

Writing Short Scripts



WILLIAM H. PHILLIPS

Foreword by **RICHARD WALTER**

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For CATHERINE ELIZABETH LOSTETTER PHILLIPS (1899–1985)
who at age eighty-four last flew west
before the setting sun
bounded down steep airplane steps
and flashed fresh photos
of her dancing at a wedding.

WILLIAM H. PHILLIPS is the author of *St. John Hankin: Edwardian Mephistopheles* (1979) and *Analyzing Films* (1985). He is Professor of English at California State University, Stanislaus, where he teaches courses in scriptwriting, film analysis, twentieth-century European dramatic literature, and nonfiction writing.

FOREWORD

DOES THE WORLD NEED yet another book on writing film scripts?

As a screenwriting educator at a leading film school, I possess the authority to compel thousands of students to purchase such books. It should surprise no one, therefore, that publishers send me their latest titles at the rate of about two a week. Some stress creativity while others emphasize marketing. Some underscore visualization and others highlight plot structure. Some are lighthearted and breezy, others are ponderous, serious, and self-important.

But the one characteristic they all share — apparently without exception — is their focus upon the long form, the feature-length film that runs approximately one hundred minutes.

Virtually none treats the short film.

It is as if the short film represented merely a fringe within a far-wider universe belonging presumably to the feature. But this is, of course, a myth. In truth, the world of the short film — both creatively and commercially — holds far more possibilities for expression, to say nothing of production, than that of the feature.

For every feature-length film that is actually produced there are hundreds of short films. These include educational, instructional, and informational films; commercials and corporate image movies; travelogues; animated films; and short subjects covering a broad array of topics. And they include also the ever-burgeoning arena of student films.

So there is abundant reason to welcome the present volume.

First of all, it is certainly appropriate that a book about writing be well written. And William H. Phillips writes with clarity and insight, offering advice that is not only theoretical but also useful in a hands-on, shirt-sleeves sense. This is uniquely affirmative in so practical an enterprise as film.

Moreover, the precepts and principles Phillips proposes are provocative and pertinent not exclusively for film writers specializing in the short form but also for filmmakers, the whole cast of artists and craftspeople who are the writer's collaborators.

And perhaps best of all, William H. Phillips recognizes that in all creative expression, including film, what is significant is not the way things come apart but how they come together. Differences among various phenomena pale beside their vast, shared, common areas. To its author's credit, this book focuses not upon the differences but the similarities.

For, as is asserted implicitly throughout this book, there are two—and only two—types of films. And these are not short films and long films. Rather, they are good films and bad films. This book is for writers and film artists who are eager to produce films belonging in the former category.

RICHARD WALTER

Los Angeles, 1990

PREFACE

THIS BOOK is designed to help you write effective short scripts that have a good chance of being made locally and modestly into films or videos. Although many of the book's suggestions and guidelines apply to feature-length scripts, the book emphasizes writing scripts of fewer than thirty pages.

I have written this book for beginning scriptwriters, would-be filmmakers and videomakers, and students required to write short scripts or make short films or videos. (As the book turned out, much of its information and advice also applies to writing one-act plays.) Those planning to work for the professional short-film industry or to write feature-length scripts will find this book helpful in getting them under way. People planning to make their own short fictional films or videotapes will find that the book will save them time and money and help them bring to life what they have to show.

The best short films and short scripts usually have one major, unchanging character seen during a brief story time (a few days or less), who has one goal (usually unspoken) and who encounters at least one obstacle in trying to reach that goal. Although short films and feature films have much in common, they differ in several important respects. Most feature films contain one or two major, changing characters seen during a story time that may be weeks, months, or years, with two or more major goals and many obstacles to overcome, some of them involved and time-consuming.

Feature scripts are so complicated that most scriptwriters should model their first scripts on effective short scripts and short films. As it is better to write short stories before writing a novel, so it is better to write short scripts before tackling a feature-length script. The chances of finishing and finishing well are much increased if you complete short runs before attempting long ones.

Most effective short scripts are based not on television shows and the movies but on events that writers know well and can re-create vividly and honestly: their own experiences or the experiences of someone they know well. To capture some of those experiences in writing, beginning scriptwriters should write journal entries and do writing exercises as they study short scripts and short films. Before they write scripts, they should understand a writer's goals, the importance of visuals and dialogue, and the components of fictional stories. Next, they should plan, write, and rewrite their scripts, then seek readers and listeners, and eventually local producers.

Throughout the book I have tried to avoid using *he*, *him*, and *his* when I mean person by recasting the sentence in the plural, but it has not always been practicable. Rather than use such awkward or wordy constructions as *she/he* or *s/he*, I have used *he*; and when that occasionally seemed inappropriate, I have used the awkward *he or she* construction. I find it potentially confusing to use *she* throughout the text or, as some authors do, to use *he* one time and *she* the next. Nearly all words that include *man* and *men* within them have been rooted out and have been replaced with gender-neutral words. I hope that readers remember without annoyance that when I occasionally use *he*, *him*, or *his* in indefinite settings, person is meant. Similarly, wherever I use words with *man* and *men* in them, I use them not out of favoritism but to be clear by avoiding awkward constructions.

As I did research for this book, I used the following sources: Library, California State University, Stanislaus; Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Library, American Film Institute, Los Angeles; Library and Film Center, Museum of Modern Art; Billy Rose Theatre Collection in the Lincoln Center Branch and the Film Department in the Donnell Branch, New York Public Library; Audio-Visual Center of Indiana University, Bloomington; AV Department, South Bend, Indiana Public Library; the Instructional Materials Center of the Stanislaus County Department of Education and the AV Department of the Stanislaus County Library, both in Modesto, California; University of California Extension Media Center in Berkeley; and Kit Parker Films in Monterey, California.

Paula Crawford — reference librarian at California State University, Stanislaus — helped me locate quotations used in this book.

Vicki Eden — graphic artist at California State University, Stanislaus — did her usual good work on the drawings. I am also grateful to the University of Southern California for permission to publish frame enlargements from the film *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy*.

My past students—Alice Assali, Stephen Ebert, Melinda Fleming, Jeff Gutierrez, and Fran McKeon—have read parts of the manuscript and made many useful suggestions on how to improve it.

Other former students contributed writings for the book: Melinda Cornwell a journal entry, Wanneta M. Reichert a scene from one of her scripts, Rosa María Díaz a treatment, and Allen L. Lujan scene cards and a short screenplay.

Another former student, Dale Melgaard, merits special thanks for allowing me to reprint a scene from one of his scripts and for reading the manuscript (twice!).

I am grateful to Raymond Hartung, who allowed me to print his original screenplay for *Leon's Case* and suggested several ways to improve the manuscript; to Susan Seidelman, who gave me permission to reprint her student screenplay for *And You Act Like One, Too* and answered my questions about the script; and to Ellen Sandler and Dennis Danziger for permission to reprint a scene from one of their student screenplays, *The New Suit*.

Thanks, also, to Leonard J. Leff of Oklahoma State University and Mary Ruggieri of the Modesto, California, PC Users' Group, who read early drafts of the book and suggested ways to improve it.

J. Stephen Hank of the University of New Orleans shares my passion for short films and short scripts. In conversation, letter, and publisher's review he sent me detailed suggestions and corrections. How fortunate I was.

Richard Walter—Screenwriting Chairman, the Department of Film/Television at UCLA—proved an enthusiastic and valued champion of the book and graciously agreed to write the foreword.

And a big thanks to my son Rey, who suggested several details that I included, and to my wife, Eva Santos Phillips, who urged me to write a book based on my years of teaching film analysis courses and writing courses and who listened to my plans and dreams . . . more than once.

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Telling a story to convey feeling and experience is . . . as natural to man and as vital to man, and as intuitive and ageless . . . as to embrace when in love and to flee when in fear.

—ROBERT CRICHTON, in Olivia
Bertagnolli and Jeff Rackham, eds.,
Creativity and the Writing Process, 152

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Part One

GETTING STARTED

Relationships between girls and boys and men and women are used repeatedly in fiction, and there are hackneyed situations that you should avoid. But in most cases you can find a safe path by asking these two essential questions: What *really* happened? And what was there about the action, the thoughts, the outcome that was truly unique? Of course there are those situations which at first glance seem too close to clichés to be credible or interesting. Occasionally lovers really do patch up quarrels while standing on the shore of Lake Placid under a full moon in June. But not often. You may have to douse the moon, change the name of the lake, and give the characters some uneasiness about that reconciliation if the story is to take on a sense of authenticity.

—STEPHEN MINOT, *Three Genres*, 128

