

# Screenwriting 101:

## 6 Cheap Stories for Your First Feature

By [Shaun Leonard](#) September 13, 2017

Write any kind of script you'd like. Honestly, go for it. Every one will make you a better writer. But, if you're aiming to write scripts professionally, for a living, for money, so you can buy food, then at a certain point you need to think about money. Not just how much money you need to afford the finer things in life, like food, but how much money your script would cost to make.

This is not to say you should feel hampered by the restraints of practicality – go full on nutbar in your writing as often as you'd like. This article is for anyone hoping to write a script that gets made. Bought, budgeted, pre-produced, cast, shot, edited, and released. The best way to write a script that gets made, is to write a great script. But, it's even easier if that great script is also cheap.

You want a story that seems like a no-brainer for financial types. Something that costs twelve thousand dollars to make is easier to say yes to than something with a million dollar budget just to rent green screens and motion capture onesies. Especially if you're hoping to make it past layers and layers of script readers whose job is to say “No” or “Pass” or the soul-gnawing rejection-by-silence. And if you can write just one film that gets produced and released, it's a lot easier to get into a room to pitch the next one. Luckily, there are a number of different story types that lend themselves to low-budgets. Better yet, they're listed just below.

### **Drama (Any)**

Stories where people mostly stand around and talk can be difficult to write, but are generally easy to film. Whether it's a family drama, a courtroom drama, a melodrama, or a biography, there's a market for it. Dramas at heart focus on individuals and relationships and how both change.

Think about how many successful movies could be summed up as “People have issues (with each other) and solving them is difficult”. If you can come up with even the slightest twist on what’s been seen before, a drama feature could be a great first sale to build on. Think about the number of low to medium budget dramas that are produced for direct-to-television distribution alone. If you can write saleable drama reliably, you might just have a steady income from screenwriting.

## **Nature is Going To Kill You**

Man vs Nature has been around for thousands of years. As long as film crews can avoid costly accidents and/or hospital bills, it will continue to be an easy sell. Whether “Nature” is a mountain, a body of water, a cold place, or a hot place, people trying not to die will usually be interesting. For slightly more money, you can throw in one or two of nature’s helpers, and have your characters face off against a shark, an alligator (swamp shark), or a bear (land shark).

Whatever the specifics, these films usually have small casts, and focus on struggles that can be captured without expensive stunts, extras, or props. Think of *Open Water*, *127 Hours*, or *All is Lost*. That last film, about a lone man caught in a violent storm at sea, only secured its budget by promising it could be made for under \$10 million.

## **Criminals Having A Disagreement**

Crime films can have car chases, explosions, and big stunts. But they really don’t have to. Often these films come down to one gang versus another, or a bag of money or drugs that needs to get somewhere by a certain time. Think of *Snatch*, *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, or gangster films not directed by Guy Ritchie.

These stories are essentially violent dramas, with colorful characters, bad guys and not-so-bad guys. More recently, *Hell or High Water* garnered critical acclaim for telling a character driven tale of brothers and bank robberies.

## Found Footage

Unlike most entries in this list, this is not a type of story, nor a genre. Found footage is a style of shooting that tends to involve a number of “ordinary” people documenting an event that takes a turn for the worse. It was popularized most recently by *The Blair Witch Project* and its spiritual successor *Paranormal Activity*. There’s a good reason these movies were so successful. They were effective at gradually raising and suddenly spiking tension. However, the reason they were so cheap is because they were filmed with inexpensive equipment and minimal crew.

They used the style to draw the audience in closer, closing the protective distance between the “real” world and the horror. And found footage films don’t necessarily have to be horror. Think of *Project X*, an R-rated comedy about teenagers throwing a party and documenting it all on social media. Though similar success would be difficult to emulate, it’s worth noting that *Paranormal Activity* cost \$11,000 to produce, and made nearly \$200 million at box office.

## Subtle Sci Fi (Take Shelter, Lake House)

Science fiction can cost a lot of money. But a character driven story with a science fiction element, one that doesn’t require CGI or elaborate prosthetics, can be as cheap as any drama. For example, *Take Shelter*, where a man has a (potentially prophetic) vision of a terrible storm and takes dramatic action to prepare for it, causing family and friends to fear he’s gone mad.

There’s also *In Your Eyes*, where a man and woman start to see through each other’s eyes, and fall in love through this strange metaphysical connection. Bodysnatching, telepathic abilities, and various cheap plot devices have been used for decades to produce science fiction drama, horror, adventure, or romance. For an example of all four, check out a *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*. Particularly vintage episodes of either.

## One Location

Again, not a particular story type or genre. Rather, think of one location as a storytelling tool to enhance whatever emotions you’re trying to create. For a tense horror or thriller, a cabin in the woods or a panic room can ratchet up tension and inspire claustrophobia. There’s also gory survival stories, where people in one location are forced to fight to the death (*The Belko*

*Experiment* being a recent *Battle Royale* twist). Consider also the premise behind classic sitcoms – how can we force people who don't like each other to spend time with each other?

Neil Simon's *Odd Couple* popularized the "roommates who are different" story, but it's been at play ever since in some of the most successful tv shows of all time, including *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. *Friends* went a step further by popularizing the concept of "bottle episodes", where a story will take place in only one location, using one of the main set locations and only regular cast members to keep costs low. This technique can be used just as effectively in film. If you're looking for a way to keep characters stuck together, consider a snowstorm, a rooftop with a door that locks automatically, or just give all of your characters detention. It's worked before.