

DCC2304 Script Writing

Week 3: Narrative Theory for Screenwriters

Teaching Material / เอกสารประกอบการสอน



Course	DCC2304 Script Writing
Session	Week 3: Narrative Theory for Screenwriters
Course Progression	Developed Story → Dramatic Scene → Screenplay, supported by Research, Theory, Visual Writing, and Critical Revision
Teaching Time	4 hours: 2 hours lecture + 2 hours workshop
Main Focus	Using narrative theory as a practical thinking tool for screenwriters, not as a rigid formula

1. Introduction: Why Narrative Theory Matters to Screenwriters

Screenwriters do not write only isolated scenes or attractive dialogue. They design how an audience receives, organizes, interprets, and emotionally experiences events. Narrative theory gives writers vocabulary and conceptual tools for making these decisions. It helps writers understand how stories create meaning through causality, time, space, character agency, point of view, information control, and audience expectation (Bordwell et al., 2023; Chatman, 1978).

For beginning screenwriters, theory can sometimes feel abstract. However, in this course, theory is treated as a practical tool. It helps writers diagnose problems in story development, transform research into narrative choices, and write cinematic scenes that do more than simply explain information.

Key idea: Narrative theory should not write the screenplay for us. It should help us ask better questions about how the screenplay works.

2. Week 3 Learning Outcomes

1. Explain key concepts in narrative theory that are useful for screenwriting, including story, plot, causality, time, space, point of view, focalization and narrative information.
2. Analyze how the organization of events affects audience understanding, suspense, surprise, empathy and expectation.
3. Apply narrative theory to improve a story idea, dramatic scene, or screenplay sequence.
4. Distinguish between what happens in the story world and how events are presented in the screenplay.
5. Use theory to support creative decisions rather than treating theory as a fixed formula.

3. Story, Plot, Narrative and Screenplay

Narrative theory begins by clarifying basic terms that screenwriters often use casually. Story, plot, narrative and screenplay are related, but they are not identical.

Concept	Simple Meaning	Screenwriting Question
Story	The larger chain of events, characters and situations that the audience reconstructs.	What happened in the story world?
Plot	The arrangement and presentation of events in a particular order and pattern.	How should the audience encounter the events?
Narrative	The organization of events, causality, time, space, character and information into meaningful experience.	How does the screenplay guide audience understanding?
Screenplay	A written audiovisual form that turns narrative into scenes, actions, dialogue and sequences.	How can the story become visible, audible and dramatic?

Chatman (1978) distinguishes between the “what” of narrative and the “way” it is presented, while Bordwell et al. (2023) describe film narrative as a system of events organized through causality, time and space. For screenwriters, this distinction is very useful: the same story material can become very different screenplays depending on what information is shown, delayed, emphasized or omitted.

4. Story World vs. Screenplay Presentation

A story world may contain many events, relationships and histories. The screenplay does not need to present everything. It selects and organizes information so the audience can form meaning. This means screenwriting is not only about invention but also about arrangement.

Screenwriting is the art of choosing what the audience knows, when they know it, and how they know it.

Example: A character has betrayed her closest friend. The story world may include years of friendship, previous lies and hidden motivations. But the screenplay might begin only with one visible clue: a deleted message, an unpaid debt, or a photograph found in the wrong place. The writer controls the audience’s route into the story.

5. Causality: From “And Then” to “Therefore”

Causality is one of the most important principles in narrative cinema. A sequence becomes dramatically stronger when events produce consequences. Bordwell et al. (2023) explain that audiences often connect narrative events through cause-and-effect relationships. For screenwriters, this means that scenes should not merely sit beside one another; they should generate pressure for the next scene.

Weak Event Chain	Stronger Causal Chain
This happens. Then this happens. Then something else happens.	This happens, therefore the character acts. Therefore another

Events feel separate.	character responds. Therefore the situation changes.
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In screenwriting, causality can be external or internal. External causality may involve an accident, discovery, threat or decision. Internal causality may involve shame, desire, fear or moral conflict that pushes a character into action. Strong screenplays often combine both.

6. Aristotle and Narrative as Organized Action

Aristotle's Poetics remains influential because it treats drama as organized action rather than a loose collection of incidents. Although Aristotle wrote about tragedy rather than cinema, concepts such as action, complication, reversal and recognition are still useful for screenwriters who need to design scenes that build toward meaningful change (Aristotle, 1996).

For screenwriters, the practical question is not "How do I follow Aristotle exactly?" but "How can action create pressure, consequence and transformation?"

A dramatic scene should not simply report a condition. It should make something happen.

7. Character Agency and Narrative Movement

Narrative theory helps screenwriters understand that characters are not just personalities. They are agents whose actions create change in the narrative world. Character agency refers to the ability of a character to pursue goals, make choices and produce consequences. When a protagonist lacks agency, a screenplay may feel passive unless that passivity is an intentional dramatic design.

Egri (2009) emphasizes the importance of character motivation and conflict in dramatic writing. McKee (1997) similarly argues that character is revealed through choices made under pressure. In screenwriting terms, this means that character should be tested by situations that demand visible and consequential action.

8. Narrative Time

Stories do not always unfold in the same order in which events happened. Genette (1980) offers influential concepts for thinking about narrative time, including order, duration and frequency. Screenwriters can use these concepts practically to decide whether a screenplay should move chronologically, begin in the middle of a crisis, use flashback, compress time, repeat an event, or withhold past information until a later scene.

Time Concept	Meaning	Screenwriting Use
Order	The sequence in which events are presented.	Chronology, flashback, flash-forward, delayed revelation.
Duration	How much screen/story time is given to an event.	Scene expansion, montage, ellipsis, compression.
Frequency	How often an event is presented or revisited.	Memory repetition, multiple perspectives, trauma, unreliable narration.

9. Narrative Space

Narrative space is not just physical location. It is the organization of where events happen, how characters move through places, and what those places mean. In film, space is especially important because audiences understand relationships through visible arrangement, distance, entrances, exits, barriers and environments.

A screenplay can use space to reveal social power, intimacy, isolation, danger, class difference or emotional distance. For example, two characters in the same room may feel emotionally separated if one remains near the door while the other sits at the center of the space. Space becomes narrative information.

10. Narrative Information: Who Knows What?

Screenplays create audience engagement by controlling narrative information. A writer must decide what the protagonist knows, what other characters know, and what the audience knows. This relationship produces suspense, mystery, surprise and dramatic irony (Bordwell et al., 2023; Branigan, 1992).

Information Pattern	Audience Position	Possible Effect
Mystery	Audience knows less than the character or must discover information gradually.	Curiosity and investigation.
Suspense	Audience knows danger or pressure is approaching.	Anxiety and anticipation.
Surprise	Audience receives unexpected information suddenly.	Shock or reorientation.
Dramatic irony	Audience knows more than a character.	Tension, humor, dread or sympathy.

11. Point of View and Focalization

Point of view is often discussed in screenwriting, but narrative theory gives us a more precise concept: focalization. Genette (1980) uses focalization to discuss the perspective through which narrative information is filtered. Branigan (1992) also examines how film narration organizes viewpoint, knowledge and subjectivity.

For screenwriters, focalization asks: Through whose experience does the audience encounter this event? A scene may show the same event from a witness, victim, investigator, outsider or guilty person. The facts may remain similar, but the audience’s emotional experience changes.

Point of view is not only about camera position. It is about access to knowledge, emotion and interpretation.

12. Audience Inference

Screenplays rarely explain everything directly. Audiences actively infer meaning from visible and audible cues. They connect objects, gestures, dialogue, silence, setting, behavior and earlier information into a meaningful pattern. Narrative theory helps writers understand that audiences are not passive receivers; they are active interpreters (Abbott, 2008; Bordwell et al., 2023).

This is why a simple object can carry narrative force. A train ticket, a wedding ring, an unlocked phone, a half-packed suitcase or an empty chair can invite the audience to infer story information without direct explanation.

13. Example: One Story, Four Narrative Designs

Story material: A student discovers that her best friend has secretly taken credit for her creative project.

Design	Opening Scene	Audience Effect
Chronological	We see the friend steal the files first.	Suspense and dramatic irony.
Mystery	The student sees her idea presented publicly but does not know how it happened.	Curiosity and investigation.
Subjective	We follow the student’s confusion, anger and doubt as clues appear.	Empathy and uncertainty.
Multiple POV	The same situation is seen from the student, friend and teacher.	Ambiguity and moral complexity.

This example shows that narrative theory directly affects screenplay design. The issue is not only “what happened?” but “how should the audience experience what happened?”

14. Scene as Narrative Unit

A screenplay is built from scenes, but scenes are not merely containers for dialogue. A scene is a narrative unit that changes the story situation. It may reveal information, intensify conflict, shift power, create a decision, expose a secret, transform a relationship or move the protagonist closer to or further from a goal.

McKee (1997) emphasizes that scenes should turn in value, while Field (2005) describes scenes as key units in screenplay construction. In this course, students should ask four diagnostic questions about every scene:

6. What does the character want now?
7. What prevents the character?
8. What information changes?
9. What is different at the end of the scene?

15. Narrative Theory and Visual Writing

Narrative theory is not separate from visual writing. Theoretical concepts become practical when they guide what a writer chooses to make visible or audible. Causality can appear as action and consequence. Point of view can appear as what a character sees, misses or misunderstands. Time can appear through repetition, delay or ellipsis. Space can appear through distance, barriers and movement.

A screenwriter uses theory when deciding what to show, what to hide, when to reveal it, and whose experience should guide the scene.

16. Case Study: Story Information to Screenplay Strategy

Story information: A father has been lying to his daughter about the family's financial situation.

A weak screenplay may make the father explain the situation directly. A stronger screenplay may construct discovery through objects, behavior and controlled information.

INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT

The daughter opens the freezer.

Inside: no food. Only envelopes wrapped in plastic.

She removes one.

BANK NOTICE. FINAL WARNING.

Her father appears in the doorway.

For a moment, neither of them moves.

This scene uses space, object, timing and silence. The audience discovers information with the daughter. The father's lie is not explained; it is made visible through evidence.

17. Common Narrative Problems in Student Screenplays

Problem	Narrative-Theory Question
Events feel random	What causes each major event?
Story starts too early	Where does the audience need to enter the story?

Characters only explain information	How can information become action or discovery?
No suspense	What does the audience know, and when do they know it?
Weak point of view	Whose experience organizes this sequence?
Scene has no impact	What changes by the end of the scene?

18. Applying Theory: Narrative Diagnosis Checklist

Before rewriting a story or screenplay sequence, students can use the following diagnostic checklist:

10. What is the main causal chain of the story?
11. Where does the screenplay begin, and why there?
12. What information does the audience know at each stage?
13. What information is withheld, delayed or revealed?
14. Whose point of view shapes the audience experience?
15. How does time function: chronology, compression, repetition or delay?
16. How does space create meaning or conflict?
17. Which objects, behaviors or sounds carry narrative information?
18. What changes from scene to scene?
19. How does each scene create expectation for the next?

19. In-Class Activity 1: Reorder the Story

Students receive six story events and create two different plot orders: one for mystery and one for suspense.

- A student finds a missing hard drive in a teacher's office.
- The best friend secretly copied the student's project files.
- The student is accused of plagiarism.
- The teacher praises the best friend's project in class.
- The student notices an unusual file name on the projector screen.
- The best friend asks the student not to overreact.

Task: Arrange the events twice. In version 1, the audience discovers information with the protagonist. In version 2, the audience knows the secret before the protagonist. Discuss how audience emotion changes.

20. In-Class Activity 2: Point of View Shift

Students rewrite the same short situation from two different points of view.

Situation: Two siblings meet at a hospital after years of silence. One knows their father has changed his will. The other does not.

Version A should follow the sibling who knows the secret. Version B should follow the sibling who does not know. Students compare how information, dialogue, silence and behavior change when focalization changes.

21. In-Class Activity 3: Theory into Scene Design

Students choose one current story idea and create a one-page narrative theory map.

Narrative Element	Student Response
Central causal chain	
Protagonist agency	

Main point of view	
Withheld information	
Key spatial contrast	
Time strategy	
Scene that must change the story	

22. Suggested Four-Hour Teaching Flow

Time	Teaching Activity
00:00–00:20	Review Week 2 and introduce theory as a practical tool.
00:20–00:50	Story, plot, narrative and screenplay.
00:50–01:20	Causality and dramatic action.
01:20–01:45	Narrative time, space and information.
01:45–02:00	Short discussion: mystery vs. suspense.
02:00–02:15	Break.
02:15–02:50	Point of view, focalization and audience inference.
02:50–03:45	Group activities: reorder the story / POV shift / theory map.
03:45–04:00	Summary and preparation for Week 4: Dramatic Theory and Story Structure.

23. Preparation for Week 4

For next week, students should select one story idea and write a 250–350 word synopsis. They should then add a short note answering:

- What is the main causal chain of the story?
- What does the protagonist want?
- What obstacle creates dramatic pressure?
- What information should the audience know early?
- What information should be delayed?
- Which theoretical concept from Week 3 helps improve the story most?

24. Key Takeaways

- Narrative theory helps screenwriters organize audience experience.
- Story is what happened; plot is how events are arranged; screenplay is how events become audiovisual and dramatic.
- Causality creates momentum; information control creates engagement.
- Point of view and focalization shape audience empathy and knowledge.
- Time, space, objects, behavior and silence are narrative tools.
- Theory should help writers diagnose, develop and revise their screenplays.

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