

DCC2304 Script Writing

Week 2 Teaching Material

Research for Screenwriting

From Assumption to Evidence, From Evidence to Drama

Course	DCC2304 Script Writing
Session	Week 2: Research for Screenwriting
Course Progression	Developed Story → Dramatic Scene → Screenplay, supported by Research, Theory, Visual Writing and Critical Revision
Teaching Time	4 hours: 2-hour lecture + 2-hour workshop
Main Output	Research Dossier + Research Questions + Story Development Notes for the semester screenplay project
Core Principle Research does not replace imagination. It gives imagination better material to work with.	

Week 1 introduced the transition from story to screenplay: a story becomes a screenplay when narrative information is transformed into visible and audible dramatic events. Week 2 extends that principle by asking where the writer's story knowledge comes from. Before a screenwriter writes characters, worlds, dialogue, occupations, rituals, conflicts, or social situations, the writer needs to examine assumptions and build credible story material through research.

In this course, research is not treated as a separate academic report that happens before creativity. Instead, it is part of the creative process. Research helps the writer discover specific details, contradictions, voices, spaces, practices, conflicts, objects, pressures and ethical questions that can later become dramatic and cinematic material. This approach is consistent with screenwriting pedagogy that connects creative practice with critical and reflective thinking (Batty & Waldeback, 2008; Price, 2010).

Research also helps screenwriters make stronger creative choices. A story based only on assumption often becomes general, stereotypical or predictable. A story informed by evidence can become more specific, more surprising and more responsible. Research allows writers to ask better questions about the world they are representing and the characters they are constructing (Booth et al., 2016; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

- Explain the role of research in developing credible and meaningful screen stories.
- Distinguish among subject research, character research, world/context research, genre research and visual research.
- Formulate focused research questions that support screenplay development.

- Evaluate source credibility and identify risks of assumption, stereotype and superficial representation.
- Apply observation, interview, document/archival search and visual research as creative screenwriting methods.
- Transform research findings into dramatic situations, character behavior, objects, dialogue, conflict and visual details.
- Prepare a research dossier that can support the midterm story development presentation.

Screenwriting is often associated with imagination, but imagination alone is not always enough. A writer may imagine a doctor, a taxi driver, a police officer, a monk, a migrant worker, a student activist, a film producer, or a family business owner. However, if the writer does not understand the routines, language, pressure, environment and social conditions of those people, the script may become vague or inaccurate.

Research helps the writer move from generic invention to specific storytelling. The purpose is not simply to “collect facts.” The purpose is to understand how facts, experiences and contexts can create dramatic possibilities. For example, researching an emergency-room nurse may reveal shift patterns, hierarchy, emotional exhaustion, ethical dilemmas, family relationships, physical routines, and professional language. Any one of these can become a scene, obstacle, character behavior, line of dialogue, prop, conflict or visual motif.

Screenwriting Question

What do I need to know before I can write this world, this character and this conflict responsibly?

Research also protects the writer from overgeneralization. Stories about social class, culture, illness, disability, religion, gender, labor, crime, education, migration or family structures can easily reproduce stereotypes if the writer relies only on second-hand assumptions. Qualitative research traditions emphasize the importance of listening, context and interpretation when trying to understand human experience (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These principles are useful for screenwriting because dramatic characters are constructed from social and emotional realities, not from isolated plot functions alone.

In DCC2304, research should be understood as creative development. It is useful only when it deepens the screenplay. Students should avoid treating research as a large information dump placed beside the script. The goal is not to show that many websites were consulted. The goal is to use research to make the story more specific, dramatic, visual and ethically grounded.

Good research often changes the story. A writer may begin with a simple plot idea, but after observation, interviews or source analysis, the writer may discover that the original idea contains false assumptions. The story may need a different protagonist, a more complex antagonist, a new setting, a stronger conflict or a more credible ending. This is a normal part of research-informed creative practice.

Research Used Poorly	Research Used Well	Screenwriting Result
Collects facts but does not change the story	Finds details that reshape character, conflict or setting	The screenplay becomes more specific
Adds exposition to prove knowledge	Turns knowledge into action, object, behavior and tension	The scene becomes more dramatic

Uses research to copy reality mechanically	Selects meaningful details that support theme and character	The script feels focused
Confirms stereotypes	Tests assumptions through multiple sources and ethical reflection	Representation becomes more responsible
Research appears only in the report	Research becomes visible in scenes, dialogue, environment and decisions	The script and portfolio become integrated

A practical research cycle for screenwriting can be organized as follows:

- 1. Identify the story area: What world, profession, issue, relationship or experience is central to the screenplay?
- 2. Identify assumptions: What do I think I know, and where did that belief come from?
- 3. Develop research questions: What must I find out to write this story credibly?
- 4. Collect material: Read, observe, interview, watch, listen, visit, photograph, map and archive ethically.
- 5. Analyze the material: What patterns, contradictions, tensions, images and voices appear?
- 6. Translate findings into drama: What objective, obstacle, setting, prop, dialogue, behavior or scene emerges?
- 7. Revise the story: How does the research change the premise, character, structure or scene design?
- 8. Document the process: What sources informed the creative decision, and how were they used?

This cycle reflects the logic of inquiry-based work: research begins with questions, develops through evidence and reflection, and should lead to more precise claims or decisions (Booth et al., 2016). In screenwriting, those decisions are creative, dramatic and audiovisual.

Research Type	Main Question	Possible Methods	Creative Use in Screenplay
Subject Research	What is the topic, profession, event or issue really like?	Books, articles, reports, documentaries, expert sources, official documents	Builds credible situations, conflicts, procedures and obstacles
Character Research	How might this person think, behave, speak and decide?	Interviews, observation, biography, diaries, case studies, lived-experience accounts	Shapes motivation, contradictions, voice, habits and behavior
World / Context Research	What social, cultural, historical or spatial context shapes the story?	Field visits, maps, local media, community observation, historical documents	Creates story world, power relations, atmosphere and realistic pressure
Genre Research	What conventions and audience expectations already exist?	Film analysis, screenplay reading, genre mapping, comparison of examples	Supports expectation, variation, subversion and market awareness
Visual Research	What does this world look and feel like on screen?	Photos, moodboards, location references, production design research, object research	Creates setting, props, visual motifs, atmosphere and cinematic evidence

Subject research concerns the factual or procedural world of the story. If a screenplay involves a courtroom, hospital, police station, film set, restaurant kitchen, temple, school, government office or online scam operation, the writer needs more than a general impression. The writer should investigate routines, terminology, hierarchy, conflicts, risks, documents, objects, rules, spaces and everyday behavior.

For example, a story about a paramedic should not rely only on generic scenes of sirens and emergency rooms. Research might reveal response protocols, radio communication, how families react at accident scenes, how paramedics manage fear, what paperwork follows, what equipment is used, and how fatigue affects judgment. These details can become screenplay material. Rabiger and Hurbis-Cherrier (2020) emphasize the importance of research and preparation in film practice because credible creative decisions depend on understanding the world being represented.

Development Question

Which facts or procedures in my story could become obstacles, decisions, conflicts or visual details?

Beginning writers sometimes design characters only as plot functions: the hero, the villain, the love interest, the helper or the comic relief. Character research helps the writer move beyond function toward specific human behavior. A character is not only what they want; a character is also shaped by background, values, language, work, family, class, community, fear, memory and contradiction.

Egri (2009) argues that dramatic characters are shaped through social, psychological and physical dimensions. While students do not need to follow Egri as a formula, the principle is useful: a believable character has more than a plot role. Research can help discover how a character speaks, what they avoid, what objects they carry, what routines they repeat and what contradictions define them.

- What does this character do every day?
- What language, slang or professional terms might they use?
- What do they avoid saying?
- What objects are always near them?
- What social pressure shapes their decisions?
- What belief might be challenged by the story?
- What do they want others to think about them, and what do they hide?

Stories do not happen in empty space. Characters exist inside social worlds. World and context research investigates the environment that shapes the story: class, family, workplace, neighborhood, culture, generation, economy, institution, history, law, technology and everyday practice. The goal is to understand how the setting creates pressure and possibility.

In cinema, world is not only background. Space, objects, routines, architecture, weather, noise, transportation, food, signage, clothing, institutional procedures and technology can all communicate narrative information. Bordwell et al. (2023) discuss how film narrative is organized through causality, time and space; for the screenwriter, this means that context is part of the causal and spatial logic of the story.

Example

A story about a scholarship student in an elite university changes depending on the campus architecture, student culture, family economy, dress codes, language expectations, social media pressure and transportation routine.

Genre research does not mean copying existing films. It means understanding the conversation that a screenplay enters. Genres create expectations about story situations, character types, conflicts, tone, rhythm, imagery and emotional experience. A horror screenplay, romantic comedy, detective film, road movie, melodrama or coming-of-age film each carries a history of patterns and audience expectations. Genre knowledge allows writers to decide whether to follow, vary, combine or subvert conventions. Without genre research, a screenplay may repeat old patterns unconsciously. With genre research, a writer can make deliberate choices. McKee (1997) emphasizes that genre knowledge is important because audiences bring expectations into the viewing experience; screenwriters need to understand those expectations in order to satisfy, complicate or transform them.

- What kinds of protagonists often appear in this genre?
- What conflicts, settings, objects or situations are common?
- What does the audience expect to feel?
- What rules or conventions does the genre usually follow?
- Which conventions feel overused?
- What could be changed because of culture, period, class, gender, location or point of view?

Visual research supports the screenwriter's ability to write cinematic scenes. It may involve collecting images, location references, textures, objects, costumes, color references, spatial arrangements and environmental sounds. The aim is not to create a complete production design. The aim is to help the writer imagine the event clearly enough to write it in concrete and meaningful audiovisual terms.

Visual research is especially useful after Week 1's principle: "What can the audience see or hear?" A writer researching a character's bedroom, shop, office, motorcycle, altar, refrigerator, uniform or phone screen may discover details that reveal character without exposition. Visual details are strongest when they do narrative work.

Key Distinction

The screenwriter visualizes the event. The storyboard artist later visualizes the shot. Visual research helps the writer make the event specific before it becomes a shot plan.

Observation trains writers to notice behavior. Instead of beginning with abstract descriptions such as "he is lonely" or "she is powerful," observation asks: What does loneliness look like in public? How does power appear in posture, clothing, distance, silence or movement? Observation is useful because screenwriting depends on visible and audible behavior.

Students can observe public spaces ethically without intruding into private lives: a café, campus corridor, bus stop, library, market, waiting room, mall, hospital lobby or food court. The goal is not to copy real people without consent. The goal is to study patterns of behavior, rhythm, space, speech, gesture, waiting, power and social interaction.

- Where do people pause, wait, avoid eye contact or gather?
- What repeated gestures or routines appear?
- How do people use phones, bags, food, documents or money?

- How does space affect social behavior?
- What sounds define the location?
- What visual details suggest class, profession, age, stress or belonging?

Interviews can help screenwriters understand experience, language and point of view. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe interviewing as a craft that involves practical, ethical and interpretive decisions. For screenwriting, interviews are valuable because they reveal not only facts but also how people organize their experiences, what words they use, what they emphasize and what they avoid.

Students should approach interviews ethically. They should explain the purpose of the conversation, request permission, avoid pressure, protect privacy when needed and avoid exploiting sensitive experiences. An interview for a screenplay is not a right to use someone's life directly. It is a method for learning, listening and understanding. If a story draws closely from a real person's life, consent and representation become even more important.

Interview Principle

Ask for stories, routines, contradictions and specific moments. Avoid asking only for general opinions.

Less Useful Question	More Useful Screenwriting Question
Do you like your job?	Can you describe a day at work when something went wrong?
Is your family important?	What is one family rule that everyone knows but nobody says aloud?
Are you stressed?	What do you physically do when you are under pressure?
What is your culture like?	What ritual, object, food or phrase would an outsider misunderstand?
What is the problem?	When did you first realize something had changed?

Some stories require research into documents, archives and media materials. These may include news reports, academic articles, court cases, official forms, policy documents, maps, photographs, advertisements, social media posts, letters, diaries, films, television episodes and oral histories. These materials help writers understand how a subject has been recorded, represented or debated.

However, not all sources are equally reliable. Booth et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of evaluating evidence and building claims responsibly. For screenwriting, source evaluation helps writers avoid misinformation, oversimplification and accidental distortion.

Source Type	Useful For	Caution
Academic / professional sources	Definitions, context, established knowledge	May be abstract; translate into dramatic material
News reports	Events, conflicts, social issues, chronology	Check bias, date and multiple sources

Official documents	Rules, procedures, institutions, terminology	May not show lived experience
Interviews / oral accounts	Voice, emotion, routines, contradiction	Need consent, context and careful interpretation
Visual / media references	Atmosphere, space, genre, tone, image systems	Avoid copying; use as inspiration and analysis

The most important step is translation. Research should not remain as raw information. Students must learn to ask how each finding can function dramatically. A fact may become a rule. A rule may become an obstacle. An object may become evidence. A routine may become suspense. A contradiction may become character conflict.

Research Finding	Screenwriting Question	Possible Dramatic Use
A nurse must finish documentation before leaving a shift.	What happens if she must leave immediately?	Obstacle, ticking clock, ethical conflict
A taxi driver knows informal shortcut routes.	What information can only this character know?	Plot movement, expertise, suspense
A family avoids discussing debt at dinner.	How can silence reveal conflict?	Subtext, withheld information, tension
A student wears borrowed branded clothes.	What does this object reveal?	Class pressure, desire, insecurity
A restaurant kitchen has strict hierarchy.	Who has power in the scene?	Blocking, conflict, language, intimidation
A genre often uses a final confrontation.	How can this expectation be changed?	Genre variation, audience surprise

Research for screenwriting involves ethical responsibility. Writers often borrow from real worlds, communities and experiences. When a story concerns vulnerable people, sensitive topics or identities different from the writer's own experience, ethical reflection becomes especially important. Research should not be used simply to make exploitation more believable.

Qualitative research traditions emphasize informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, respect and reflexivity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In a screenwriting classroom, students should adapt these principles to creative practice. They should ask what they have the right to represent, what they need to understand better, what harm might result from simplification, and how they can avoid reducing people to stereotypes.

- Do not pressure people to share private or painful experiences.
- Do not use a real person's identifiable story without permission.
- Do not treat culture, poverty, trauma, illness or crime as decorative material.
- Do not assume that one interview represents an entire community.
- Consider how the final story might affect the people or groups represented.
- Disclose sources and AI assistance when required by the assignment.

A good research question is focused enough to guide inquiry but open enough to create discovery. Students should avoid questions that only produce simple factual answers. For screenwriting, better questions often concern behavior, pressure, contradiction, routine, language, space and conflict.

Weak Question	Better Research Question	Why It Helps the Script
What is a chef?	What happens in a kitchen during the ten minutes before service?	Creates pressure, rhythm and scene detail
What is a monk?	What daily routines shape a monk's relationship with time, objects and visitors?	Creates setting, behavior and tone
What is depression?	How might a person hide emotional distress through daily behavior?	Creates visual characterization
What is cybercrime?	What steps make a small online scam believable to a victim?	Creates plot logic and escalation
What is rich student life?	How do students display class status without directly talking about money?	Creates subtext and visual details
What is horror?	What visual and sound conventions create dread before anything happens?	Supports genre and atmosphere

For the midterm development presentation, each student should prepare a research dossier. The dossier is not a separate academic essay. It is a creative development file showing how research informs story decisions.

- 1. Working title and logline
- 2. Story world and topic area
- 3. At least five research questions
- 4. Source list with brief notes on credibility and relevance
- 5. Subject research summary
- 6. Character research notes
- 7. World/context research notes
- 8. Genre reference map
- 9. Visual reference board or description
- 10. Ethical considerations and representation risks
- 11. Research-to-story decisions: how research changed premise, character, conflict, setting or scenes
- 12. Three possible dramatic scenes generated from research findings

Story area: A scholarship student at an elite international college hides financial difficulty from classmates.

Research Area	Possible Finding	Scene Possibility
Subject	Scholarship payments are delayed by administrative paperwork.	Student must pay a field-trip fee before the scholarship arrives.

Character	The student avoids asking for help because of family pride.	They lie about why they cannot join a group project outside campus.
World/Context	Class status is signaled through phones, coffee shops and weekend travel.	The protagonist quietly calculates food costs while classmates discuss travel.
Visual	The student repairs worn shoes with tape hidden inside.	A close behavior detail reveals economic pressure without exposition.
Genre	Coming-of-age stories often use public humiliation and self-acceptance.	The script can follow or subvert this by making the turning point private.

The research does not automatically write the scene. Instead, it offers specific material from which the writer can construct objective, obstacle, stakes, subtext and visual behavior.

Students may use generative AI responsibly for brainstorming research questions, comparing genre conventions, summarizing public information, organizing notes or testing possible story angles when the lecturer permits it. However, AI output should not be treated as verified knowledge. Students must check important factual claims against credible sources, disclose AI use when required and make their own creative and ethical decisions.

AI can help generate questions, but it should not replace human observation, reading, listening, field experience or ethical reflection. A screenplay is stronger when the writer understands why a detail matters and how it functions dramatically.

AI Use Principle

Use AI to help ask better questions, not to invent unsupported facts or replace research.

Students choose one story idea from Week 1 and list ten assumptions they are currently making about the protagonist, world, conflict, setting or topic. Then they classify each assumption as:

- I know this from personal experience.
- I know this from reliable sources.
- I think I know this but need evidence.
- I do not know this yet.

After classification, students select three assumptions that could damage the credibility or ethics of the screenplay if left unchecked. They turn those assumptions into research questions.

Students work in pairs. Each student presents one screenplay idea and three early research questions. The partner responds by asking:

- Is the question too broad?
- Can it lead to dramatic material?
- Does it focus on behavior, conflict, space, voice, routine, object or pressure?
- What source or method could answer it?
- What ethical issue might appear?

The lecturer gives students a sample research finding:

Sample Finding

In a small family restaurant, the youngest child often handles online food-delivery orders because older family members are less comfortable with the application.

Students must create three possible dramatic scenes from this finding. Each scene must include: protagonist, objective, obstacle, stakes, location, one object, one line of dialogue, and what changes by the end of the scene.

Students begin drafting their own research dossier in class. The lecturer circulates and gives feedback on focus, feasibility, source quality, ethical risk and how the research connects to screenplay development.

Dossier Item	Student Notes
Story area / topic	
Protagonist and world	
Current assumptions	
Five research questions	
Possible sources / people / locations	
Ethical risks	
Visual research needs	
Three possible scenes from research	

Students should give feedback using the following questions:

- What part of the story still feels based on assumption?
- Which research question is strongest for generating drama?
- Which research question is too broad or too factual?
- What source or method would make the story more credible?
- What ethical risk should the writer consider?
- What visual detail, object or behavior could emerge from this research?

Problem	What It Looks Like	How to Improve
Research is too broad	"I researched poverty"	Narrow the focus to a person, place, routine, conflict or institution

Research is only factual	Many facts but no dramatic use	Ask how the fact creates pressure, obstacle, choice or behavior
Research confirms stereotypes	All characters act like clichés	Seek multiple perspectives and contradictions
Research is not documented	No source trail	Record sources, dates, notes and how they influence decisions
Research becomes exposition	Characters explain facts unnaturally	Turn facts into object, action, silence, conflict or setting
Ethics ignored	Real experiences used without care	Use consent, anonymization, sensitivity and reflection
AI output treated as truth	Unverified invented details	Verify with credible sources and disclose AI support

Time	Teaching Activity
00:00-00:15	Review Week 1: What can the audience see or hear?
00:15-00:35	Mini-lecture: Why research matters in screenwriting
00:35-01:00	Five types of research for screenwriting
01:00-01:25	Subject, character and world/context research examples
01:25-01:45	Observation, interview and document research
01:45-02:00	Activity 1: Assumption Audit
02:00-02:15	Break
02:15-02:40	Research ethics and responsible representation
02:40-03:05	Activity 2: Research Questions Clinic
03:05-03:35	Activity 3: Research Finding to Scene
03:35-03:55	Workshop: Begin research dossier and peer feedback
03:55-04:00	Summary and homework briefing

Prepare a preliminary Research Dossier for your screenplay project. Submit or bring to class:

- Working title and logline
- 150-250 word story synopsis
- At least five focused research questions
- A list of at least five sources or research methods you plan to use
- One visual reference board or reference description
- One paragraph on ethical concerns or representation risks
- Three possible dramatic scenes generated from research findings or research questions

Week 3 will use this dossier to connect research with narrative theory: causality, point of view, narrative information, time, space and audience experience.

- Research gives imagination better material; it does not replace creativity.
- Screenwriting research should lead to character, conflict, behavior, space, object, dialogue and dramatic action.
- A strong research question creates story possibilities, not only factual answers.
- Observation and interviews help writers understand behavior, voice and lived experience.
- Ethical representation is part of professional screenwriting practice.
- A research dossier should show how research changes creative decisions.

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