

SCREENPLAY WRITING MODULE

Screenplay Module Overview

Content

- How can students take the natural art of storytelling and create a screenplay or a story for film?

Process

- Lesson One: Story Elements
- Lesson Two: Understanding the Short
- Lesson Three: Writing the Story Outline
- Lesson Four: Script Formatting & Submission to Contest

Objectives

- To review the elements of storytelling.
- To examine ideas for creating a compelling story that is both creative and unique.
- To identify screenwriting fundamentals.
- To write a story as a story outline.
- To view and evaluate a short.
- To write a story in script format.
- To submit a completed script for contest.

Screenwriting -- Lesson #1

Title: Story Elements

Question: How do you use the elements of a story to capture a reader's attention?

Objectives:

To review the elements of storytelling

Process (Activities)

1. Bring in 6-8 notable children's picture books with developed story lines. (See suggested titles on attachment or check the American Library Association web site.)
2. Choose one of the books to read aloud to the entire class. Before reading, preassess student understanding, and/or review, basic story elements. While reading, have students note how the characters are developed, how the setting is described, and what aspects of the plot seem most intriguing (conflict, irony, resolution, suspense, humor, etc.). Also have students consider how the illustrations enhance these story elements.
3. As a class, discuss the elements that students noticed and how these elements work together to create a good story.
4. Divide students into groups of three or four. Have each group select one of the books and read it together, discussing what the strongest elements of the story (including illustrations) seem to be and why.
5. Have each group share with the class their ideas from their discussion along with a brief synopsis of the story.
6. Next ask students to revisit a story they have read earlier in the year (one that you feel embodies strong use of story elements) and to recall how the author uses certain elements to create a "good" story. [Ex. "Thank You Ma'am" by Langston Hughes -- characterization; "The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell -- suspense; "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut -- irony; "Flight" by John Steinbeck -- setting]
7. Have students compare how telling a story with words and pictures compares to telling a story only with words. Have them consider the importance or impact of the visual element in developing the story line. [NOTE: This discussion prepares them for writing a story to be told on film.]
8. In groups have students select a story, or provide them a story, that they must retell using only pictures. The pictures must convey the basic story elements, such as the setting, the characterizations, and the overall plot. Be sure students understand that if the story is suspenseful, the pictures should convey that suspense.

Product/Application:

Group presentation of children's book
Group presentation of picture stories

Assessment/Evaluation:

Quiz on basic story elements
Evaluation of picture stories

Conclusion:

After this lesson, students should be prepared to create their own story outlines, concentrating on the key elements of a “good” story and how to tell a story visually.

Resources: Web site for ALA (www.ALA.org)
List of Children’s books (attachment)

Time Frame: 2-4 days

Grade Level: 6-12

TEKS:

K.2 (A), (B)

K.3 (D)

K.9 (C)

4.15 (E)

6.3 (A-C)

6.12 (B, C, E, G, I, J, K)

7.3

7.4

Screenwriting - Lesson #2

Title: Understanding the “Short”

Objectives:

To identify screenwriting fundamentals.

To view and evaluate a “short”.

Question - How does a writer effectively tell a story on film?

Process (activities)

1. Have students watch the video on screenplays produced by the Austin Film Festival. (teachers, you may want to preview the video and compile a set of questions on things you want students to pay attention to while viewing) Then hold a class discussion on what the students have learned about telling stories on film.

2. Select 2-3 appropriate “shorts” to view. See the list of websites below for sources. Be sure that you preview the shorts for content and age appropriateness. Use the attached questions to guide students’ viewing and follow up with a discussion of the storytelling techniques used in the shorts.

3. After the discussions on the film festival video and the shorts viewed, students should brainstorm ideas about the kinds of stories they could tell on film, specifically short films.

Product/Application: N/A

Assessment/Evaluation - check for students’ understanding of storytelling elements as portrayed in film.

Conclusion - This lesson should work in conjunction with the first lesson and act as a catalyst in preparing students to write a story outline as proposed in Lesson #3.

Resources/Comments/Feedback

film websites:

www.atomfilms.com

www.cinemanow.com

www.omnishortfilms.com

<http://www.shortfilmbureau.com>

film guiding questions attachment

Time-frame: 2-3 days

Student prerequisites (grade level): 6-12

TEKS:

4.10 (L)

4.12 (B, D, E, F, G)

6.22 (A-C)

6.23 (A-D)

Guiding Questions for “Shorts”

- How does the writer engage your attention at the beginning of the story?
- What story elements does the writer use to keep the viewer interested?
- How does the writer develop the characters?
- How would you describe the main characters?
- What techniques of indirect characterization does the writer use to develop the character actions? thoughts? words? reactions of other characters?
- In what ways do you find the characters believable or not?
- How does the writer develop the setting, a sense of time and place in the story?
- Why does the setting seem appropriate to the plot or not?
- How does dialogue contribute to the telling of the story?
- What special devices does the writer incorporate to tell the story?
 - Symbolism?
 - Foreshadowing?
 - Flashback?
 - Suspense?
 - Irony?
- Why do you think the ending/conclusion of the story is/is not satisfying?

Screenwriting - Lesson #3

Title: Writing a Story Outline

Objectives:

- To write a story as a story outline
- To plan, draft, revise, edit and proof story outline

Question - How does a writer effectively write a story in outline form?

Process (activities)

- Have students read 2-3 story outlines (source: Top Secrets: Screenwriting) and note the differences they see between a story outline and story, such as the lack of dialogue, limited character and setting description, and the direct telling of the story without much elaboration.
- Have students return to their story ideas that they brainstormed at the end of lesson two or use the attached story starter ideas. (Middle school students should work in groups of 2-3. High school students should work alone or in pairs.) Students should use one of the story ideas to begin to create a story that will be told on film.
- Allow students options on how to begin ñ with short descriptions of characters, a brief description of a setting, or an outline of a plot. (*See short story unit, lesson #3 for more in depth discussion on getting started).
- Once students have completed a first step (character, setting, or plot) they should begin to develop a draft of the other two elements.
- Next have students put the elements of their story together into a story outline.
- Put groups of students together to read their story outlines to each other.
- Have the responders list 4-5 questions they have about the story.
- Then have students rewrite their outline based on the questions asked by the responders.
- Regroup students into new peer response groups. Now have the responders answer the judging criteria questions to react to the revised story outlines. (see attachment)
- Have writers complete rewrites of story outlines based on reactions.
- Complete proofreading and editing exercises on story outlines.
- Have students make final corrections to story outlines.

Product/Application:

- Final story outline.

Assessment/Evaluation

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- Develop a rubric based on the judging criteria.

Conclusion

- Students will use their story outline to create their screenplay

Resources/Comments/Feedback

The Writer's Journey : Mythic Structure for Writers by Christopher Vogler

You can Write a Movie by Pamela Wallace

Top Secrets: Screenwriting by Jurgen Wolff and Kerry Cox

Attachments

- Story Starters
- Judging Criteria Questions

Side Bar:

- time-frame: 7-10 days

Student prerequisites

Grade level: 7-12

Teacher tips:

Rubrics:

TEKS:

4.25 (B)

Eng. I (4) (F)

Eng. I (13) (B)

Eng. IV (1, 2)

Eng. IV (4)

Eng. IV (19)

Eng. IV (20)

Eng. IV (21) (A-E)

Story Starters

1. She had a little tinkling laugh like those bells made of glass and painted with exotic flowers you hear chiming on porches when a breeze blows.
2. His impatience was like a teasing toothache
3. His eyes bulged like marbles and his suit of rough green skin with big bumpy spots was so thick that a stone wouldn't have scratched it.
4. She was as cool and graceful as a very elegant cat.
5. He looked like a crafty intelligent old goat.
6. She was small and mouselike.
7. The entrance to the cave was hidden by leaves and branches.
8. The blazing sun drifted low in the sky, shooting purple and gold sunset into the room.
9. Like rivulets of tears, the rain ran off the windows of the crooked old house and dripped from the crooked old roof hanging like a shapeless hat.
10. Velazquez Street is in the heart of the city.
11. The island sits off the coast of Georgia.
12. The fire roared like a hurricane all night.
13. Under the full moon shining through a gauzy cloud, the wind-rippled cove glittered like a sheet of hammered silver.
14. The strong spring sun lifted a mist-like chiffon veiling from the weathered red roof.
15. Thunder cracked like a giant whip, and lightning sizzled through the air.
16. Tallfeather crouched low in the canoe as it rushed downstream.
17. The clubhouse was a cozy shack in an unused parking lot.

Judging Criteria Questions

Austin Film Festival Judging Criteria Questions

1. Does the writer engage the reader and carry the ideas through to the finish?
2. Is the story focused?
3. Are the characters ones the audience wants to watch?
4. Do they matter?
5. Are they memorable?
6. Does the story have a strong sense of place?
7. Does the location serve as an appropriate background to the characters and their actions?
8. Does each character have his/her own voice?
9. Do they speak distinctly and economically?
10. Does the writer build mystery or surprises which keep the audience interested?
11. Does the story have conflict which drives it towards a satisfying conclusion?

Screenwriting -- Lesson #4

Title: Script Formatting and Submission to Contest

Objectives:

- To write a story in script format.
- To submit a completed script for contest.

Activities:

1. Have students look at an actual, format of a screenplay based on one of the story outlines you used in Lesson #3, paying attention to how the story is formatted on the page. Have them pay attention to how the names of the characters appear in the middle of the page in all capital letters, how delivery of lines is directed in parentheses under the character's name, how information about the location and time of the action is written in all capital letters flush against the left margin, and how characters' actions are directed with brief sentences preceding characters' dialogue. (See examples in Top Secrets: Screenwriting by Jurgen Wolff and Kerry Cox or any other screenwriting book.)
2. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Select a short story for them to convert into a script format. Try to select a story with much dialogue or action.
3. Have groups exchange script drafts and critique each other's scripts. First, have students look for appropriate formatting. Give them a list of characteristics to check. Then have them note places in the script that they like, parts that are difficult to understand, and parts that would be difficult to capture on film.
4. Have a full class discussion allowing students to share what they have learned about writing a story in screenplay or script form. This is a good chance to address any questions students have, to review screenwriting vocabulary, and to introduce the guidelines for the Austin Film Festival Contest. (See <http://www.wordplayer.com> for a list of terms. See <http://www.austinfilmfestival.org> for contest guidelines.)
5. Have students return to their own story ideas and begin the process of converting the story outline to a screenplay format.
6. Have students read through their scripts with a partner. Have students use the attached handout "Things to Look for in Each Other's Scripts" to guide them in evaluating the scripts.
7. Based on the comments of their partners, students should now make necessary revisions.
8. Have students edit their scripts, paying special attention to formatting issues -- capitalization, placement, etc.
9. Students should now write a final copy of their screenplay.
10. Have students complete submission forms for the Austin Film Festival Middle/High School Screenwriting Contest.

Product/Application: A final copy of student screenplay.

Assessment/Evaluation: Develop a rubric to judge students' screenplays, or count the actual submission of the screenplay as the final grade.

Resources/Comments/Feedback:

Wolff, Jurgen and Kerry Cox, Top Secrets: Screenwriting, Lone Eagle Publishing Co., 1993.

<http://www.wordplayer.com>

<http://www.austinfilmfestival.org>

Attachments:

“Things to look for in each other’s scripts”

Time frame: approx. 10-12 days

Grade level: 7-12

TEKS:

4.19 (G, H, I)

4.25 (B0

6.22 (A-C)

6.23 (A-D)

Things to look for in each other's scripts:

Continuity – do the scenes follow each other seamlessly, or do you wonder what's linking them? If you hit a scene and aren't sure where it came from, say so. Ask. Explain why it was confusing for you.

Character – by the time you get to the writer's end of Act I, do you have a sense of his/her characters? What do you know about them? Do you care what happens to them? Are you interested in seeing more? Do you have any idea where they're headed? Tell the writer what you see coming and why.

Place - do you have a strong sense, not only of where they are, but of how that place is going to resonate throughout the screenplay? If so, what gives you that sense? If not, why not? How is place important to the characters? How is it important to the plot? How big is place?

Images – what images from Act I do you think will be recurring (like in *Body Heat*, we have the smoking, the fire, the smoking...)? How do they reflect the story? In tone? In bringing us into the story? What effect do they have on you?

Story – go through Act I, scene by scene. Can you see why each piece of each scene is important? If not, mark the parts that don't necessarily seem important yet. It may be that they will become that way. It may also be that they are superfluous. Either way, it will be helpful to the writer to know how you responded to them. Does each scene seem to have a beginning (presenting place, char & story), a middle (some sort of conflict, minor as it may be) & an end (some sort of resolution)? Are you satisfied with each scene?

Tension – does information come too soon, or not soon enough? Is the writer making the most of possible tension points? Are there many levels of tension? Some kind of conflict for each storyline? Mark the places that you find where the writer has maximized dramatic potential, or where he/she could do more. Be specific.