FROM STORY TO MOVIE...
How to get your big idea onto the big screen

What is a short screenplay?
It can be as short as a minute, and as long as 40 minutes. In general, one page equals 1 minute of film. For Froshlife, we are looking for films that are no longer than 8 minutes long, or 8 pages long. There can be many sorts of short scripts—experimental, animated, documentary, mockumentary, etc. All we ask is that your story in some way reflects the ‘freshman experience’—beyond that, it’s up to you. Any style is welcomed.

What is so hard about writing a short story?
On the one hand, a short script is more manageable to write than a typical feature-length screenplay, which is between 110-120 pages long. A short script is about one-twelfth of that. The cast of the short film is often limited to two or three main characters, often less fleshed out than in a feature film. The plot of a short screenplay is linear and uncomplicated by the subplots of the longer form. So in this sense, yes, the short script is easier to write.

On the other hand, you still have to tell a story and you have only eight minutes to do the following:
- Grab your audience’s attention.
- Set up the location, style and mood of your film.
- Create believable characters—a main one, and an antagonist. The main character must want something as if his life depended on it, and will have trouble achieving/getting it. This is called conflict.
- Deliver a satisfying ending.

First, you need to have an idea.
Where do I find an idea to write?
Use as a starting point something that captures your imagination or unlocks a powerful emotional reaction. It could be, for instance:
- A person (friend, roommate, professor) so intriguing you cannot get him out of your mind.
- A snippet of dialogue exchanged between two strangers on a bus ride to West.
- A chapter of campus lore passed down over generations.
- An outlandish crime brief article in the Chronicle.
- The color of the Durham sky at night.
- A situation that made you laugh.

What you are looking for is a powerful creative trigger, an event that struck you in one way or another as describing of the ‘elusive freshman experience’, and you want to write about it. When you explore your options for a story idea, always focus on how you feel about it. It’s that FEELING, that EMOTION that are important. Fear, anger, a desire for revenge, a sense of thrill or elation, all are powerful engines behind the desire to write and frequently experienced by Freshman every day.
What you write about has to matter to YOU. If you are not passionate about what you want to tell, you will not be able to make other people care, either.

I have my idea. How do I turn it into a story?

Once you have found the creative trigger for your story, play a game of “What if?” with it. Playing “What if” allows you to explore all the possible dramatic situations that can develop from the original idea. The important rule is that you pay attention to the choice you make when you answer the “What if?” question. Each answer is a choice you make. That choice will determine the next question. Your narrative will start developing in a specific direction. Little by little, the image you started with will be transformed through the decisions you make. Your goal is to come up with the most interesting, dramatic situation possible.

What makes a good story for a short film?

Compelling characters.
The temptation when you write a short film, and have less time to develop complex characters, is to write your characters in short-hand. If their behavior is simplistic and predictable, your story will be, too. Characters, particularly your hero’s, is the force that drives your story. Do not short-change your characters! Give them the full range of human characteristics:

Physical: the character’s height, weight, gender, age, clothes they wear can all influence how your story develops.
Behavioral: there can be unexpected contrast between expected behavior and actual behavior (for instance, a psychiatrist who is obsessively re-arranging the pens on his desk). This disconnect between what is expected and the actual behavior of the character is immediately intriguing – and often humorous.
A strong need: Character is ACTION. An action is what the character DOES in order to get what he WANTS. Energize your story by making the hero’s need extreme. What the character wants, he wants passionately. He wants it more than anything in the world. The need of the character must be immediate and urgent, especially in a short film.

The element of conflict
Conflict is the result of what a character “wants” (his goal), and the obstacles he must face to get what he wants. Those obstacles can be another character, nature, society, community. Those are called external obstacles. Sometimes, the obstacles are purely internal – an addiction, psychological issues resulting from a trauma, for instance. Watching the hero struggle against those obstacles is what makes a story interesting. Your job is to make the life of you character difficult! The character says: “I want this!” Say “NO!” to your character!
How Can I Do All This in 8 Minutes?

Seven Tips for Organizing Your Writing & Staying Sane

The first and most important rule-of-thumb: KEEP IT SIMPLE! Focus on one main conflict, then develop and explore it in surprising ways.

Start your story as late as possible: Start your story at the moment something is about to happen to the hero. In other words, choose the last possible moment to enter the story and still have it make sense.

Keep your characters to a minimum – it’s better to have fewer well-developed characters than a bunch of less-developed characters.

Use polarities to create your protagonist (hero) and your antagonist: think of personalities that are polar opposites in terms of values, age, tastes, social position, sexual inclinations, abilities, behavior, etc. This is a simple way to create conflict as you pit one character against his opposite, and let the situation play out between them.

Use Characterization: This means that you externalize the temperament, profession, social status, attitudes, thoughts and feelings of your characters through character behavior. In other words, you make their back-story and internal life visible –visual- on screen. Note that characterization is not caricature: although certain attributes allow the audience to identify a character’s “type” immediately, the details of his/her behavior reveal their unique personality.

Give your hero one Goal: Keep the character’s goal clear and simple. What the hero wants (or needs) to accomplish must be conveyed quickly.

Surprise us: The resolution: there is often a twist at the end of a short film, something that adds interest, or humor to a conventional ending. Its purpose is to make the audience think, or to make them laugh (or both). Anything that keeps your audience from guessing your ending is an asset. Then make sure your ending is the best thing about your film. Your payoff is what you’re leaving the audience with, and it’s how they’re going to remember you.