same truth applies in a feature script. But how do you put that in action? If you're like me, you hear the word "subtext" and instantly glaze over.

The approach is very simple. First you need to be clear on the reason each scene is in your

short scripts is that you have a lot more room to play with writing style. Audiences are more tolerant of experimental ideas when they are only watching a film for ten minutes. While you can't push the envelope as far in a feature script, a strong and distinctive writing style makes your work stand apart. Think of the number of scripts a studio reader goes through in one week. A fresh, yet tight style grabs the attention of every reader, including directors and actors.

Breaking your rewrite into manageable amounts makes it simpler to analyze your style while you are writing. The same way you are able to break down a scene's purpose before rewriting the actual words, you can examine the style. Are you maintaining the mood you established at the beginning of the script? Is it getting diluted? Is your style tense enough for a thriller? Light enough for a comedy? Once you're past the "get the story down" first draft, you get to play with how you are telling the story in the rewrite.

THE FINAL PRODUCT

Rewriting each ten pages of your script with these short script principles can make the rewriting process fulfilling and enjoyable. Ten pages are far less daunting than one hundred pages, leaving you the mental room to play with previously ungraspable elements like subtext, style, and flow. Use this approach to make your next rewrite a process you actually look forward to. The result will be a tight script with memorable characters and a refreshing style. ■

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PRINCIPLE FIVE: STRONG WRITING STYLE

One of the best things about