



The 48 Hour Film Project

**WRITING THE
48HFP
SCREENPLAY**

By Sharon Y. Cobb

WELCOME, FILMMAKERS

The purpose of this e-book is to give 48 Hour Film Project (48HFP) teams and writers a quick reference guide to an important element of the 48HFP experience: writing the screenplay.

If you have not competed in the 48HFP or are new to the competition, it's essential to check out rules and details at: www.48hourfilm.com.



WHAT A THRILL!

Writing a script for the 48 Hour Film Project competition is a thrilling experience. Whether your team writes as a group or puts the scriptwriting in the hands of a solo writer, the script is the roadmap to a short filmmaking journey that's a race against the clock. You have just 48 hours to write, shoot, edit and deliver a four- to seven-minute film.



HELP FOR NEW AND EXPERIENCED WRITERS

This short e-book does not cover all elements of writing for the 48HFP, but is intended to help new and experienced writers prepare for and execute a script in a short time. We plan on producing an expanded version of this e-book in the future for distribution on Amazon.

MESSAGE FROM 48HFP CREATOR & EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Hello Filmmakers! We're happy you've decided to join our group of filmmakers from around the world. The 48 Hour Film Project is an adrenaline-charged, creative weekend. And, it all starts with the writing! Once you receive your genre and required elements on Friday night, it is off to the races. We hope this e-book will help guide you to a great story.

Happy Filmmaking! Mark Ruppert, Creator, 48HFP



#1 PREPARATION. Prepare To Be Inspired.

Whether you're a seasoned scriptwriter, newbie or somewhere in between, writing for the 48 Hour Film Project is a unique experience. Prepare to have fun and be inspired.

Your team may prefer to write its script as a team, everyone in the room developing the story and writing the script together, or scriptwriting may be the responsibility of a lone writer or two/three writing partners.

No matter how your team develops and writes the script for your film, advanced preparation is your friend.



UNDERSTAND HOW THE 48HFP WORKS

Review the rules under the “How It Works” tab on the 48 Hour Film Project website (www.48hourfilm.com). Be clear about how the Required Elements fit into your film. Study genres listed for your city's competition on your city's competition website.



CAST

Your team should recruit principal cast members well before the competition weekend. As the writer/s, it's important to know your cast members' strengths and weaknesses, if possible. If you can see reels or other shorts featuring your talent, that will help you when writing for them. Are they excellent at delivering rapid-fire dialogue? Then you know they can handle powerful monologues. Are they new to acting? Then consider limiting their dialogue and/or use voice-over to help tell your story.



LOCATIONS

Scouting and securing locations well before competition weekend is also essential. Either scout locations with your team, or have photos of locations so you may quickly write scenes for your 48HFP script that will work for your locations.



#1 PREPARATION. Continued.



BRAINSTORMING CONCEPTS

Even though writing a script for the 48HFP in advance of the official hours of competition is prohibited, many teams brainstorm genre concepts in advance based on their secured cast and locations. This is part of the fun of participating in the 48HFP. Coming up with ideas outside of competition hours is okay, writing any part of a script/screenplay is not. Remember, the challenge—and the joy—of the 48 is to do all creative work within the 48-hour time frame.



NOTES ABOUT DIALOGUE

If your 48HFP script features dense dialogue, it may be difficult for your cast to memorize all that dialogue in such a short time. This could mean—even with the best actors—many takes to get all that dialogue delivered correctly on film.

The screenwriter's adage, "show don't tell," can serve the 48HFP writer well. It's not necessary to tell the entire story through dialogue, and restraint in dialogue can deliver powerful scenes.



LOGISTICS

The 48HFP Kickoff event is super exciting, yet it may be a good idea for the writer/s to be at their computer and have the team leader text or call with the required elements. Maybe the director and/or others are in the room with the writer/s "beating out the story" using the Five Essential Questions on page 5 of this e-book. Will you be the solo writer? However the team envisions the work flow, the writer should begin the writing process as soon as he/she gets the 48HFP elements.



WRITERS EXPECTATIONS

Some experienced 48HFP writers can complete a five-page script in less than two hours, allowing time for a table read on Friday night of the competition. Some teams write multiple drafts of a script which may take all night and go directly into production with no sleep. There's no right or wrong way, just so your team has a clear and compelling story to shoot.



#2 WRITING UNDER PRESSURE. Keep Calm and Write On.

Planning with your team leader, director and producer about how the writing process will work on competition weekend is essential.

No matter how you decide the process will work, writing under pressure can be exhilarating and stressful. The more prepared you are, the less anxiety you will feel and perhaps the better the script.



REQUIRED ELEMENTS

Your screenplay must adhere to the genre your team chooses at the Kickoff event. Your script must also include the Required Character, Required Prop and the Required Line of Dialogue—verbatim! Review details on the 48HFP website. As the writer/s you may want to jot down your required elements and stick it to your computer screen or some place prominent so you don't forget to include them in your script.



DO NOT PANIC

Writing a script for the 48HFP is similar to writing any short screenplay. You type: FADE IN: at the top of page 1, then you let the characters tell the story, making sure they know their world is set in the genre your team chose. So, sometimes your characters are reluctant to get started with their story and thirty minutes pass and there's nothing on the page. Do not panic. Do not consume copious amounts of alcohol or gallons of coffee. Do not pound your head on your desk hoping a brilliant story will fall out. Turn to page 5 for helpful things to do.



#3 DEVELOPING YOUR STORY. Five Essential Questions.

Starting with a strong story will help when writing the script. As the writer, you may want to develop the story with your director or some team members.



WHOSE STORY IS IT? WHO IS THE PROTAGONIST?

It's essential to begin by being clear about who the protagonist is. With the 48HFP, making the Required Character the protagonist could earn favor with judges but is not essential. The protagonist must drive the momentum of the story, making decisions and taking action.



WHAT IS THE PROTAGONIST'S GOAL?

Once you're sure whose story it is, you need to know what the protagonist's goal is. With short films, it's important for the audience to know what the protagonist desires right away. That way folks will root for the character to get the goal. This gives direction to your story.



WHO OR WHAT IS THE ANTAGONIST?

Who or what is stopping your protagonist from reaching his/her goal? A character doesn't need to be evil to serve as a powerful antagonist. He/she just needs to have more resources to stop your protagonist from getting the goal. Maybe the antagonist and protagonist are competing to obtain the same thing.



WHAT ARE THE STAKES?

This means: what happens if the protagonist doesn't get the goal? Increasing the stakes as the story develops increases the tension and drama, even in a comedy. Adding stakes will make the protagonist more desperate. For instance: If he/she doesn't get the goal, the job will be lost; the car and house will be lost; then the family will be lost.



WHAT IS THE THEME?

What is your story really about? Underdog triumphs? Love conquers all? Revenge? Theme speaks to the heart and emotion of your story. Some writers say, "It's the lesson the protagonist must learn to survive the story." Scenes, characters and dialogue should all connect to theme.



#4 LOGLINE! Loglines Keep Your Story on Course.

If you've answered the Five Essential Questions on page 5, it's time to write a logline. Loglines help Hollywood screenwriters nail down their story before they write a feature or pitch a project. Writing a logline will help you keep your 48HFP story on target.

Below is the formula this e-book author learned from an executive at Universal Studios. The only deviation over the years was to add theme last to end on an emotional note.



TITLE

Oh, by the way, titles are very important in the 48. When audiences watch dozens of films during the competition screenings, it's helpful to have a memorable title, especially if your city has an Audience Choice Award. If your genre is comedy, the title should make people laugh. If it's thriller or horror, consider a title that suggests that genre.



GENRE

Hollywood loglines usually include the genre, which sets up specific expectations for the story. Using genre in your 48HFP logline reminds you to stay in your genre lane. After your film is finished and submitted, your logline can later be used to promote your film's screening.



PROTAGONIST

Describe the protagonist's role in your film story. You wouldn't use the protagonist's name here unless it's pivotal to the story. Again, it would be good to have your Required Character be the protagonist, but not necessary.



PROTAGONIST'S GOAL/STAKES

This is where the protagonist's goal comes into the logline. And what happens if he/she doesn't get the goal? Now we're starting to see a story develop: someone who desperately wants something.



#4 LOGLINE! Continued.



ANTAGONIST/OBSTACLES

Your protagonist wants something, but what or who gets in the way? Enter the antagonist. No need for a name here unless it plays to comedy. The role or occupation in the story is what you need here.



THEME

End your logline with a short sentence that speaks to the heart. For example: It's a story about family falling apart and coming back together again.



HELPFUL NOTE

Loglines are always written in present tense.



LOGLINE FORMULA

TITLE:

GENRE:

PROTAGONIST:

PROTAGONIST'S GOAL/STAKES:

ANTAGONIST/OBSTACLES:

THEME:



LOGLINE EXAMPLE

Juno is a comedy about a quirky, sixteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant and resolves to find the right family for her baby. But, the perfect couple she chooses gets a divorce. It's a coming-of-age story about doing the right thing, even if you don't know what it is.



#5 STRUCTURE. Consider the Three-Act Structure.

There are many ways to structure your 48HFP script. Using the Three-Act Structure will give you the most story momentum.



LENGTH OF YOUR SCRIPT

Since your finished film must be four to seven minutes, you will want to keep your script to four to seven pages. That's using conventional screenplay formatting. See page 10 for more about formatting your script.



ACT I (1/4 of your script)

- Set up your story immediately. It could be an ordinary day in the life of your protagonist. Or you could start with the protagonist in crisis.
- Inciting Incident. This is the event that sets your protagonist on the path to pursue and obtain his/her goal. Put this on page 1.
- Introduce main characters (keep them to a minimum, like three) and antagonist.
- Put obstacles in the protagonist's way. Make obtaining the goal difficult.



TURNING POINT I

- Turning Point I forces the protagonist into action and kicks off Act II.
- The most powerful turning points are events that force the protagonist to make hard decisions and take action.
- Turning Point I should change the direction of the story.



ACT II (1/2 of your script)

- Act II should push your protagonist into a world of chaos, whether that's physical, emotional or both.
- Throughout Act II, the protagonist learns about him or herself.
- MIDPOINT: Divides Act II in half. It can create a shift in story direction, usually dealing with an emotional subplot.
- Near the end of Act II, the protagonist should suffer a great defeat. He/she is closest to physical or metaphorical death in your script.



#5 STRUCTURE. Continued.



TURNING POINT II

- After suffering the biggest loss in the story, your protagonist must come out of the end of Act II making a decision to rededicate him or herself to the goal.
- This is where you want the audience to root for the protagonist to pick him or herself up and go full blast toward the goal in Act III.
- Turning Point II changes the direction of the story again and kicks off Act III.



ACT III (1/4 of the script)

- Usually at the top of Act III you'll see Preparation. The protagonist and friends prepare to go after the goal.
- Shortly after Preparation, the Climax begins.
- During the Climax, the protagonist "battles" the antagonist.
- The protagonist must be in the greatest danger (physically or emotionally).
- The protagonist must face insurmountable obstacles and have the audience wondering how the protagonist will win, yet be cheering him or her on.
- At the end of the Climax the protagonist defeats the antagonist and gets the goal.
- Sometimes the specific goal may not be obtained, but the Protagonist may obtain something better.
- Resolution comes after the end of the Climax and should be very brief. It's usually an emotional "button" on the story. The resolution ties up all the subplots and should give the audience a satisfying ending.



NOTE ABOUT ENDINGS

- Your ending doesn't need to be Disneyesque with birds chirping and sun shining through clouds. Just give the audience hope or leave the story right at the moment that the protagonist reaches for the goal.
- We plan to cover twist endings in the expanded Writing for the 48HFP book to be available on Amazon in the future.



#6 SCREENPLAY FORMAT. You have options.



WHATEVER WORKS.

- For the 48HFP, getting your story on paper is the most important thing. Some teams write an outline (like in MS Word, etc.) and allow the cast to improv. This can work if you have a cast that's strong in improvisation and the story is mapped out with act breaks and clear turning points.



TRADITIONAL SCREENPLAY FORMAT

- If your writer/s or team are experienced screenwriters and accustomed to writing scripts using traditional screenwriting software like Final Draft, Movie Magic Screenwriter or Celtx, you will probably want to write a traditionally formatted script.
- Or you could create an MS Word template to format your script.
- Here are some tips:
 - Use twelve-point Courier since it's screenwriting's standard font.
 - Usually one page of the script equals one minute of screen time.
 - Keep your script short. Five pages is great. If you keep your script tight, this will allow your team to discover improv moments on set. A shorter script, like five pages, should allow a shorter shooting day than a seven-page script.



FIRST AND LAST PAGES

- Begin the first page with "FADE IN:" at the top left corner of the page.
- End the last page with "FADE OUT." at the bottom right corner of the page.



#6 SCREENPLAY FORMAT. Continued.



CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

- When introducing a character for the first time, use all capital letters for their name. It's cap and lower case letters within the description after that.



CHARACTER DIALOGUE

- Character names are centered on the page in capital letters. Dialogue is also centered, but indented on both sides of the dialogue. If you're using script-formatting software this happens automatically. Brilliant!



SCENE HEADINGS ARE CALLED SLUG LINES

- Slug lines are written in capital letters like this:
EXT. HOUSE - DAY
- EXT. means exterior. INT. means interior. You may want to keep the time of day simple: just DAY or NIGHT.



KEEP DESCRIPTION BRIEF

- No need to describe copious details. This isn't a novel. (Although you may want to write one later based on your story.) Your 48HFP script will be mostly brief dialogue, unless you've drawn silent film and then no sound on the set can be used in your film.



#7 HELPFUL TIPS. Some ideas for 48HFP writers.



CHARACTERS

- Consider making your 48HFP Required Character your protagonist. Keep your main characters in your story to a minimum, like three to five. Yes, you may want supporting characters. But, focus on the protagonist and his/her goals.



YOUR CAST

- Having headshots of your cast handy may help you visualize actors in specific roles as you write.



48HFP GENRES

- Well before the competition weekend, familiarize yourself with all the genres listed on your city's 48HFP website and make notes about elements of those genres. Yes, that's a lot of research, but it's a great investment to assure your script will receive a high score from judges for "Adherence to Assignment" which accounts for 25% of points.



REQUIRED CHARACTER

- The Required Character must be seen on screen and it must be clear, either directly shown or by context, who the required character is. The Required Character's name does not have to be said out loud or written on screen.



REQUIRED PROP

- A Prop is used by the actor. It's not just set decoration. Consider making the Prop pivotal to the plot. If your genre is comedy, make sure the Prop gets a laugh when it appears.



REQUIRED LINE OF DIALOGUE

- The Required Line of Dialogue must be used verbatim. Have the Line lead to a turning point in the story. Make it important. Consider wrapping a monologue around it or repeat the Line several times. Maybe more than one character delivers the Line.



#8 HOW THE 48HFP IS JUDGED.



JUDGES

- Each City Producer or Producer Team chooses their judges. They may be a mix of local and out-of-town judges. Judges are chosen for their filmmaking background and experience.



JUDGING CRITERIA

Here's how all judging criteria works:

- 45% Artistic Merit (story, creativity, entertainment value)
- 30% Technical Merit
- 25% Adherence to the Assignment



AWARDS

- Each City Producer or Producer Team decides on specific awards and form of the awards (trophy, framed certificate). All 48HFP competitions present a "Best Film" award and that film will screen at the 48HFP annual Filmapalooza event. There may be other awards presented for directing, writing, acting, cinematography, editing, sound, etc. Most cities present awards for Best Use of Character, Prop and Line of Dialogue. Sometimes there are additional awards for makeup, wardrobe, graphics, special effects and musical score, etc.



#9 THAT'S A WRAP.



YOUR INPUT

- *Writing the 48HFP Screenplay* was written for you and we'd love to hear your feedback about this e-book. Email Sharon Y. Cobb, Writing48HFP@gmail.com.



WRITING FOR THE 48 HOUR FILM PROJECT, THE SEQUEL

- We're planning an expanded version of this free e-book to be sold on Amazon as e-book and print versions. We'll be interviewing filmmakers from around the world about their experiences making films for the 48HFP competition. More about the expanded books soon.



48HFP GENRE BOOK SERIES

- Since understanding genre is essential to filmmakers competing in the 48HFP, we are considering writing a series of books focused on genres featured in the competition. We may write short books featuring individual genres or a compilation book with chapters on genres. They too will be for sale on Amazon in the future.



THIS BOOK'S AUTHOR

Sharon Y. Cobb is a member of Writers Guild of America west and has sold a dozen projects to Hollywood. Her British film *Lighthouse Hill* was released on DVD after premiering at film festivals and being broadcast by SkyTV worldwide. Her action movie *On Hostile Ground* was broadcast on TBS and worldwide. She co-wrote *June*, released 2015 on DVD and premiered on Amazon Prime in 2019.



Sharon has competed in many 48 Hour Film Project competitions as a writer and has also judged multiple 48HFP competitions. She is author of the novel *False Confessions of a True Hollywood Screenwriter* and *Touched by an Angel, A Christmas Miracle*. She contributed a chapter on writing neo noir films to *Film Noir Reader 2* and lectures on writing in the U.S. and internationally.

