



Story Planning & How to Step Outline a Screenplay

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What Is A Step-Outline?

A step outline is essentially a step by step breakdown of your story. By planning your story structure in advance you will save yourself a whole lot of time in the "rewriting" stage of your project because no matter how good you are at screenwriting, all writers have to learn to love rewriting! Movie outline offers a simple way for screenwriters to outline their story while simultaneously referencing successful movies of all genres.

Step or Scene?

Movie outline uses "steps" instead of "scenes" which may confuse some screenwriters who are used to using scenes in relation to film timing and screenplay layout, but the difference is actually quite simple to understand. A "step" in movie outline really means an "event" in the progression of your story, and this means that each step can consist of more than one "scene". A montage sequence is one good example or:

Joe leaves his apartment, gets in his car, drives to the bank.

Although in a screenplay this totals three scenes, in a step-outline it is only one step since the nature of creating a step-outline dictates that you focus on the main story event and do not get into too much detail. Unless something big happens to Joe while he is getting into his car, the scene can be described within the overall event. What then happens when



Joe enters the bank is another step, and so on. Another example could be a car chase. In a screenplay, each location that the cars involved in the chase pass through is technically a scene, but since we're dealing with the same story event, the entire chase and collection of scenes is referred to as a step.

Or supposed your screenplay has your hero bravely dashing into a burning building to save a child while other fire-fighters frantically do their best to put out the blaze. Technically, each room your hero searches in constitutes a scene, and every time we cut back to the other fire-fighters, they are separate scenes too, but when planning your story, it is much easier to think of this as one single event and as such, a single step.

When you write a film script either straight onto a pad or punch it directly into your computer, the worst thing you can do is imagine that these words are chiselled in stone. That the scenes in the order you have created them are rigid and will remain where you put them for all eternity. You have to see the script as a reflection of your original idea that can now be moulded and shaped into the story it was always meant to be.

The problem is, when you don't plan out your screenplay first, this is much harder to do. That's why I started outlining scripts before writing them. Well, that's actually a lie. I started outlining them because producers and development execs wanted to see the ideas for my pitches and I couldn't just hand them a bunch of scribbled notes. These outlines then developed into longer treatments and before I knew it, I was already in the habit of "step-outlining" first and writing screenplays second. It was a bizarre, subconscious transition, but I'm extremely glad that it happened.

It does take a little commitment, especially if you are eager to start writing dialogue and getting to know the characters populating your new world up close and personal, but if you try to curb your enthusiasm for just a few days and hammer out the central event driven plot beforehand you will most certainly save yourself a whole load of time and screenwriting headaches in the end.

Vocabulary:

Story Planning & How to Step Outline a Screenplay

Step-outline: escaleta

Breakdown: desglose

Screenwriter: guionista

Step: paso

Layout: distribución

Dashing into: lanzándose

Script: guión