

Section 3: Writing Openings

You've paid nearly £15 to watch a film at the cinema. You sit down, the lights dim and as the film begins you're excited and slightly nervous-you've been looking forward to seeing this film for months.

On screen we see a sky and hear a voice over. It begins to explain where the story starts. Some words on screen tell us where the story starts just in case you missed the voice over. The voice over continues. We learn who the main character is, we know what they want and the problems they have. The voice over tells the audience about friends of the main character. We see some people on screen. Names come on screen also tell us who these people are just in case the audience missed the descriptions. Then we see each of the characters do different things to show what they're like and what skills they have. We're introduced to another character who turns to someone and explains why they're watching these characters on a CCTV screen. The film is 5 minutes long and so far, we haven't seen a character do anything that hasn't already been mentioned by a voice-over, a character or on screen.

This is *not* how to start a film.

On screen we see a sky and hear traffic. The camera pans down slowly and we see a birds-eye view of traffic that isn't moving. One car sits in the centre of the frame and contains our protagonist and their family. We cut to an interior shot of the car where the driver is laughing at the other drivers who are getting impatient and tooting their horns. A loud noise is heard off screen but is so far away that the protagonist and audience aren't sure if it is an explosion. Then, a motor cycle zooms past the car, knocking off the wing mirror as it goes. Our hero steps out of the car and screams at the motor cyclist who, by now, is long gone. Our protagonist turns, puts his head into the car and asks if his family are ok. He attempts to reattach the wing mirror and as he does, a large explosion can be seen in it. As the sound of the explosion hits the car, in one fluid motion he jumps into the car, starts the engine and quickly pulls onto the pavement. Holding down the horn to warn the people on the pavement, he deftly weaves the car between pedestrians, lamp posts and other obstacles, putting distance between his family and the developing chaos behind him.

This *is* how to start a film.

Beginnings can be difficult to write and can be easily passed over by simply revealing information that we think the audience needs to know at the start of the film. In reality, beginnings are difficult because they need to be effective; they need to hook an audience, they need to draw attention, they need to be *good*. Screenplays that fail to attract the interest of the audience set the rest of the film up to fail because if your audience are not invested from the first few scenes, what reason do they have to care about what happens? There are many ways to start a film and many that may not suit the screenplay you want to create so the key is identifying techniques or conventions that could be useful to you and your film and making them as good as they can be.

The difference between an effective start to a film and one that isn't is simple: create excitement and intrigue. To do so, it's important that you as a writer know how and where to start the story in terms of how it will lead to the end of the story.

This doesn't mean that you need to know all the exact details of the end of your film but you do need to know where the story is heading and how the ending will generally be whether that will be happy, tragic, horrifying or even ambiguous. By knowing where your character

needs to go means that you can send them on a path that is interesting and motivated towards a narrative. This doesn't have to mean starting the middle of an action sequence, but it does, at the least, mean starting the story straight away by showing at least one of your characters in action; this will allow you to show what they are like and how they act towards others or in certain circumstances. This also avoids the need for exposition, whether from on screen with characters talking or from a boring voice over - it allows the audience to learn about a character in an interesting and effective way.

As a writer you also shouldn't try to set up a story or introduce characters in a way that feel unnatural-we don't have voice overs or on screen text in real life, so instead showcase what your characters are like by showing what they do.

Similarly, don't spend time explaining a backstory or information that isn't important at that exact moment. If there's something important that the audience will need to know, aim to introduce it in a natural, interesting way, such as bringing it into the story and getting the characters involved with it.

Finally, this leads onto the last point with the opening of a film: don't do too much. The beginning of a film isn't where you need to introduce every character and theme, every part of the story and backstory at once, it's a place to entice an audience. To do this, have the film open with something important and to try to force your characters out of their everyday situation in some way. You need to set your characters on some journey, and quickly, by giving them a problem or an issue-give them a problem to solve. This problem can be big or small, inconsequential or important, but just make sure that you change things for your character for a reason. This will give your audience a reason for watching.

Of course, there's nothing to say that you shouldn't use some of the techniques that are often used in a lazy manner. *Goodfellas*, for example, uses a voice over at the beginning of the film and does so in a very clever, interesting and insightful manner. *District 9* begins with the use of 'found footage' style archive films that use straight-to-camera dialogues that provide backstory through heavy exposition. *Blade Runner* opens with a crawl which features a lot of written exposition, but immediately after this is a visual feast with arresting imagery and a precise and focused control over what the audience is shown. Each of these examples may use techniques that can be lazy and that can create dull openings, but each carefully manages the information that is revealed to the audience and creates interest through visual elements and a careful revelation of key facts as they start their protagonists on a journey. Creating the opening to a film is not a simple exercise and takes many revisions and a confidence in what they are trying to communicate, but here are 5 key things that may help in creating an effective opening that you could do, rather than you shouldn't do.

1. Introduce your protagonist as soon as possible.

This need not be by revealing everything about the protagonist-the audience does not necessarily need to see every part of the character or learn everything about them, but provide some semblance of who they are quickly. This is most effective through action, reaction or failing this, through dialogue. What is key however is that the protagonist be introduced to the audience in some manner, quickly.

2. Make sure to establish the genre.

Whilst generic elements can be introduced during different parts of the script to establish, maintain or even subvert genre, it can be worthwhile to include some references to genre early on. Even brief mentions of props or visual signifiers of genre that are fleeting can help establish setting and expectation for an audience.

3. Create conflict immediately.

Conflict is a key element needed throughout the entirety of any interesting script. Utilising conflict near the beginning of your script can be an effective way of establishing pace, tone and narrative and is widely used in modern filmmaking. Conflict need not be 'large' and could be used in something as simple as a character having to make a decision under duress or other pressures.

4. Send your protagonist on a journey.

Much like conflict, having a protagonist set off on some form of journey can and should be done throughout a script. However, establishing some form of journey for the protagonist early on allows an audience to engage with a quest and therefore a desire, making things interesting and creating a 'stake' for people to be invested in. As with conflict, a journey need not be a 'large' or especially important near the start of a script and could be something as straightforward as a small emotional journey or a quick physical one. So long as the journey allows an audience to appreciate *how* the protagonist approaches the journey it will be effective.

5. Make it visual.

This one is vital for all aspects of a script. The opening, as with all parts of a script needs to be visual. Establish the strong visual nature of the script and do so at the beginning of the script to help create a style and tone for the rest of the script.

To support these ideas, there are a range of activities and resources.

Section 3, Resource 1. Effective openings techniques in real scripts. The difference between an effective start to a film and one that isn't is simple: create excitement and intrigue. To do so, it's important that you as a writer know how and where to start the story in terms of how it will lead to the end of the story.

Creating the opening to a film is not a simple exercise and takes many revisions and a confidence in what they are trying to communicate, but, using the 5 key techniques and elements from above, this can help in creating an effective opening. Using the attached extracts, annotate along the sides which of the techniques below has been used. As an extension, use the table on page two to explore what you think each example does for the script.

If struggling to create an effective opening, one way to develop an idea could be to explore the possible narrative devices and to use one that is suitable for the story. The resource below offers examples and an activity to help with this.

Section 3, Resource 2. Narrative techniques. This activity features some of the most common narrative techniques from literature and scriptwriting. Some may be more familiar than others and similarly some may be best not being used in every script. However, this resource offers the opportunity to consider each as a possibility by finding examples of as many as possible. This will allow you to then explore how useful or interesting each is. The names of the techniques are listed below: you will need to use the resource to find the details and information on each.

To complete the table, read the definition of each technique and then by conducting research, try to find as many examples as possible by writing the example in the empty column. Some techniques are used much more frequently than others however, so be prepared to find some quite difficult to locate!

Technique
Backstory
Chekhov's gun
Cliffhanger
<i>Deus ex machina</i>
Eucatastrophe
Flashback (or analeptic reference)
Flashforward
Foreshadowing
Frame story, or a story within a story
Framing device
<i>In medias res</i>

Technique
MacGuffin
Narrative hook
Ochi
Plot twist
Poetic justice
Predestination paradox
Quibble
Red herring
Self-fulfilling prophecy
<i>Story within a story</i> (Hypodiegesis)
Ticking clock scenario
Unreliable narrator

Section 3, Resource 3. Writing own examples of narrative techniques. This activity lists many of the most-widely recognised and used narrative techniques from literature and scriptwriting. Having explored examples of these in scripts using the previous resource, this activity now provides an opportunity choose 5 to have a go at creating examples of them. Use the table on the activity, write the name of the technique on the left hand side and use the right hand side column to write an example of that particular technique. If struggling for ideas of general narrative, consider using one of the earlier resources which can randomly generate genres, settings or other aspects

Section 3, Resource 4. Write the beginning of a script for a variety of genres. In this resource are 6 different genres. These can be used to create the opening of two films. Having spent time looking at these in Section 1, each genre should be familiar but there is some space to list some generic conventions for each before writing an opening. The main activity here is to use the key principle of establishing genre quickly and following conventions of a script. The openings here will open with a slugline but wherever it sets the scene for, whether Internal (INT.) or External (EXT.) it will need to be suitable and immediately help to establish the genre. It also must be considered how action can help to establish the genre through the character's interactions with props, the description of their clothing and even the words used as part of their dialogue. Finally, consider how other key aspects can be used to make this an interesting and arresting opening scene, namely "Introduce your protagonist as soon as possible, create conflict immediately, send your protagonist on a journey and make it visual.

Section 3, Resource 5. Writing the opening to horror film. This activity recalls the 5 key techniques of writing an effective opening to a film. In previous activities, it was necessary to simply note the action and the dialogue for a scene. Here, this will be extended to the first two pages of a script, covering all aspects of presentation and effective writing. Firstly, notes will be needed on action and dialogue from the previous resource and secondly, a re-watch is encouraged of DON'T KNOCK TWICE (2016) from 03:08 to 05:11.

The aim of this activity is to recreate what the script could look like, paying close attention to the key elements of a script including formatting. The clip is just over 2 minutes long so aim to make the script around 2 pages in length.

Secondly, the aim is to then improve the new version of the script by utilising the 5 key aspects and techniques that make for an interesting and engaging opening. These are listed below as a reminder. There is also scope for adding more detail or changing things to emphasise one or more of these key aspects and techniques.

Also included in the resource are six images from this clip; they may be of some use in considering how the beginning of the film introduces key aspects and techniques-be sure to include these in the script.

A reminder of the key aspects and techniques:

- Introduce your protagonist as soon as possible.
- Make sure to establish the genre.
- Create conflict immediately.
- Send your protagonist on a journey.
- Make it visual.