

THE BEATSCRIPT FORM: ACTION-CENTRED SCRIPTING FOR SHORT- FILMS AND ANIMATIONS

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OUTLINE

A beat is the smallest unit of action within screenplays. It is generally used to describe character actions but can also be used to identify other key events, which are directly related to the communication of plot information e.g. diegetic (in-scene) sounds etc.

The concept of 'beats' were first defined by acting guru Constantin Stanislavski who described them variously as *beads*, *bits* and *beats* (Hodge and Carnicke 2010).

Description

A *beatscript* (or *beat sheet*) is a scripting aid used for describing story ideas. It offers a level of detail not afforded by the standard feature-film screenplay format. This makes it especially useful for describing short-film, animation and short sequence ideas.

Its structure is focused on action rather than thought. This allows screenwriters to organise their narrative ideas in a concise manner that is conducive to screen presentation. It prevents authors from describing non-tangible, subjective elements that are unable to be effectively represented in screen form.

Beatscripts are used as the starting point for generating storyboards and shooting- scripts. While beats are used to describe action, shots are used to describe the visual screen presentation of action.

There isn't a direct relationship between individual beats and shots. In situations where an event is significant in a sequence, a single beat might equate to a single shot (and is likely to be framed as a close-up). Whereas where a series of beats might describe a general idea, these beats might collectively equate to a single shot (which is likely to be framed as a long-shot). The specific visual treatment of beatscript ideas is usually determined by the cinematographer or director (which on small projects is usually the same person).

Method

Create a list where each key story event (action, sound, on-screen-text) is listed on its own line. Drop to a new line for each subsequent story event. Avoid listing anything that can't be described in terms of an action, for example don't describe thoughts and feelings, as they can't be easily represented on-screen. If a beat can't be described on a single line, then it is likely that the beat describes more than one event. Break the multi-part event into its constituent events and list them as separate beats (on their own lines).

BEATSCRIPT EXAMPLE

1. Thud!
2. Janet opens her eyes abruptly
3. A bulldozer has just crashed through a wall in her adjoining apartment
4. Janet struggles to wake-up fully
5. the bulldozer roars out of control
6. Janet scrambles to her bedside window
7. she is in her pyjamas
8. she stares at the bulldozer outside
9. its driver is unaware that she is still inside the apartment
10. Janet smashes on her window with her fists
11. but the din of the bulldozer drowns-out her protests
12. again, the claws of the bulldozer crash into the apartment block
13. chunks of plaster begin to crack away from her bedroom wall
14. Janet jumps from her bed and throws on her dressing-gown
15. the bulldozer whirs and whines menacingly
16. Janet races out her door
17. a large chunk of plaster meets the floor in a pile of dust behind her.

Hodge, A. and S. Carnicke, Eds. (2010). Actor Training, Routledge.