



Scripts That Win – The Scholastic Screenplay and Dramatic Script Playbook

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

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Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

09.1 Format, Length, and What Judges Read

A script is a blueprint that must work as reading. Learn the official limits, pick one format convention, and shape a 3,000-word cap into a finished dramatic idea.

Why This Matters

In the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, the Screenplays & Scripts category accepts dialogue, action, and stage direction written for TV, film, or stage. The length is 500 to 3,000 words. Jurors are told to weigh originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. Scholastic does not publish a more detailed rubric for scripts, so everything below about what tends to separate pieces is coach's inference from published winners, not a statement from the judges.

Where do students lose points before the story even starts? Usually in three places. They treat the cap as a page count and pour in a whole feature film's first act with no ending. They mix formats, using film slug lines in one scene and stage-play cues in the next. And they forget that a juror reads your script in a text box, with no actors, no music, and no camera. If the page does not make the juror see and hear the scene, the scene does not exist. Grades 9 and 10 are expected to show clean format and a clear situation. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to add a controlled dramatic idea and a voice a juror could recognize on the next page.

Core Ideas

Start with the rules, because every craft choice sits inside them. Your script must be 500 to 3,000 words. At roughly 150 to 250 words per script page in standard formats, 3,000 words is about 10 to 12 pages. That is a ten-minute play or a short film, not a feature. If you have a longer project, Scholastic allows a clearly labeled excerpt, and a script over 3,000 words may include a 250-word synopsis that counts toward the limit. How judges weigh excerpts versus complete short scripts is not published, so the safest default is a finished short piece with a beginning, a turn, and an ending.

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Official Facts to Build Around

Category: Screenplays & Scripts. TV, film, or stage are all accepted.

Length: 500 to 3,000 words. Excerpts must be labeled. A synopsis of up to 250 words counts toward the limit.

Type or paste directly into the portal text box. PDFs and hyperlinks cannot be reviewed, and jurors see roughly what appears in the box, line breaks and spacing included.

No name or identifying information anywhere in the manuscript, including a title page.

Work must be your own idea and creation. List influences and collaborators in Work Sources.

The portal gives no font or margin rules for scripts, so formatting is by convention. That makes consistency your job.

Because the text box strips fancy layout, choose a format you can reproduce with plain typing. There are two broad families. **Screenplay format** uses scene headings (INT. or EXT., location, time), action lines in present tense, character names in capitals above dialogue, and short parentheticals. **Stage-play format** uses a character cue followed by a colon or in capitals, dialogue, and italic or bracketed stage directions that describe set, light, and movement. The research on published winners shows both families appear: the one script excerpt Scholastic itself published used stage-play style, while other winners are labeled screenplays. Pick one and hold it for the whole piece.

Choice	Screenplay convention	Stage-play convention
Location	Scene heading in capitals: INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT	A setting note at the top of the scene in brackets or italics
Action	Present-tense, only what the camera can see or hear	Stage directions in brackets; can describe light, sound, and movement
Speaker	Name in capitals, centered or on its own line	Name followed by a colon, or in capitals
Tone cues	Short parenthetical, used sparingly	Short bracketed note before the line
Strength in 3,000 words	Quick cuts across places; visual storytelling	Contained space; language and subtext carry the scene

Next, understand what a juror does. They read dozens of scripts in a sitting. The first page tells them whether you know the form. The first ten lines tell them whether someone wants something. The last page tells them whether the writer can land an ending. Your job in this section is to design a script that survives that reading.

The Container Test

One central want: can you say what the main character wants in one sentence?

One obstacle: who or what stands in the way, in this room, now?

One change: what is different about the character or the relationship at the end?

Two to four speaking roles, one or two locations, and a clock (a deadline, a performance, a storm).

If you cannot fit those inside about 11 pages, the idea is a feature film or a novel, not this entry.

Case Studies

A limit on honesty first. Scholastic's gallery requires an account and none of the scripts below could be read in full for this guide. The analyses use the evidence available: Scholastic's own published excerpt, school and press descriptions, and writer interviews. Treat the craft points as readings of how the described choices fit the rules, not as a verdict on the finished pages.

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CASE STUDY 1: THERE YOU WERE (GOLD MEDAL-WINNING PLAY, 2012; EXCERPT PUBLISHED BY THE SCHOLASTIC NEWSROOM)

Evidence level: partial. Scholastic's Category Highlight on dramatic scripts published an excerpt and describes this play as one of that year's Gold Medal winners. The writer also won a Portfolio Gold Medal. The whole script was not read for this guide.

SOLUTION

Format: the excerpt uses stage-play style. Speaker names are bold and followed by a colon, small tone notes are italic parentheticals, and longer italic directions set up weather, light, costume, and movement. Scholastic accepts this range, which tells you film slug lines are not required.

Development: only two speakers carry the scene. Their situation is concrete. A kitchen, snow outside, a pot of food, and then an outdoor space where one character persuades the other to leave safely. The want is simple (go outside) and the obstacle is fear, tied to an upcoming performance. A scene this small is a good model for a 3,000-word cap.

Structure and diction: the scene moves from playful banter to a quieter, tender note about the present moment being lovely even when it is messy. The relationship between the two is never labeled in the excerpt, so the audience infers it. That withholding creates curiosity without any plot twist.

Effect: stage directions carry atmosphere so the dialogue can stay short. The takeaway for you is that setting and weather can do emotional work that you do not need to explain in speech.

CASE STUDY 2: MIND GAMES: A SCREENPLAY (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2018; NEWTOWN BEE ARTICLE)

Evidence level: description only. A Connecticut news article reports a twelfth grader won a Gold Medal at the national level for this screenplay. It centers on a young patient in a psychiatric hospital and how he relates to fellow patients and staff. It was his third year entering.

SOLUTION

What the description supports: the setting is contained, the cast is an ensemble, and the central figure is defined through relationships. That combination is practical under a 3,000-word cap, because the world and its rules are established once and then reused in every scene.

Inference, not a Scholastic statement: a protagonist built around how he treats people, rather than around a plot gadget, lets a writer build the script from short two-person scenes where subtext does the work. If you choose a hospital, school, or workplace, the same economy is available to you.

Process lesson: the article notes repeat entry across three years. Skill in format and voice often grows with repeated attempts, so treat this year's script as one in a series.

Limit: without the text, we cannot judge dialogue or action lines. Do not copy the premise; copy the discipline of a bounded place and a character shown through other people.

CASE STUDY 3: UNTITLED SCREENPLAY ABOUT A CHILD WHO STOPS SPEAKING AFTER HER MOTHER DIES (GOLD MEDAL, 2024; HARVARD SECONDARY SCHOOL PROGRAM STUDENT STORY)

Evidence level: description only, and the tier is unclear. The program page says the work earned a gold medal in 2024 but does not say whether that was a regional Key or a national Medal. The title is not given. Treat the tier as unverified.

SOLUTION

Process: the student wrote it in a summer beginning screenwriting course while new to the form, with an instructor giving structured feedback before she entered. For a beginner, a class is a legitimate engine for drafts and revision.

Craft reading from the description: a silent protagonist forces the writer to use what screenplays reward most: images, objects, action lines, and pauses. Other characters must talk around her, so dialogue becomes pressure instead of information.

Effect: the premise ties form to feeling. The reader experiences grief as absence of speech. Coach's inference: when the formal limit (no lines for your lead) matches the theme, the script feels designed, not just written.

Caution: do not choose a mute character just to be unusual. The choice earns its place only if every scene finds a new way to show what she cannot say.

Step-by-Step

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- 1 Choose a format and write a header rule** Decide screenplay or stage-play. Write three lines on a note card showing how you will format a location, an action, and a speaker. Tape it to your screen.
- 2 Set the container** Write the want, the obstacle, the change, the locations, and the clock in five short sentences. If it needs more than two locations, cut one.
- 3 Map eleven pages** Divide your 3,000 words: about 300 to open, 600 to 800 to build, 800 to 1,000 for the turn, and 600 to 800 for the end. These numbers are a coaching target, not a rule.
- 4 Draft fast, then count** Write the whole script without stopping to polish. Then paste it into a word counter. Stage directions and character names count, so count the full text.
- 5 Read for what a juror sees** Highlight every line a camera or audience could not perceive. Replace thoughts with behavior.
- 6 Check the paste** Paste into a plain text editor. Fix any line that collapses. Remove your name from every line, including the header.

Two Before and After samples follow. They are original coach samples, written for this guide, not taken from any student's entry.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: OPENING LINES THAT SHOW THE WANT

BEFORE (screenplay):

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Maya is sad about moving. She thinks about her old friends and feels like nobody understands her.

MAYA

(sadly)

I really do not want to move.

SOLUTION

AFTER:

INT. MAYA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Half the posters are rolled into a tube. Maya tapes one back to the wall. Her mother's footsteps stop at the door.

MOTHER

The truck comes at seven.

MAYA

Then it comes to an empty wall.

She presses the corner flat. It curls again.

What changed: the thought ('sad', 'feels like nobody understands') became an action the camera can film, taping a poster that will not stay. The parenthetical 'sadly' disappeared because the behavior carries the mood. The heading names a specific place and time. The mother's line sets a clock (seven). Maya's reply is indirect and has an edge. The ending image (the curling corner) says the want and the obstacle without a speech.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: STAGE DIRECTIONS THAT CARRY ATMOSPHERE

BEFORE (stage play):

[The room is cold and it is night. They are both worried.]

ANNA: I am worried about tomorrow.

BEN: Me too.

SOLUTION

AFTER:

[A kitchen. One lamp. Ben wraps both hands around a mug that stopped steaming a while ago. Anna rinses the same plate twice.]

ANNA: You can stop watching the clock.

BEN: I'm watching the plate.

[She sets it down. It is the only sound.]

What changed: 'worried' is told twice in the before version. In the after version the worry is only shown, through the cold mug, the repeated rinse, and the clock they both avoid mentioning. Each direction is one image a stage crew or a juror's imagination can hold. The dialogue got shorter, and the second line has humor that lets the audience in. Both versions use the same stage-play convention, which is the point: consistency plus specificity.

Tier Check

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Scholastic does not publish a rubric for scripts or percentages for each tier. The table below is the coach's inference from the published winners and Scholastic's stated criteria. Treat it as a set of hypotheses to test against your own drafts.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Format is clean and consistent, and the container (cast, place, clock) is chosen so the idea fits the cap.	Format is mostly clean. The idea fits the cap but the ending arrives a page late or early.	Format drifts between conventions. The idea needs more room than 3,000 words allow.
An angle that feels unusual: a silent child, a play inside a play, a place defined through its people.	A clear premise that is well told but familiar in shape.	Premise is a generic situation described instead of dramatized.
Action lines and stage directions deliver mood; dialogue stays short and charged.	Directions are competent but sometimes explain feelings.	Directions narrate thoughts that nobody could film or stage.
A finished arc with a change the reader can name.	A finished arc with a modest change.	An excerpt feeling, no ending, or a summary at the close.

Common traps

1. Writing a feature film's opening and calling it a short. 2. Mixing screenplay headings with stage-play cues. 3. Using parentheticals like (angrily) on every line. 4. Putting your name, school, or a date in a header, which breaks the no-identifying-information rule.

Coach's Playbook

Before you submit: one want, one obstacle, one change. Eleven pages or fewer. One format, tested by pasting into plain text. Every line either shows something or says something a person would say. Final work must be entirely your own, and anything that influenced you goes in Work Sources.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, write the Container Test answers for your best idea in five sentences, then draft the first ten lines of the script in your chosen format. Do not edit until the timer ends.

Practice

WORKSHOP Format, Length, and What Judges Read

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write the Container Test (want, obstacle, change, locations, clock) for three different script ideas. Circle the one that fits 11 pages best.
2. Rewrite the Maya opening from Before and After 1 in stage-play format instead of screenplay format. List what you had to change.
3. Choose a format and write a three-line format key card for it. Then draft a half-page scene that follows it exactly.
4. Take a scene you wrote and highlight every line a camera could not capture. Rewrite five of them as visible behavior.
5. Draft a 300-word opening that sets a place, a clock, and a want without any character announcing how they feel.
6. Plan your 3,000 words in four blocks (open, build, turn, end) and note the page each block will land on.
7. Paste a draft page into a plain text editor. Describe what broke and how you will fix your formatting so jurors see what you intended.
8. Rewrite a bored, vague stage direction as three concrete images. Pick the strongest and defend your choice in two sentences.
9. List three published plays or films you admire and name which format family they use. Say what you will borrow from one of them (a technique, not a plot).
10. Write a 100-word explanation of why your idea is a short script and not a longer one, as if explaining to a teacher.

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09.2 Character, Conflict, and Structure on the Page

Short scripts win on a want, an obstacle, and a change. Learn to build a tight three-part structure and a character jurors can picture in a few lines.

Why This Matters

Scholastic tells jurors to look for originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. In a script, technical skill mostly means structure: can you take a character from one state to another in about eleven pages? Scholastic publishes no scoring sheet, so the following is coach's inference from the winners we can describe. The described winners share a bounded situation, two to four characters, a clear frame such as a hospital, a rehearsal, or a kitchen, and a theme that surfaces through action and not speeches.

Students lose points here by confusing a premise with a story. 'A girl finds out her best friend is moving' is a situation. A story begins when she wants something specific, someone or something blocks it, and she ends up different. Grades 9 and 10 are expected to show a complete arc. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to show an arc that is surprising, yet inevitable once you see it.

Core Ideas

Every dramatic scene runs on a simple engine: a character wants something, runs into an obstacle, tries a tactic, and either gets closer or is pushed back. A script is a chain of these engines, each one a little more costly than the last. In 3,000 words you have room for roughly six to nine of them, so each must matter.

The Want-Obstacle-Change Frame

Want: concrete and visible. 'To get the teacher to admit the truth' beats 'to be understood.'

Obstacle: a person or force in the scene, not just an inner feeling. Another character who wants the opposite is strongest.

Stakes: what is lost if the want fails? Name it in one sentence.

Change: the final image or line should show the character has moved, even by an inch.

Test: cover the dialogue and tell the story in six verbs. If the verbs are 'feels, thinks, remembers, hopes,' you do not have action yet.

Now structure. Think in three movements rather than a rigid formula. **Setup** (roughly the first tenth to fifth of the script) establishes place, people, and the want. **Confrontation** (the middle) raises costs, reverses expectations, and exposes what each character is hiding. **Resolution** (the last section) delivers the choice and its consequence. These proportions are a coach's drafting target, not a Scholastic rule. If your turn lands in the last page, you probably never built a middle.

Part	Job	Typical size in 3,000 words	Warning sign
Setup	Place, want, relationship, clock	300 to 600 words	Backstory dump or a character explaining their life
Confrontation	Obstacles, reversals, secrets	1,500 to 1,900 words	Same argument repeated at the same volume
Turn	The choice that cannot be undone	400 to 600 words	Choice made by coincidence or a new character arriving
Resolution	Image and echo of the opening	200 to 400 words	Summary speech, or the lesson stated aloud

Character on the page works differently than in prose. You cannot go inside a head. A reader learns who someone is from what they choose under pressure, what they avoid saying, how they talk, and what the others say about them. Give each speaking role one dominant trait, one contradiction, and one verbal habit. A character who is gentle but controlling, or funny but cornered, is more playable than a character who is just 'nice.' Keep names distinct on the page: avoid two names starting with the same letter, because cues are all the reader has.

Character Sheet in Five Lines

Wants: the visible goal in this script.

Needs: what they would have to admit to change (usually hidden).

Tactic: how they go after the want (charm, joke, silence, attack).

Voice: sentence length, favorite word, what they never say directly.

Object: one prop they touch that tells us something.

Case Studies

These pieces could not be read in full for this guide. Each analysis is labeled with its evidence level, and the craft observations are readings of described choices, not verdicts on the finished pages.

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CASE STUDY 1: WE WRITE THE WORDS WE CANNOT SAY (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL; DRAMATIC SCRIPT; SCHOOL BLOG POST DATED 2020, AWARD YEAR NOT STATED)

Evidence level: a school blog post summarizes the play. A shy student, Margaret, writes and directs a play for a college course. Before the premiere she learns her teacher let a donor's son take credit for her work. The play inside the play follows Julia, a reserved young woman who elopes with an overbearing fiancé to escape cold parents. An older Julia narrates and reflects that the marriage became a different confinement.

SOLUTION

Structure: the piece nests two stories. The outer story is about who gets to claim authorship. The inner story is about a woman who escapes one cage and enters another. Because both stories are about voice taken or withheld, the structure itself becomes the argument.

Development: the outer plot supplies a clock (the premiere) and a betrayal. The inner plot supplies an image-driven journey from escape to realization. In a short script, a frame like this lets you show a theme from two angles without adding new locations.

Device: an older version of a character who narrates is a stage-native way to compress time. It also lets an adult reflection coexist with youthful action, so a character's change can be heard as well as seen.

Title: it states the theme as a condition. A title like this tells the juror what to watch for in the first page. Limit: the actual dialogue and scene pacing are not known.

CASE STUDY 2: THERE YOU WERE (GOLD MEDAL-WINNING PLAY, 2012; EXCERPT PUBLISHED BY SCHOLASTIC)

Evidence level: partial. Scholastic's newsroom printed an excerpt, which was summarized for this guide. The scene has two speakers. One coaxes the more cautious other out into the snow to make snow angels, though a violin recital looms.

SOLUTION

Want and obstacle: the want is to go outside and play. The obstacle is fear of cold and of performing. A want this small is actually a strength: it shows how a tiny desire can carry a scene when it connects to a bigger worry.

Reversal: the tone moves from banter to a tender statement that the moment is lovely even though it is messy. This is the kind of turn that gives a short scene shape. The cautious character is changed by being outside, not by being lectured.

Withholding: the relationship between the two is never labeled in the excerpt. That choice makes the audience pay attention to behavior to work out who they are.

Takeaway for you: place the real stakes (the recital, a fear of failing) under the surface want, so a light scene has weight.

CASE STUDY 3: MIND GAMES: A SCREENPLAY (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2018; NEWTOWN BEE ARTICLE)

Evidence level: description only. The article describes a young male patient in a psychiatric hospital and how he relates to fellow patients and staff. The writer was a twelfth grader in his third year of entering.

SOLUTION

Character design: the protagonist is defined through relationships. That suggests scenes built as pairings (patient and patient, patient and staff member), each revealing a different side of him.

Structure (inference): a contained setting lets the writer reuse a small cast, so each new scene can change the relationship instead of introducing new people. This is a smart use of limited words.

Conflict: the facility supplies built-in pressure from rules, schedules, and authority, so conflict does not need to be invented from scratch.

Limit: we cannot say how the arc resolves, or whether the script is complete or an excerpt. Use the lesson, not the content: a place with rules gives your characters something to push against.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Write the story in six verbs** List six actions your protagonist takes, in order. Cross out anything that is a feeling or a memory.
- 2 Name the opponent** Give your main character one person who wants the opposite. If the opponent is an inner fear, add a person who makes the fear visible.
- 3 Place the turn** Decide the one choice that cannot be undone. Write the line or action that shows it. Build backward from there.
- 4 Plan three escalations** Make each attempt to get the want cost more than the last: a polite ask, a trick, a confession.

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- 5 Cast and label** Give each role a one-line sheet and make sure no two names look alike on the page.
- 6 Write the last image first** Draft your final image or line before the middle. It will tell you what the opening needs to plant.

The two samples below are original coach samples, written for this guide.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: MAKING THE WANT VISIBLE

BEFORE:

Nina sits with Dad at the table. She wants him to understand her. They talk about school. At the end he says he is proud.

SOLUTION

AFTER:

Nina slides the acceptance letter across the table, under his coffee cup, so he has to lift it to read.

DAD

(reading, not lifting)

New York is expensive.

NINA

So is staying.

He finally lifts the cup. The ring of coffee stays behind on the letter.

DAD

You answered them already.

NINA

I am answering you.

What changed: 'wants him to understand' became a concrete goal (get him to read and accept the letter). An obstacle appeared in his resistance. Escalation happens in three beats: the letter slides, the cost is named, a confession arrives. The last exchange shows the change in their relationship through her line, not through him announcing pride. The coffee ring is an object that stays after the moment is gone.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: GIVING A CHARACTER A CONTRADICTION

BEFORE:

COACH is a strict person who yells. He tells the team to run laps. He is mean to everybody.

SOLUTION

AFTER:

COACH tapes a stopwatch to the clipboard, then peels it off and puts it in his pocket where no one can see.

COACH

Laps. Now.

He watches Tomas limp to the line. He looks away to the scoreboard that has no score on it.

COACH

Slow is allowed. Stopping is not.

What changed: a flat trait ('mean') became a contradiction (harsh words, private mercy). The stopwatch gesture shows that he is bending his own rule. The final line is firm in form and kind in content, which makes the character playable by an actor and memorable to a juror.

Tier Check

This table is the coach's inference from the published winners and Scholastic's stated criteria. Scholastic gives no rubric and no tier percentages. Test it against your draft instead of treating it as a scorecard.

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Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
The structure carries the meaning: a frame, a device, or a formal limit that echoes the theme.	Structure is sound and the arc is finished, but the shape is conventional.	Structure is a sequence of events without a turn.
Characters have contradictions and specific verbal habits.	Characters are distinct but mostly one-note.	Characters sound alike or exist to deliver information.
Conflict comes from people who want opposing things.	Conflict is clear but sometimes inner and told.	Conflict is announced rather than dramatized.
The ending changes the relationship and echoes the opening.	The ending resolves the plot but states the lesson.	The ending stops or summarizes.

Common traps

1. A premise with no want. 2. An opponent who is only weather or fate. 3. Three characters who share the same sense of humor. 4. A turn caused by a coincidence or a stranger entering in the last page.

Coach's Playbook

Six verbs, one opponent, one irreversible choice, three escalations, one last image. Check that each speaking role has a want, a tactic, and a voice. Your final script must be your own idea and creation.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, fill out the Want-Obstacle-Change Frame for one idea and write the six verbs. Then circle the single verb that marks the turn.

Practice

WORKSHOP Character, Conflict, and Structure on the Page

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write the six-verb version of a story you are considering. Revise any verb that names a feeling.
2. Pick a scene from a film or play you know and fill in its Want-Obstacle-Change Frame. Say what the tactic was.
3. Create a Character Sheet in Five Lines for your protagonist and one for the opponent.
4. Rewrite the Nina scene so that the object on the table is different. How does the meaning change?
5. Draft a 200-word scene in which two characters want opposite things from the same object.
6. Outline your script in four parts with target word counts and note where the irreversible choice sits.
7. Write the final image of your script first, in two to four lines, and then list what the opening must plant.
8. Take a flat character you have written and add one contradiction shown by a gesture. Write five lines.
9. Read the Case Study about a frame story and sketch your own two-layer structure where both layers share a theme.
10. Write a 150-word note on where your script could drag in the middle and what escalation would fix it.

09.3 Dialogue, Subtext, and Stage Direction

In a script the words on the page are all a juror gets. Learn to write speech that hides as much as it says, and directions that show only what can be seen or heard.

Why This Matters

Technical skill is one of the three things Scholastic says jurors weigh, and in a script that skill shows up on every line. Dialogue and direction are the two tools you have. Scholastic does not publish a script rubric, so what follows about tiers is coach's inference from the winners we can describe, not a judges' statement. Still, the pattern in the evidence is steady: pieces that earn recognition tend to let silence, objects, and indirect speech carry feeling, and they keep directions short and visual.

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Students lose points when every character says exactly what they feel (on-the-nose dialogue), when speeches explain the plot to an imaginary audience, and when directions describe thoughts a camera cannot capture. Grades 9 and 10 should aim for distinct voices and clean directions. Grades 11 and 12 should aim for subtext: a gap between what is said and what is meant that the reader can feel.

Core Ideas

Subtext is the meaning under the words. Two people talk about dinner while really fighting about who left. Subtext appears when a character has a want they cannot ask for directly, because it is risky, shameful, or rude. So the first step in writing subtext is to give your characters something they cannot say. The second step is to give them a safer topic to talk about instead. The reader then does the work, which is why subtext feels intelligent.

Five Tools for Subtext

- Deflection: answer a different question than the one asked.
- Interruption and trailing off: the unsaid shows in the cut-off line.
- Object talk: argue over a coat, a key, or a phone instead of the real thing.
- Repetition with a change: the same phrase reused with new weight.
- Silence: a beat with an action in it (a cup set down), not an empty gap.

Voice differentiates speakers. Cover the character names on a page of your script; can you still tell who is talking? Vary sentence length, rhythm, vocabulary, and what each person avoids. One character may speak in finished sentences and another in fragments. One may ask questions when afraid, and another may give orders. The goal is not accents or spelling tricks, which tire the reader, but consistent habits.

Stage direction and action lines are the other half. In screenplay form, action lines are present tense and describe only what an audience can see or hear. In stage-play form, directions can also describe light, sound, set, and costume. In both, the rule is the same: write the image, not the interpretation. 'She is nervous' is an interpretation. 'She straightens the same napkin three times' is an image. Keep directions short, because the reader's eye skips long blocks.

The Direction Filter

- Can an actor do it or a camera show it? If not, cut or rewrite.
- Does it do more than the dialogue already does? If not, cut.
- Is it one image, in one or two lines?
- Does the parenthetical change the meaning of the line? Keep it only if the line would be misread without it.
- Is it in the same convention as the rest of the script?

Weak habit	Why it fails	Stronger move
(angrily) before a line	Tells the actor what the words already show	Cut it. Make the words sharper or add a gesture.
Characters explain backstory to each other	Both already know it	Reveal the history through an object or an argument about the present.
Every line is a full sentence	Sounds like writing, not speech	Allow fragments, interruptions, and echoes.
Long speech to end the scene	Explains the theme	End on action or a short line that echoes the opening.

Case Studies

As elsewhere, none of these scripts could be read in full for this guide. Analyses are tied to the evidence available and labeled.

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CASE STUDY 1: THERE YOU WERE (GOLD MEDAL-WINNING PLAY, 2012; EXCERPT PUBLISHED BY THE SCHOLASTIC NEWSROOM)

Evidence level: partial, via a summary of Scholastic's published excerpt. Two speakers. A kitchen with snow outside and a pot of food, then a snowy outdoor space. One character coaxes the other out to make snow angels despite a looming violin recital.

SOLUTION

Format and direction: speaker names are bold with a colon, short tone notes are italic parentheticals, and longer italic directions set weather, light, costume, and movement. Directions here create atmosphere, which frees the dialogue to stay light.

Dialogue: the exchange begins as banter and ends with a tender line about a moment being lovely even when it is messy. The move from play to sincerity is the kind of shift that keeps a short scene from feeling flat.

Subtext (inference): the recital is the unspoken pressure under the snow-angel plan. A reader senses that going outside is really about being allowed to be imperfect, though the scene does not state it as such.

Lesson: let a small activity (snow angels) carry a bigger fear. Notice also that the relationship is never labeled, so the lines must reveal it through tone.

CASE STUDY 2: SCREENPLAY ABOUT A MUTE CHILD AFTER A MOTHER'S DEATH (GOLD MEDAL, 2024; HARVARD SECONDARY SCHOOL PROGRAM STORY; TIER UNVERIFIED)

Evidence level: description only. A beginner in a summer screenwriting course wrote about a young girl who stops speaking after her mother dies, to explore how small children experience grief. The page says it earned a gold medal but does not say whether Key or Medal. Title not given.

SOLUTION

Dialogue: when the lead character does not speak, every other character's speech becomes a kind of pressure or avoidance. Adults tend to fill silence with chatter, which can be written as comedy, tenderness, or failure. This is how silence can be a dialogue technique.

Direction: action lines must carry the main character's inner life. Objects (a coat, a bowl, a door left open) and small behaviors do the work that speech would do in another script.

Effect: because the form restricts speech, the reader feels the cost of every word spoken around her. Coach's inference: this match between formal limit and subject is the kind of deliberate choice that reads as skilled.

Limit: we cannot say how she is brought to speak, or whether she does. Do not assume a payoff; focus on the technique of building a scene without her voice.

CASE STUDY 3: WE WRITE THE WORDS WE CANNOT SAY (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL; SCHOOL BLOG DATED 2020; AWARD YEAR NOT STATED)

Evidence level: summary only. A shy student writes and directs a play and learns her teacher let a donor's son take credit. The inner play follows a reserved young woman who elopes to escape cold parents; an older version narrates and reflects that the marriage became another confinement.

SOLUTION

Dialogue: the title names the technique. Characters who cannot say what they feel force the reader to hear what they do not say. The shy writer, the reserved young woman, and the narrator who looks back are all ways of dramatizing silence.

Direction and device: a narrator who is the older self lets reflection be spoken aloud without a long speech by a younger character. In stage form, this is an economical way to add insight, since the younger character can stay in the moment.

Effect: the doubled structure lets subtext rise in two registers: the outer scene about credit and the inner scene about escape. The audience hears a theme twice and recognizes it without being told.

Limit: we do not have the lines. What you can take is the principle that a narrator can speak the truth that a character cannot, if you give that narrator a clear identity.

Step-by-Step

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- 1 List what each character cannot say** For each speaking role, write the one sentence they would never say aloud in this scene. Everything they do say should circle that sentence.
- 2 Choose the safe topic** Pick the thing they talk about instead: dinner, a game, a form to sign. The safe topic must connect to the stakes.
- 3 Draft the scene fast** Write with only dialogue and minimal directions. Do not explain. Let each line answer the previous one sideways.
- 4 Run the name-cover test** Cover the speaker names. Mark any lines where you cannot tell who speaks. Change rhythm, vocabulary, or habit.
- 5 Apply the Direction Filter** Go through every direction and parenthetical with the five questions. Cut a third.
- 6 Read aloud twice** Read once for sound, once with a partner reading the other role. Mark any line that you or your partner stumble over.

Two original coach samples follow, written for this guide.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: REPLACING ON-THE-NOSE DIALOGUE

BEFORE:

JORDAN

I am angry that you forgot my birthday and it makes me feel unimportant.

SAM

I am sorry. I feel guilty and I will do better.

SOLUTION

AFTER:

JORDAN

Nice shirt. Is it new?

SAM

I got it last week.

JORDAN

Good. Wear it. Somewhere.

Sam looks at the calendar on the wall. Today is circled in red. He tries to stand in front of it.

SAM

I have a thing tomorrow. If you wanted to...

JORDAN

Tomorrow is not today.

What changed: the feelings are no longer named. Jordan deflects with the shirt, and the circled date is the real subject. Sam's attempt to block the calendar is an action that tells the audience his guilt. The last line is short, final, and funny in a painful way. Each character now has a safe topic (clothes, tomorrow) and a thing they cannot say.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: CUTTING EXPLANATORY DIRECTION

BEFORE:

[Rosa walks into the kitchen feeling anxious about the test results she got in the mail that morning, which she has not told her mother about because she is afraid of disappointing her.]

SOLUTION

AFTER:

[Rosa enters with a white envelope held flat against her stomach. Her mother is chopping onions. Rosa stands behind the chair, then in front of it, then behind it again.]

What changed: the original tried to hand the audience Rosa's thoughts, her history, and the plot in one sentence that no audience could see. The rewrite offers three visible things (envelope, onions, indecisive movement). The audience pieces together the secret. The direction is half the length and twice as active. Notice that the chair gives an actor something to do, which is how a good direction supports the performance.

Tier Check

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Scholastic does not publish a rubric for scripts or tier percentages. This table is coach's inference from described winners and Scholastic's stated criteria of originality, technical skill, and personal voice or vision.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Subtext carries the important feeling; characters avoid the thing they most need to say.	Some subtext, though key emotions are stated outright in places.	Characters state feelings and plot to each other.
Each voice is recognizable with names covered.	Voices differ in content but share a rhythm.	All characters sound like the writer.
Directions are brief, visual, and add meaning beyond the lines.	Directions are clean but sometimes decorative.	Directions narrate thoughts, history, or inner states.
Silence and objects are used on purpose.	Silence appears, but mostly as pauses.	Every beat is filled with talk.

Common traps

1. Adverbs in parentheses on every line. 2. Characters who tell each other what they both know. 3. Accents spelled phonetically. 4. Stage directions about what a character thinks, remembers, or secretly feels.

Coach's Playbook

For each scene: name what is unsaid, choose a safe topic, give each voice a habit, filter every direction through the five questions, and read it aloud. Everything you submit must be your own writing.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, take one page of your script and delete every parenthetical. Add back only the ones the page cannot live without. Then read the page aloud once.

Practice

WORKSHOP Dialogue, Subtext, and Stage Direction

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a 200-word scene in which two people argue about a household chore while really arguing about something else. Do not name the real subject.
2. Rewrite the Jordan and Sam scene so the object in play is a phone instead of a calendar.
3. Take a page of your script and cover the speaker names. Mark every line where voice is unclear, then revise five of them.
4. List three things a character you invented would never say, and write a four-line exchange that circles one of them.
5. Convert a paragraph of narration from a story you wrote into five action lines, each showing only what could be seen or heard.
6. Write a scene where one character does not speak at all. Show their feelings through objects and behavior only.
7. Rewrite a long speech from your draft as an exchange of five short lines with interruptions.
8. Choose three parentheticals from your own script. For each, decide whether to cut it, or replace it with a gesture.
9. Draft a narrator line (spoken by a character's older self) that says what the younger character cannot. Keep it to two sentences.
10. Read a page of your script aloud with a partner. Record which lines you changed and why in a short note.

09.4 Revision, Excerpts, and Table-Read Testing

Scripts are tested by ear. Learn a table read, a cutting method, and how to decide between a complete short script and a labeled excerpt with a synopsis.

Why This Matters

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Scholastic says you may edit until your regional deadline, and the secondary source on judging adds that jurors tend to value substantial revision. Scholastic itself publishes no rubric, so treat that as a reasonable expectation, not a rule. In scripts, revision matters even more than in prose, because a script is written to be spoken. Flaws that eyes forgive, such as a clumsy sentence or a repeated beat, are obvious when voices say them.

Students lose points by submitting a first draft that runs past the cap, then chopping the ending to fit. They also skip any test by ear, and they handle excerpts carelessly. The official rules allow a clearly labeled excerpt of a longer script, with an optional synopsis of up to 250 words counted inside the 3,000 words. How judges weigh an excerpt versus a complete short script is not published. This guide's advice, to finish a short piece when you can, is coach's inference from the described winners, which include complete scripts and labeled screenplays.

Core Ideas

A **table read** is simple: you, or friends, read the script aloud in character, with one person reading the directions. You listen, you do not defend. Mark every place where the reader stumbles, laughs when you did not intend it, checks a phone, or asks 'Who is this?' Those marks are your revision list. A table read is the cheapest test you can run, and it needs no stage.

Table-Read Protocol

Cast one reader per role, plus one reader for directions. Read at normal speed.

Writer stays silent and takes notes. No explanations during the read.

Mark: stumbles, laughs, silences, and any line a reader asks to repeat.

After the read, ask three questions: What did the main character want? When did you stop believing someone? What do you remember?

Revise the three biggest problems first. Then read again.

Cutting is the next skill. A script over the limit is usually carrying lines that repeat. Use a three-pass method. Pass one cuts anything that repeats information already given. Pass two cuts anything that explains a feeling. Pass three cuts the first and last lines of each scene to see if the scene starts later and ends sooner. In most scripts, entering a scene late and leaving early improves pace. Count words again after each pass, because stage directions and names count toward the limit.

Complete Script or Excerpt: How to Decide

Complete short script: choose this when your idea has one want, one turn, and one ending that fit in about eleven pages.

Labeled excerpt: choose this when the idea belongs to something longer. Label it plainly as an excerpt at the top.

Synopsis: optional, up to 250 words, and it counts toward the 3,000. Use it to give the ending and the arc so the excerpt can be read as part of a whole.

Whichever you choose, the pages you submit must stand as a satisfying unit of reading.

Never include your name in the label or synopsis.

If you do choose an excerpt, pick a section that has its own mini-arc: an entrance, a conflict, and a change, even if the larger story continues. A synopsis should tell the whole story in plain, present-tense sentences, including the ending, in the way a back cover would if it held nothing back. Remember it eats into your word count; a 250-word synopsis leaves about 2,750 for script.

Revision pass	What to look for	Tool
Structure	Want, obstacle, turn, change	Six-verb list from earlier
Scene	Late in, early out	Cut first and last lines
Dialogue	On-the-nose lines, repeated beats	Table read
Direction	Thoughts, adverbs, long blocks	Direction Filter
Format and paste	Consistent convention, no name, clean text box paste	Plain text editor test

Case Studies

These case studies focus on process because process is where the research evidence is strongest. None of the scripts could be read in full. Everything below is paraphrase of school pages and press descriptions, and craft readings are labeled as inference.

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CASE STUDY 1: MIND GAMES: A SCREENPLAY (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, 2018; NEWTOWN BEE ARTICLE)

Evidence level: description only. A twelfth grader from Connecticut won a Gold Medal at the national level. The article notes it was his third year entering and that he planned to continue as a novelist. He said the award gave him a platform.

SOLUTION

Process: three years of entering suggests a pattern of draft, submit, learn, and return. Repeated entry is a legitimate revision method, because each year you test your skills against the same form and word limit.

Structure (inference): a contained hospital ensemble is easier to cut to a cap than a sprawling plot, since scenes can be trimmed without losing a map of locations.

Attitude: his remark about gaining a platform shows he treated the script as writing in its own right, not as a rough draft of a film. That mindset supports revision for the reader's eye and ear.

Limit: we do not know how many drafts or what was cut. The takeaway is long-term commitment, not a particular method.

CASE STUDY 2: SCREENPLAY ABOUT A MUTE CHILD AFTER A MOTHER'S DEATH (GOLD MEDAL, 2024; HARVARD SECONDARY SCHOOL PROGRAM; TIER UNVERIFIED)

Evidence level: description. A student new to screenwriting wrote this in a summer course taught by an instructor and then entered it. The program page says it earned a gold medal in 2024 but not whether Key or Medal.

SOLUTION

Process: structured classroom feedback gave her an outside reader before she submitted. For a first script, an instructor's notes on format and pacing can save many revision cycles.

Revision lesson (inference): a script with a silent lead is easy to over-explain. Revision for this kind of project likely focuses on removing explanation until images do the work.

Test by ear: when the lead does not speak, a table read reveals whether the other characters carry too much talk. Silence is hard to stage, so reading aloud checks the beats.

Takeaway: if you can take a class, join a writing group, or find a teacher who will read your draft, do so before you enter. This is the pattern in several described winners, though correlation is not proof.

CASE STUDY 3: I LOVE MY GUTS (SCREENPLAY, REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026; MARIN SCHOOL OF THE ARTS)

Evidence level: school news page. The page reports a student's screenplay earned a regional Gold Key in 2026, placing among the top five of 374 entries across two counties. The school planned to produce it in its Cinematic Arts program. No description or text was available.

SOLUTION

What the page supports: the piece was strong enough to rank in a local top five and was selected for production. That means readers could imagine it filmed, a useful test of whether the page is playable.

Process lesson: a production plan creates a deadline and a real audience. If you can get friends to film a scene, the shoot will show which lines and directions fail in practice.

Limit: with no description, craft analysis is not possible. Use this as evidence that school programs can support regional recognition and production, not as a model for content.

Tier note: this is a regional Gold Key, not a national medal. Do not blur the two when you describe your own results.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Rest the draft** Put it away for two days. Fresh eyes spot repetition and confusing directions much faster.
- 2 Run the first table read** Use the protocol. Collect marks. Do not fix anything during the read.
- 3 Fix structure first** Address the biggest problem, usually a missing turn or a flat ending, before touching line-level style.
- 4 Cut in three passes** Repetition, explanation, then late in and early out. Recount the full text after each.
- 5 Decide complete or excerpt** Use the decision box. If excerpt, label it at the top and write the synopsis, remembering it counts toward your 3,000.
- 6 Run the paste test** Paste into a plain editor and then the portal box. Check line breaks, spacing, and that no name appears anywhere.

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- 7 Read once more, then stop** A last read aloud, then submit before your regional deadline. Deadlines vary by region, so check yours.

The following two samples are original coach samples, written for this guide.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: CUTTING A SCENE ENTRANCE

BEFORE:

INT. DINER - DAY

Lena enters the diner and walks to the counter. She says hello to Marta, who says hello back. They talk about the weather. Lena sits down.

LENA

I need to tell you something.

SOLUTION

AFTER:

INT. DINER - DAY

Lena sits at the counter before Marta has put the pot down.

LENA

I need to tell you something.

MARTA

Coffee first.

What changed: the greeting and weather talk repeated what the audience already assumed. By entering the scene when the conflict starts, the script saves forty words and adds a small power move, since Marta delays her. The cut also gives the reply 'Coffee first' a job: showing avoidance.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: TURNING AN EXCERPT LABEL AND SYNOPSIS INTO A UNIT

BEFORE:

This is part of my longer script. A lot of stuff happens before and after.

[scene begins]

SOLUTION

AFTER:

EXCERPT from a longer script. Synopsis: Two brothers return to sell the family bakery. Over one night, the elder discovers the younger already signed a contract. The excerpt below is the midpoint, when the elder finds the paper. In the end, they decide to bake the last batch together and sign nothing until morning.

[scene begins]

What changed: the label says clearly that it is an excerpt. The synopsis gives who, what, the turn, and the ending in four sentences. The reader knows where this scene sits. In a real entry the synopsis can be up to 250 words and counts toward the total, so keep it as lean as the story allows.

Tier Check

No rubric or tier percentages are published. This table is coach's inference from the described winners and from Scholastic's stated criteria, to be tested against your own draft.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Evidence of substantial revision: cut scenes, tightened entrances, a clear ending after multiple drafts.	One or two full revisions; some repetition left.	First draft submitted, often over or under the cap.
Dialogue tested by ear; no stumbles.	Dialogue is clean but some lines read as written, not spoken.	Dialogue has not been read aloud.
If an excerpt, it stands alone as a unit and the synopsis gives the whole arc.	Excerpt is readable, but the ending of the section is soft.	Excerpt stops mid-scene or has no synopsis context.
Format and paste are clean.	Minor formatting slips.	Layout breaks in the text box, or identifying information appears.

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Common traps

1. Cutting the ending to hit the word limit. 2. Writing a synopsis that hides the ending. 3. Skipping the table read because no one is free. 4. Leaving your name in a header, label, or file that you paste.

Coach's Playbook

Rest, read aloud, fix structure, cut in three passes, decide complete or excerpt, test the paste, check your regional deadline. The final script must be your own work, and AI use must be disclosed per the rules.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, read your best scene aloud, alone, twice. Mark every place you stumble or want to skip. Then cut the first line and the last line of the scene and see if it improves.

Practice

WORKSHOP Revision, Excerpts, and Table-Read Testing

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Run a table read of one scene with two friends or family members. List every mark you collected.
2. Cut a scene by 20 percent using the three-pass method. Report the word count at each pass.
3. Write the first and last lines of three scenes, then delete both and decide whether each scene still works.
4. Write a 250-word synopsis for a script you could imagine as a longer work. Include the ending.
5. Compress that synopsis to 120 words. Say what you lost and what you kept.
6. Rewrite the diner opening so the scene begins with a different line of conflict.
7. Create a one-page revision plan for your script with the three biggest problems ranked.
8. Paste a page of your script into a plain text editor. Fix anything that changed. List the fixes.
9. Write a two-sentence label for an excerpt that contains no identifying information.
10. After a table read, answer the three protocol questions in writing, from the perspective of a listener.

09.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Scene Clinic

Follow one complete original short scene in three annotated parts, then run six revision passes on your own script. The scene is a coach's sample, not a Scholastic winner.

Why This Matters

A script is judged on the page, so every line of dialogue and direction must do visible work. This lab walks you through a complete short scene in a single film-style format, with analysis after each part. The scene is **Coach's sample (original, not a Scholastic winner)**. Scholastic's criteria for Screenplays & Scripts are originality, technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, with no published rubric beyond that, so the analysis is coach's inference. Scripts run 500 to 3,000 words, and your work must be your own idea and creation.

Annotated Draft Clinic: The Sample Scene

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PART 1: OPENING IMAGE AND WANT (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

INT. LAUNDROMAT - NIGHT

Fluorescent hum. One dryer turns a single red sock. INEZ (17) sits on a folding table, a bus schedule pinned under her thumb. Her brother TOMAS (9) draws on a receipt.

TOMAS

Is Mom coming?

INEZ

She said ten.

TOMAS

It's eleven.

Inez folds the schedule smaller.

SOLUTION

Development: the want is clear in under 60 words: Inez is planning to leave, and Tomas needs someone to stay. The red sock is a visual anchor that can return later.

Format and diction: slug line, present tense action, character introduced in caps with age. Action lines contain only what a camera can see or a microphone can hear. Dialogue is short and sparse, with subtext carried by 'It's eleven.' Device: the tiny physical action (folding the schedule) shows decision without announcing it.

PART 2: COMPLICATION AND TURN (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

A MAN (50s, work boots) enters with a duffel and starts a machine. He glances at Tomas's drawing.

MAN

That a bus?

TOMAS

It's a ship.

INEZ

(quick)

He's not allowed to talk to strangers.

MAN

Good rule.

He sets down a quarter on the table. Leaves it. Walks away.

INEZ

(to Tomas, low)

We are not taking that.

Tomas slides it into his pocket.

SOLUTION

Organization: a new character interrupts the pair, which raises pressure without adding plot. The small kindness creates conflict between the siblings. Syntax: lines are short, interruptions are clean, and the parenthetical directions are used only where tone would otherwise be lost.

Device and diction: bus versus ship is a quiet contrast between Inez's plan and Tomas's imagination. The quarter is a prop that carries the scene's turn: Tomas chooses to accept, and Inez cannot stop him. Note that no one explains the stakes.

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PART 3: ESCALATION AND ENDING (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

The dryer buzzes. Inez opens it, pulls out the red sock, and holds it a long moment.

TOMAS

You can go.

INEZ

Go where?

TOMAS

(not looking up)

The bus.

She stares. Then she sits and pulls him against her. The schedule slips off the table and lands face down.

Headlights sweep the window. A car idles outside. Neither of them turns.

CUT TO BLACK.

SOLUTION

Development: the youngest character names the truth, which flips expected power. The ending refuses a speech. Syntax: the lines get shorter, then silence replaces them.

Devices: the red sock pays off the opening, the fallen schedule is a visual decision, and the headlights add an unanswered question. Coach's inference: endings that leave one door open but close the emotional question tend to read as confident.

Revision Pass Plan

- 1 Pass 1: Format** Pick one format and apply it everywhere: slug lines, character cues, action in present tense. Remove camera moves unless they are essential.
- 2 Pass 2: Want** Write each character's want in one sentence. Cut lines that do not push a want.
- 3 Pass 3: Dialogue** Cut every line of dialogue that states what the character feels. Replace with action or silence.
- 4 Pass 4: Image** List the objects in each scene. Choose one to return at the end. Delete decoration.
- 5 Pass 5: Length** Check the total against 500 to 3,000 words. Cut the middle first, not the ending.
- 6 Pass 6: Read aloud** Cast two friends or read in two voices. Fix any line an actor would stumble on. Remove your name from the manuscript.

Scene Checklist

The want is visible within the first half page.

Action lines show only what can be seen or heard.

Dialogue is short and carries subtext.

One object or image returns at the end.

The format is consistent throughout.

The ending changes something, even if small.

Common traps

Characters who announce their feelings. Long action paragraphs that read like prose. Mixing screenplay and stage-play conventions. Ending with a twist that the setup never earned.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, write a one-page scene in a single location with two characters and one prop. One character wants something, the other will not say it. End on an image.

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Practice

WORKSHOP Bonus Lab: Annotated Scene Clinic

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Rewrite Part 1 of the sample in a different setting while keeping the want and the visual anchor.
2. Cut the sample's dialogue to half its length. Describe what you removed.
3. Write one action line that shows a character lying without using the word.
4. List three objects that could replace the red sock and say what each would imply.
5. Rewrite the ending of the sample so it is more explicit. Explain what is lost.
6. Take a scene of your own and mark every line that states an emotion. Replace three.
7. Write the same scene in stage-play format. List what changes.
8. Write a 100-word scene where the ending image is the answer to a question never asked.

Notes Coaching Notes and Model Responses

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

09.1 Format, Length, and What Judges Read

WORKSHOP · FORMAT, LENGTH, AND WHAT JUDGES READ

1. Coaching note: the winning idea usually has the smallest cast and the clearest clock. If two ideas tie, choose the one whose ending you already know. An idea with no ending in sight is likely a longer project.
2. Model: MAYA'S ROOM. Night. [Half the posters are rolled into a tube. Maya presses one corner flat; it curls.] MOTHER: The truck comes at seven. MAYA: Then it comes to an empty wall. You should find the heading becomes a bracketed setting note and the present-tense action line becomes a stage direction a crew can build.
3. Coaching note: a key card should name how you write a location, an action, and a speaker, for example setting in brackets, action in italics, speaker in capitals with a colon. If your half-page breaks your own key card, fix the page, not the card.
4. Coaching note: expect thoughts like 'she remembered' or 'he felt guilty' to be the culprits. Model rewrite: 'He remembered the fight' becomes 'He puts the phone face-down and turns the volume off.' Behavior replaces report.
5. Model opening: [A school gym, empty. Three folding chairs. Dev checks his phone: 6:58. The recital starts at seven.] The place, clock, and want (Dev needs someone to show) are set without a single feeling named.
6. Coaching note: a sample plan is 300 words open, 800 build, 1,000 turn, 800 end. These are targets for drafting, not rules. If the turn arrives at page two, you may be missing a middle.
7. Coaching note: typical breakage includes lost indents, collapsed blank lines, and special characters. Use plain hyphens and straight quotes, put each speaker on its own line, and retest after every cleanup.
8. Model: 'The room is gloomy' becomes (1) a lamp with a dead bulb, (2) a coat still on its hook, (3) a cup with a ring of old coffee. Pick the image that suggests a story, here the coat, which implies someone who has not come back.
9. Coaching note: the aim is to see technique in a form you can name: a play that uses a narrator, a film that stays in one room. Your note should read 'I will try X in my scene,' never 'I will use their plot.' Work must be your own idea.
10. Model: 'My idea happens in one night in one kitchen with two people. The change is that they finally say the thing both avoided. A longer version would need other days and places, so the short script is the right size.' A good answer ties scale to the idea.

09.2 Character, Conflict, and Structure on the Page

WORKSHOP · CHARACTER, CONFLICT, AND STRUCTURE ON THE PAGE

1. Coaching note: a good verb list looks like 'hides, lies, gets caught, offers, refuses, leaves.' If you wrote 'realizes,' ask what action shows the realization.
2. Coaching note: choose a scene with a clear tactic, such as flattery or silence. Example: in a goodbye scene, the want is to leave without a fight; the obstacle is a parent who wants a promise; the tactic is a joke.
3. Model: Protagonist wants the truth admitted; needs to forgive; tactic is polite questions; voice uses short sentences; object is a pen she clicks. Opponent wants to avoid blame; tactic is changing the subject. Check that the sheets create friction.
4. Model: if the letter sits under a car key instead of a cup, the conflict becomes about leaving by car. An object carries the story's meaning; swapping it should change the subtext, not just the setting.
5. Model: two siblings both want the last train ticket. One folds it into a paper boat; the other holds out a hand. Keep the scene to behavior and short lines, and let the object be the battlefield.
6. Coaching note: a workable outline is Setup 400, Confrontation 1,700, Turn 500, Resolution 400. Mark the page where the choice happens. If it is before the midpoint, you may be resolving too early.
7. Model last image: the empty chair is pushed in. It tells you the opening must plant the chair and who sits in it. Writing backward ensures every early detail has a payoff.

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8. Model: a lifeguard who refuses to swim herself. 'She keeps one sandal on, always, even at the edge of the pool.' The contradiction is about safety and fear, shown by a prop, not told.
9. Coaching note: a two-layer sketch might be a student rehearsing a eulogy (outer) and the scene the eulogy describes (inner). Both layers should answer the same question, such as what we owe the dead.
10. Model: 'The middle may repeat one argument at the same level. Fix: have the second argument reveal a secret, and the third force a decision.' Good answers name a specific escalation, not just 'more conflict.'

09.3 Dialogue, Subtext, and Stage Direction

WORKSHOP · DIALOGUE, SUBTEXT, AND STAGE DIRECTION

1. Model: A. 'You never rinse the pan.' B. 'I rinsed it Tuesday.' A. 'Tuesday you also said you would call.' The pan is the safe topic; the real subject (a missed call) erupts in the third line. Check that you never wrote the word for the true feeling.
2. Model: Jordan sees Sam's phone light up and ignores it. Sam flips it face down. 'You can answer that.' 'It's work.' 'On my birthday?' The phone becomes the evidence of divided attention without anyone saying 'you forgot.'
3. Coaching note: a common fix is to give one character questions and another commands, or to change the vocabulary level. If three lines stay unclear after revision, merge two characters.
4. Model: a coach who never says 'I'm proud.' Exchange: 'Your shoe's untied.' 'I know.' 'Then tie it. We have a game.' 'Will you be there?' 'Tie it.' The unsaid line is the pride, shown as insistence.
5. Model: 'She was terrified' becomes 'She holds the door handle with both hands and does not turn it.' Each rewritten line must pass the camera test.
6. Coaching note: strong answers use at least three objects or behaviors, such as a drawn picture slid across a table, a spoon she keeps stirring, and a door she closes softly. Avoid explaining them afterward.
7. Model: a three-sentence speech about regret becomes 'I should have called.' 'You were busy.' 'I was scared.' 'Of what?' 'This.' The interruptions turn a lecture into a duel.
8. Coaching note: most (quietly) and (angrily) cues can go. Keep a parenthetical only when it flips meaning, as in '(smiling)' before a threat. Replace the rest with a gesture on its own line.
9. Model: 'I thought leaving was the brave part. It was only the first part.' It reflects, in the older voice, what the younger character cannot yet admit. Make sure it does not give away the whole ending.
10. Coaching note: a good note names specific changes: a stumble over a long clause was cut, a line given to the wrong speaker was reassigned. Reading aloud finds rhythm problems your eyes miss.

09.4 Revision, Excerpts, and Table-Read Testing

WORKSHOP · REVISION, EXCERPTS, AND TABLE-READ TESTING

1. Coaching note: most beginners collect marks on pacing and unclear speakers. Group your marks into structure, dialogue, and direction. Fix structure first.
2. Model report: 400 words to 360 after removing repeated information, to 335 after cutting explanations, to 320 after trimming entrance and exit. A 20 percent cut should not remove the turn.
3. Coaching note: if a scene still works without its first and last lines, you were entering early and leaving late. Keep the deleted version unless the cut line contains a plant or payoff.
4. Model: present tense, who wants what, the central obstacle, the turn, the ending. Example opening: 'In a town where the last bakery is closing, two brothers fight over whether to sell.' End with the decision and its consequence.
5. Coaching note: you lose subplots and secondary characters; you keep the want, the turn, and the ending. If the 120-word version loses the ending, rewrite until it holds it.
6. Model: begin at 'Coffee first' by placing Lena already seated while Marta wipes the counter without looking up. The conflict is apparent from the first image.
7. Model plan: 1. Missing turn in the middle: add a discovery. 2. Over-explained ending: cut the final speech. 3. Voices overlap: give Ben shorter lines. Ranking by impact helps you avoid polishing before fixing.
8. Coaching note: typical fixes include replacing curly quotes with straight quotes, re-adding blank lines, and removing tabs. Retest after each change. The portal box shows what jurors see.
9. Model: 'EXCERPT from a longer script. Two siblings, one night.' It labels without naming anyone or any school. Verify there is no byline, date, or file name that could identify you.
10. Model: 'The main character wanted the key. I stopped believing the brother when he said he was fine. I remember the broken oven door.' If the answers differ from what you intended, the page is not delivering your idea yet.

09.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Scene Clinic

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WORKSHOP · BONUS LAB: ANNOTATED SCENE CLINIC

1. A strong version changes the place but keeps a small physical action that shows the decision. If the setting does not matter, choose one that does.
2. You will probably cut the explaining lines first. The scene should still make sense. If it does not, restore only the necessary one.
3. Example: she says 'Fine' while pressing a ticket stub flat under her palm. The body contradicts the word.
4. A glove suggests absence; a key suggests access; a coin suggests exchange. Pick the one that deepens the theme.
5. An explicit ending usually states the theme and lowers the tension. Describe the exact lines that tell instead of show.
6. Replace with an action or object. For example, 'I'm scared' becomes a character checking a locked door twice.
7. Expect to lose slug lines and gain stage directions and set notes. Entrances and exits replace cuts.
8. A model: a character sets two cups on a table, then removes one. Check that the image answers without explaining.

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