SCREENWRITING

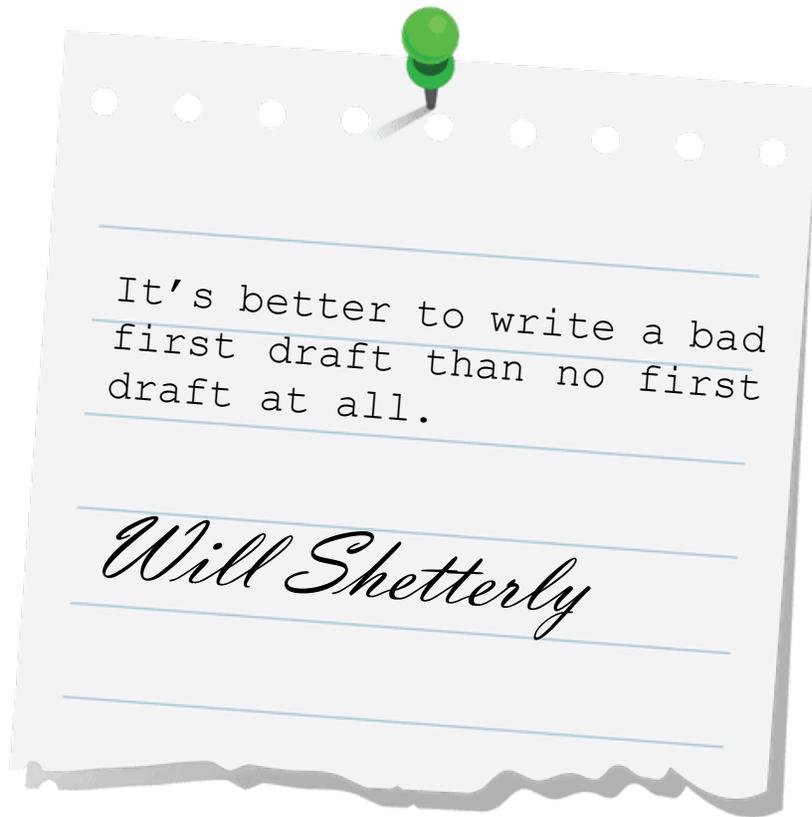## MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

ACT 1

> It's better to write a bad first draft than no first draft at all.
>
> *Will Shetterly*

It's time to write your screenplay!

After four short weeks, the pre-planning work is done. You've established everything you need in order to write the first draft of your screenplay. This is a huge step, and it's important to not rush ahead. That's why this week we are only going to write the first act of your script.

We are also going to review different software options, how to format a screenplay & how to master the craft of a screenplay. All three of these things are crucial when it comes to writing an industry standard script, which is our goal.

In the last few weeks of this program we are going to shift from giving you step by step instructions, to providing you with general information and screenwriting tips. We are going to break down how to schedule your time, how to beat writer's block and much more. We want to see you succeed with your first draft!

Kate Niemuller

WRITING A FIRST DRAFT

Before we start talking software, formatting and craft, I want to take a moment to talk to you about something much, much bigger: _expectations_.

Writing a first draft of a screenplay is a very exciting time. Your story is travelling from your mind to the page. But don't let yourself believe the struggle is over. You will have good writing days and bad writing days. The key is to _keep writing_, no matter what, and muscle through. Because guess what? This draft is just about getting it done.

And you know what? It's probably not going to be great.

But no first draft is. The first draft serves a very unique purpose. It gets the story out of your head. And yes, even with all our pre-planning work, there are going to be things neither of us could possibly catch until it's finished.

So curb your expectations. See a first draft for what it is. There will be time later to become a perfectionist in your writing, but that time is not now. Right now, all we want to do is get that story down on the page. We can edit and rebuild it later.

A common issue writers have is editing their work as they write (especially first drafts). They do this because they want everything to be perfect and outstanding. If you accept that your first draft will not be those things *before* you write, you will speed up your overall writing process. Meaning, you will finish that first draft faster and be working on the next version sooner.

Because until you finish that first draft, you don't have a screenplay. There is no benefit to tweaking and overthinking something that you are going to rewrite anyways.

Keep this in the back of your mind as you start writing this week. Be excited! But also recognize that this draft is not going to be the one you try to sell or submit to festivals. It's the first step in a long process. **Most professional writers only write 1 – 2 marketable screenplays a year**. If you can accomplish that, you are on the right track.

SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE

A lot of aspiring screenwriters opt to write their work in Microsoft Word (or similar text processing documents). There are even some that have created shortcuts so that the document works in the same way that screenwriting software does. My advice would be to *not* do this. And I have a couple of reasons why.

First, I've seen "formatted" word documents completely screw up screenplays, rendering the page count to be twenty, thirty, sometimes even forty pages longer than it would be if correct.

Second, by manually formatting your screenplay yourself, you are adding *hours* of work to your writing time. As a screenwriter, you should *know* formatting, but you shouldn't have to think about it constantly while you write.

Third, I am a firm believer that if you are serious about writing a screenplay, you need to invest in software that will lower your margin for error. Screenwriting software is a tool that you are expected to use and understand. Working without it is the equivalent of asking a chef to bake a cake without an oven. It's possible… but far more difficult.

The last thing you want is to have you script thrown in the trash because of mistakes that could have easily been avoided.

That's why you should *invest* in screenwriting software. There are many free and premium options available.

CELTX: Free, online (desktop app discontinued)

Celtx is a free screenwriting platform that allows you to write and collaborate online. It exports to PDF and Final Draft very easily.

WRITER DUET: Free, online (desktop app with premium account)

Writer Duet has a similar platform to Celtx. It exports to Final Draft, PDF, and Fountain (Highland). It's gained quite a lot of popularity recently for being very easy to use.

HIGHLAND 2: Free (in app purchases), desktop app

It's free to download, but there are in app purchases that vary. It allows for distraction free writing by formatting everything for you. Exports to final draft and PDF.

FADE IN: $79.99, desktop app

Slowly becoming the industry favourite (but not yet), it's clean and makes it remarkably easy to edit your work. Exports to final draft and PDF.

FINAL DRAFT: $249.99, desktop app

The behemoth of the industry, still used by most. If you don't buy Final Draft, make sure you invest in software to exports to an FDX file (final draft file). You'll save yourself and your editors a lot of time.

WRITING ACT ONE
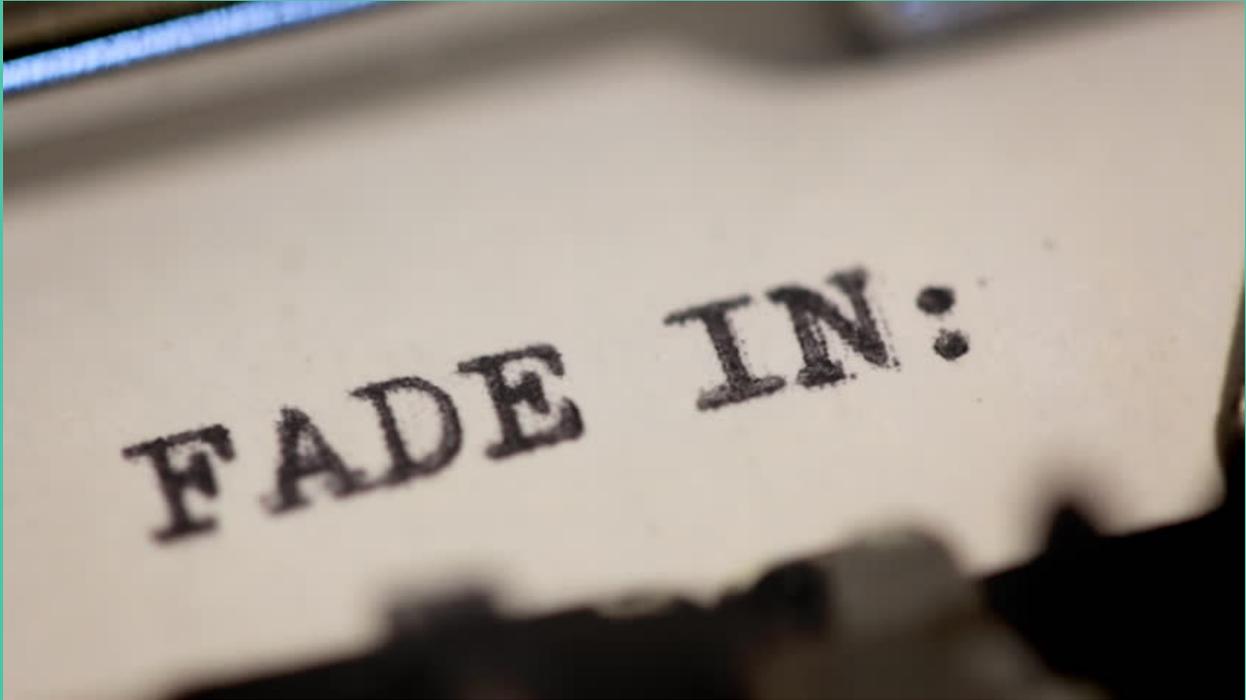
Ready to get writing?

Before you do make sure you read over our "Formatting & Craft Guide". Once you've done that, open up your treatment and the screenwriting software of your choice. It's time to do what you've been waiting four weeks to do. This is going to be the most writing you've done so far, and I don't want you to burn out early. To avoid that, there are a few things we should go over.

NUMBER 1: Length
A first act is generally anywhere between 25 – 30 pages long for a feature film. We have four beats in this act to write. They each have different page lengths. I've included where they should fall (if your first act was 25 pages long):
- The Setup (page 1 – 10)
- The Catalyst (page 11 – 13)
- The Debate (13 – 20)
- First Act Turn (20 – 25)

Hopefully this will give you some guidance when it comes to pacing and length of your scenes.

A general rule of thumb in screenwriting is that 1 page = 1 minute of screen time. You will rarely see scenes in films that are longer than 3 minutes (3 pages). So, try to keep that in mind as you write. If a scene is longer than 3 pages, there should be a good reason for it.

NUMBER 2: Schedule

Now that you know how many pages you are aiming to write this week in order to complete your first act, it's time to take a look at your schedule. What days do you have free time to write? My advice would be to spread the writing out.

For example, if you commit to five pages a day, you can have your first act complete in five days! But, if that doesn't work for you, find something that does and stick to it.

NUMBER 3: Make Writing A Routine

Incorporate writing into your daily routine. The best way to ensure you write every day is to make it a habit.

TIPS & TRICKS: HOW TO WRITE A FANTASTIC FIRST ACT

The first act of your screenplay is arguably the most important. It's in this act that you must hook the interest of the audience, and cause them to root for your characters. Because of that, it has to be outstanding. Here are some tips and tricks to make sure your first act is excellent.

1. Hook

Open your screenplay with something different that hooks the attention of the audience. Even if it's just the viewer being introduced to the protagonist, think to yourself: what is the most interesting & unusual way that I can do this?

For example, say our protagonist is an adrenaline junkie living in the city. It would be much more exciting for our first scene to depict him rock climbing down a skyscraper than at an indoor rock climbing wall.

2. Visuals

Something writers often forget when writing a screenplay is that this is a *visual* medium. I'll talk about this a lot in the "Craft Guide" for this week, but I want to mention it again here _because it's that important_. When you are writing the descriptions, try to picture what it looks like on screen. Choose your words carefully so that you are both painting the scene and letting us know what is happening.

3. Character Introductions

These are so important, especially for the leading characters. So often writers will skip over this and simply write, "TIM, 30s" and leave it at that. I want you to give us more. Look back to your character bios and draw from that. Make your characters stand out. Make them real.

If you can nail these three things in your first act, you are off to a great start.

A NOTE ABOUT SUBMITTING YOUR WORK:

Since we are in the screenwriting portion of this course now, I want all your energy to be focused on writing. Because of that, the feedback section of this portion will work a little differently than it did in the first four weeks. Here's how it will work from now on:

DEADLINE

To give you maximum writing time possible, your assignments are now due on the Sunday of each week. Please see your Session Schedule (or Google Calendar) for the exact dates.

FEEDBACK

I will still be personally marking up your script with notes… but I'm not going to send that to you until the end of the program. Why? Because I don't want you to get bogged down with details and begin to edit as you write. Instead, I will give you a quick review of your progress so far and point out anything that does need immediate correction (formatting errors, spelling, plot holes that weren't in the treatment…etc.).

At the end of the program you will be given a full, marked up copy of your screenplay along with a basic script analysis of it.