

## Writing For Film

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The following is provided as a general guide for writers who wish to write for New Zealand film.

### Before You Begin

Starting out in this industry can seem daunting but there are some basic first steps you should take.

**Watch Films:** Do you want to write feature films? Then watch them. Watch short films if that's what you're interested in. Watch both New Zealand films and international films. Watching great films is good but also watch films that are not quite great, you can often learn more from a film that was 'almost' perfect rather than an absolute classic.

**Study The Market:** New Zealand movies are generally made on budgets far smaller than in most of the English speaking world. Most films are funded by the New Zealand Film Commission. If you want to get a movie made here you must work within the rules of this industry (for example, it's no good pitching a \$100 million budget action movie to the NZFC, they simply don't have the money to finance a film like that.)

**Practise:** Write a film script. Finish it! Write another. Finish that one! Most writers have several 'spec' scripts in their drawers. Get feedback from people who know good writing (script consultants are a useful way of getting unbiased feedback). Read film scripts and compare the scripts to the finished films. Compare adapted scripts with the original work. Screenwriting books and courses can also help you hone your craft.

### Reality Check – Is This Going to Make Me Rich?

Rich? Unlikely. New Zealand has a small screen industry and only a few writers in New Zealand earn enough from writing purely for film to earn a living wage. If you are tenacious and work hard, however, it is possible to make a career from being a scriptwriter in New Zealand.

Most scriptwriters in New Zealand tend to write across mediums – including television, film, theatre, radio, prose, print, new media – or pick up other industry based jobs (director, producer, editor) as it provides a diversity of income and avoids literally putting all their income eggs in one basket.

## Reality Check – Breaking Into Hollywood

Getting your film script made in Hollywood is difficult but not impossible. There are many books and materials which claim to know the secrets to breaking into the US market. Some of them are good and some are not. It is easier to break into Hollywood when you live in Los Angeles but some people have gotten film deals without living there.

If you are serious about getting a film made in Hollywood you will likely need a US agent. Studios and producers will not read scripts unless submitted to them by an agent. Many agents will also not read unsolicited manuscripts. To get an agent you will either need to (a) find an agent that accepts unsolicited submissions and send them your script or (b) get a referral by someone who already has an agent. Check out the website of the Writers Guild in the country you're interested in submitting work to for information on local agents. Remember, if agents are to take you on as a client they will want to know you have more than one script in you. If submitting to an agent be prepared with other scripts either completed or well in development.

Remember, film is a global business now, especially in Hollywood. When submitting to the US look to write movies with international appeal, capable of eliciting a powerful emotional response from people all over the world.

## Writing a Script

### Creative Issues

Your ultimate initial goal should be a solid completed script, either short or feature. Anyone trying to judge your work will want to see a completed script so they (a) know you can actually finish something and (b) get a full idea of your talent, style and the story.

Often reading scripts of films in the similar genre that you wish to write in can help you begin. Many writers first create a treatment which is a prose telling of the story – this gives you a blueprint upon which you can expand. You can download or buy scripts off the internet or, if you are an NZWG member, borrow scripts from the NZWG library.

Writing books and courses can help if you need some extra guidance or to help push past problems that might cause blocks.

There are various hands-on short film competitions such as the 48 Hour Film competition that can help you hone your short film writing skills.

### Practical Matters

Film scripts come with fairly standard specifications. They should be no shorter than 90 pages and no longer than 120 pages, appropriately formatted and comply with standard industry specifications.

#### New Zealand:

- A4 plain white paper
- 12-point Courier font.
- Two punched holes (standard).
- Two brass paper fasteners – often called 'brads'.

#### United States:

- 8.5 x 11 inch plain white paper.
- 12-point Courier font.
- Three punched holes (standard).
- Two brass paper fasteners/brads (¼" to 1" long, size #5 brads) – put through the top and bottom holes leaving the middle hole empty.

Writing programmes, like **Final Draft**, can assist greatly with formatting. Final Draft and screw type **brass brads** are available from the NZWG.

## **Where Can I Send My Work?**

Before you send your work to anyone **register** it with the Guild.

For short film you should send your work to:

- Independent producers  
– a list of producers in New Zealand is available from the Guild for members only.
- New Zealand Film Commission – through their short film programme (a call for scripts goes out once a year).
- Creative NZ/NZFC – Screen Innovation Fund – provides funding for innovative short films - administered through Creative NZ (there are two dates each year for submission).

For feature film you should send your work to:

- Independent producers  
– a list of producers in New Zealand is available from the Guild for members only.
- New Zealand Film Commission – through their First Writer's Initiative (a call for scripts goes out once a year).

When you send your work out to producers you should send a polite covering letter and make sure your details are on the front page of the proposal/script.

It is usually best to send the work to one producer at a time. Can't think where to send it first? Choose the producer whom you think will respond most favourably to the work or who produces work of a similar nature/genre.

## **I've Sent My Script To A Producer - What Happens Now?**

If the producer isn't interested they will return your work.

If they are interested they may decide to option the work. They may also ask you to retool the script to better suit them or the funders. In the latter case they may engage your services to do that work by contract. If the script receives NZFC funding you will likely be hired to further rewrite it – this is known as 'development work'.

The Guild can provide advice on contracts and rates.

## **I've Applied To The NZFC/Creative NZ Scheme - What Happens Now?**

The NZFC/Creative NZ or the person running the scheme will evaluate your work and if successful your work will receive further development.

## **Is There Any Other Way I Can Get My Script Made?**

Some writers simply get some friends together and shoot a digital film. This is especially true in terms of short film.

The NZFC also occasionally run other initiatives for digital features and telefeatures