

How Content Gets Made

This is a training module from the ScreenSkills 'From Script to Screen' programme.

The text includes multiple choice questions for you to answer. Each question is identified with the words 'Multiple choice question' and finishes like this:

Question end

That's so you can stop and think. Each question end is followed by the correct answer and feedback.

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- [Section B: Pre-production \(aka 'Preparation' or 'Prep'\)](#)
- [Section C: Production \(aka 'shoot' or 'principal photography'\)](#)

Section A: Introduction

Hi, I'm Alex. You want to make some content? Come with me and I'll show you how it's done.

Do you want to shoot a movie? A series? How about a feature or a docudrama? We make pretty much everything here. And whatever your role, knowing how content is made will help you succeed. Lucky for you, and really for me too, the process is very similar for any scripted format.

I'm what they call a 1st AD, and as you'll see later, 1st ADs, or Assistant Directors, are pretty essential for getting content made. But, enough about me, here's a rundown on the basics. Let's start at the beginning with development.

It's not easy for new ideas, even great ones, to make it on to the screen, but those that do tend to follow a couple of different paths.

Sometimes a Producer or Writer has an idea they're passionate about. They'll develop a series summary or screenplay that they can pitch to a production company.

Or, it can happen the other way around. That's when Development Producers from a production company go looking for stories and scripts that have strong characters that elicit powerful emotions.

Either way, the idea gets pitched to the people with the money, like commissioners from outside companies or networks. Producers can also get bankrolled by film funds, government grants and private investors.

Of course, we're in the entertainment business, so it will take more than mere words to sell the idea. Sometimes, a lookbook or Treatment will be created. When funders need to see what it's all about, often the Producers will make a video to show the concept. Not surprisingly, that's called a sizzle reel.

And if the sizzle and the material are really good, then it gets what is called optioned or bought and then the money and expertise follow so that the concept can get developed.

Multiple choice question. How long do you think it might take to develop an idea through to a successful pitch? Have a guess...

- A. Weeks
- B. Months
- C. Years

Question end

Trick question! It could be any of those answers.

After that it becomes even more of a team effort. The characters, the stories, the script, and the entire fictional world are further developed.

Why does so much effort go into creating an awesome script? Because everything, and I mean everything revolves around that document. But more on that later.

In the meantime, for episodic programmes, a fancy name for series, often there will be a Writers Room. That's the approach used in the US, the UK and a few other regions. It's where from two to 22 Writers gather to brainstorm, debate, eat too much pizza, drink cold coffee, and eventually come out with a story that hopefully will become a big global hit.

There, in that sacred space, they pound out plots, they trace character arcs, and hopefully what gets written is an accurate reflection of the Creator's vision.

In some regions, the Head Writer runs the project from a creative standpoint and could also look after the scripts.

And a story is not as straightforward as you might think.

Multiple choice question. This is a summary of an episode from a vampire crime drama: "The county sheriff is investigating the latest vampire attacks while dealing with her own messy romance and battling against the mayor's political interference." How many stories are being told here?

- A. One
- B. Two
- C. Three

Question end

The answer is C. Three stories. We've got the vampire attacks, the messy romance and the political meddling.

We just told you a little about storylining and outlining, which are key parts of development. This is where Writers work out the journeys of all the characters and stories and weave them together into a meaningful and compelling script.

Now, once we have that beautiful script that creative minds sweated over, then and only then can we move on to the next stage: Pre-production, also known as Preparation or Prep.

Section B: Pre-production (aka 'Preparation' or 'Prep')

With the fully fleshed-out script as our guide on this journey from script to screen, Pre-production can begin. Heads of Departments, or HODs for short, get recruited to start working on things like casting, costumes, location scouting, and so much more.

This is a crucial decision point where Directors and Actors will be selected, Crews will be decided on, the timing and length of the shooting schedule will be determined and the number of filming units will be agreed, which will affect the budget.

Multiple choice question. Does Post Production get considered at this stage?

- A. No, not yet
- B. Absolutely!

Question end

The correct answer is B. Absolutely. This might sound crazy because the word 'post' in English means 'after', but in the world of Production, Post planning starts in the Pre-production stage, because decisions made at this point of content creation will have a profound impact on the workflows and resources needed in Post.

While Post Production normally happens once the shooting is finished, pre-planning is the only way to ensure that the best final product is delivered in a way that retains the creative intent of the project.

Finally, more about me. This is where I, the 1st AD, come in to break down the script into all its production elements. This is the way we make sure that we have everything that we need in the right place, at the right time, to shoot each scene during the next phase of production. This is what I meant when I said that everything revolves around the script.

OK, so I'm breaking down a script for a new teen drama. Let's look at an extract from Episode 2, Scene 2.

Scene 2

EXT. STREET. DAY

BILLIE, 17, strides down the sidewalk in the dawn light. She's angry. She wears a torn, baggy woollen jumper over spray-on denims with big black boots. She crushes her drink can and throws it into the gutter.

PASSERBY

Hey Miss! There's a trash can right there.

Billie first keeps walking, but then stops and spins around.

BILLIE

Miss?! What century you in?

PASSERBY

I didn't mean nothin.

Text-only version of the script extract shown in the image above:

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PASSERBY

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Billie first keeps walking, but then stops and spins around.

BILLIE

"Miss?! What century you in?"

PASSERBY

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This is the end of the script extract.

First up I've got the set. Outside on a street. It's daytime, and I can see here that we need a dawn-light effect. I'll need to talk with the Director about that, and aim to schedule shooting as early as possible in the day.

Billie enters the scene. So Casting needs to know who they have to find for that role.

We've got costume details here – we're going to need some big black boots.

And I can see we'll be showing a can of a branded drink. The Art Department needs to know if the specific brand is critical. If it is, we'd need to check with the Legal team to see if this might need clearance, or if the Art Department might create a fictional brand of drink and a graphic for it.

Props need to know they'll be providing that drink can, too. Several cans in fact, because Billie crushes it in the shot, and we'll probably have multiple takes.

Now we have a passer-by. That's another Actor to find, so I'll need to talk to the Director about who they want to use.

You see, so much detail and work goes into just this tiny fragment of the script. I take all of this detail and put it into a Script Breakdown Sheet, which is what we'll use to build a schedule for the shoot. I do that with a tool called Movie Magic Scheduling, which is pretty common, although the use of this tool may vary country to country.

When I'm building the schedule, I'm trying to make the most efficient use of people, locations, Crew, equipment, etc. But I also need to think about what will help the Director get what they need. So I won't schedule a whole series of intense emotional scenes for the same Actors one after the other, for example.

The result of all this is what we call the Stripboard or Oneliner. This is the schedule and plan for shooting. It tells everyone what's happening, when it's happening, and what they need to do.

Once the schedule has been reviewed by the Director, Line Producer and Heads of Department, all of this Pre-production work means we're ready for the next phase – the shoot.

Section C: Production (aka 'shoot' or 'principal photography')

We're going to shoot a historical drama. You'll get a lot more detail about what happens on set and how Production works later, so I'll just cover the essentials here. No matter where in the world you're working, there are five key steps to shooting a scene.

Step 1: Blocking. The Director blocks out the action, working through the scene on the set with the Actors. Together they go over all the movement, timing, interactions, and what that means for lighting, camera angles and so on.

Step 2: Light. The Actors disappear to Costume and Make-Up, while the Lighting and Camera Crew make sure the set is rigged for whatever was decided in the blocking.

Step 3: Rehearse. Now the scene gets rehearsed on set, with the Actors in costume and make-up, and with the lighting, props and camera rig in place.

Step 4: Final adjustments. When rehearsals are finished, the Crew make final adjustments to lighting, camera, props, set dressing – whatever is needed so everything is just right and ready for...

Step 5: Shoot. Here we roll the camera and capture the Actors bringing the story to life for all to see.

And after lots of takes and shots for different set-ups and scenes, the Actors' performances will be in the can. Or on the hard drive. Or in the cloud.

The journey to the screen is not yet over as we still have to go through the Post Production stage, which you'll learn about in a later module.

So you see, it's an amazing collaboration between lots of skilled people, processes, and equipment to get content made. It's fast-moving and thrilling. So, stay alert and enjoy the ride, after all, you're entertaining the world!

And that's the end of this module. This was created by ScreenSkills.