

NO-BUDGET SCREENPLAY

A creative workflow by Noam Kroll

This guide will help you create a finished screenplay that can be produced on any budget level, with step by step instructions for each phase.

STEP 1: CONCEPTUALIZE

No-budget feature films are made or broken by their concept.

Your goal is to tell a story driven by unique perspective that only *you* have, but that can also work with a minimal production scope. What gets your movie noticed is your original style and unique voice above all else. The smaller your budget, the more critical it is to do something entirely new.

When starting from scratch, consider:

- Themes you're passionate about
- Characters you've never seen on film
- Unique experiences you've had

ACTION ITEM: Give yourself 60 minutes to free-write 100 film concepts based on the criteria above.

Don't overthink them, just jot down a few words or a sentence for each and quickly move on.

STEP 2: NARROW FOCUS

Once you get the wheels spinning with some rough concepts, the next step is to narrow down your ideas. Do this by weighing each story concept against a set of practical criteria.

Highlight any film concepts that meet all of the following criteria:

- Do not require traditional production support (AKA can be shot by one person if needed)
- Do not require any unusual resources / locations / cast that you don't already have access to
- Do not require an ensemble cast, and primarily features 1 - 3 main actors

To narrow things down further, consider which concepts are not just good ideas, but ideas you are personally connected to. Assuming you plan to turn your script into a movie, you will spend many months with this project. Pick a concept you're likely to still care about even years from now.

ACTION ITEM: Narrow your list of 100 ideas down to a selection of your top 10.

STEP 3: PICK A GENRE

Working with a defined genre in mind can be helpful when screenwriting. It allows you to draw creative boundaries around your work, and really imagine the tone and texture of your film. On a no-budget level, it can also be important from a marketing / film festival perspective. The following genres often work well with no-budget productions:

- **Art House / Slow Cinema**
- **Horror & Contained Thriller**
- **Sci-Fi**
- **Found Footage**
- **Mumblecore**
- **Road Movies**

You can of course work in any genre you like. These just tend to lend themselves to no-budget productions particularly well. But keep an open mind to any genre. The important part is that choose.

ACTION ITEM: Narrow down your top 10 ideas to just one concept. Do this by picking a genre and matching it with the most suitable story concept.

STEP 4: CREATE A SCHEDULE

Nothing ever gets done without a deadline, so it's important to set one up early and stick to it. I recommend setting a final deadline 3 months from the day you begin writing. Here is an example schedule, which takes you from concept to a revised script.

STORY DEVELOPMENT

Jan 01: Writing commences (starting with the story's logline)

Jan 05: Logline is completed, treatment writing commences

Jan 15: First pass of treatment complete, revisions commence

Jan 25: Second pass of treatment complete, beat sheet commences

Jan 31: Beat sheet is completed

SCREENWRITING

Feb 01: First draft of screenplay commences

Feb 10: First act of screenplay is completed

Feb 20: Second act of screenplay is completed

Feb 28: Third act / full screenplay is completed

SCRIPT EDITING

Mar 01: Screenplay is reviewed, notes made

Mar 15: Story pass is completed

Mar 20: Character & Dialogue pass is completed

Mar 25: Production pass is completed

Mar 31: Second draft is completed

At this point, you may choose to seek feedback, revise your script again, or just go straight to camera. That will be up to you, depending on how confident you are in the current draft.

As a general rule - be careful not to rush into production too early, but be equally careful not to revise your script to death. Part of what makes no-budget productions fun is their spontaneity. Give the writing process the time it deserves, but then move on quickly when it starts to click. You will end up revising the script until (and during) production, so expect it to be in a constant state of evolution.

Use the sample schedule above as a launching off point, but be open to moving at your own pace. With my schedule you are writing about 3 - 5 pages/day. Scale up or down as needed.

ACTION ITEM: Create your 3 month schedule. Write down the deadline somewhere you can see and look at it every day.

STEP 5: LOGLINE

I suggest writing a logline (a one sentence description of your film) before actually writing the screenplay itself. It forces you to really think about your idea and distill it down to its core, which can be invaluable later on in the writing process. A great logline needs three things: A **protagonist**, the **goal** of the protagonist, and an **antagonist**.

There are many ways to write a logline, but here is one easy formula you can use:

When [INCITING INCIDENT OCCURS], a [SPECIFIC PROTAGONIST] must [OBJECTIVE], or else [STAKES].

Using this formula, you have to determine a few important things: Your **inciting incident**, the **objective**, **stakes**, and **character dynamics**. All of this detail will be needed in the next step as we develop a beat sheet.

ACTION ITEM: Narrow down your top 10 ideas to just one concept. Do this by picking a genre and matching it with the most viable story concept.

STEP 6: BEAT SHEET

A beat sheet is an effective stepping stone between your initial idea and the first draft of your screenplay. The idea is to break down every scene (or beat) in the film, and arrange them in order so you can start to plot out and pace the narrative flow.

Most three act films are actually written in four acts (Act 1, 2A, 2B, 3). So to keep things simple when making a beat sheet, I like to break my story into 40 beats. That equates to exactly 10 beats / 10 scenes per act, which is a good happy medium for no-budget productions.

ACT 1: Beats 1 - 10

ACT 2A: Beats 11 - 20

ACT 2B: Beats 21 - 30

ACT 3: Beats 31 - 40

Start by writing out your most important beats. Your opening scene, act 3 break, climax - all those critical moments that the story hinges on need to be plotted out before the smaller transitional scenes. Later, you will be able to expand upon each beat and connect them to create the full story.

According to screenwriting guru Blake Snyder, there are 15 main story beats to start with.

BLAKE SNYDER'S 15 BEATS

1. **Opening Image**
2. **Set-up**
3. **Theme Stated**
4. **Catalyst**
5. **Debate**
6. **Break Into Two (Choosing Act Two)**
7. **B-Story**
8. **The Promise of the Premise**
9. **Midpoint**
10. **Bad Guys Close In**
11. **All is Lost**
12. **Dark Night of the Soul**
13. **Break Into Three (Choosing Act Three)**
14. **Finale**
15. **Final Image**

To get started, you can use the template above or any other beat sheet/structure that you like. Which format you use isn't important. What matters is that you start to identify the most important cornerstones of your story and plot them out in a logical order.

You can read more about Blake Snyder's beat sheet in [this article](#) on my blog.

I recommend creating 2 - 3 versions of your beat sheet up front to challenge yourself to come up with a greater volume of ideas. Quantity leads to quality. Once you have 15 beats that cover your full story, you can begin to expand them into a full 40 beat sequence.

40 BEAT SHEET TEMPLATE

Below is a template you can use to flesh out your idea into 40 story beats. Note how each of the 15 beats we've already come up with have been transplanted here, but there are gaps in between them that you need to fill in to complete your story. You can use free-writing here to quickly develop additional scene ideas, and then plot the best ones out on your extended beat sheet.

ACT 1	ACT 2A	ACT 2B	ACT 3
1. (Opening Image)	11. (Break into Two)	21. (Bad Guys Close In)	31. (Break Into Three)
2. (Theme Stated)	12. (B-Story)	22.	32.
3. (Set Up)	13. (Promise of Premise)	23.	33.
4.	14.	24.	34.
5.	15.	25.	35.
6. (Catalyst)	16.	26.	36.
7. (Debate)	17.	27.	37.
8.	18.	28. (All Is Lost)	38. (Finale)
9.	19.	29.	39.
10.	20. (Midpoint)	30. (Dark Night Of The Soul)	40. (Final Image)

ACTION ITEM: Create an initial beat sheet with 15 main story beats, and then expand to 40 beats.

STEP 7: TREATMENT

It's not mandatory that you create a treatment before writing your screenplay, but I highly recommend it. The more angles you can look at your story from, the better. Each angle teaches you new things about your film, and reveals potential blind spots. You may feel like you know your story inside and out after writing your beat sheet, but putting it into treatment format will lead to new discoveries.

Try writing out three different treatments for your film:

- **Short Treatment (under 250 words)**
- **Medium Treatment (Under 1000 words)**
- **Long Treatment (2500+ words)**

You don't have to spend forever polishing these, especially if no one else is going to see them. But do explore each treatment style thoroughly so your story can become more well rounded.

ACTION ITEM: Create 3 treatments for your film (short, medium, long). Update your beat sheet or other materials with new ideas and discoveries from this process.

STEP 8: FIRST DRAFT

At this point in the journey you should have a crystal clear vision for your story. And when you do, it's time to move on to the first draft. I recommend working through this first draft quickly, and never looking back at previous scenes to edit as you go. There is a time for writing and a time for editing, but they should never be done simultaneously. Trying to be in a creative mindset while also critiquing your own work is the fastest path to writer's block.

Some tips for writing your first draft quickly and effectively:

- **Write every single day, even if just for 30 minutes**
- **Set a minimum page count per day (mine is 3 pages)**
- **Never look back on your work to edit as you go**
- **Avoid complex scene direction & over-polishing dialogue**

The goal of the first draft is to get *something* down on paper so that you can edit it. You just want a complete (and inevitably messy) draft, that you can start to refine and polish.

ACTION ITEM: Create a daily writing habit and commit to a minimum number of written pages per day.

STEP 9: REVISIONS

Writing is re-writing. This is true for all project types - But there are some extra criteria that you need to consider when revising a script that you intend to shoot without any financing.

When your first draft is complete, put it in a drawer for a few days or a week so you can read it with fresh eyes. Then write down every note you have on what worked, what didn't, and new ideas. With that, you can start working on your second draft. I suggest making your revisions in individual passes:

- **Story pass**
- **Character pass**
- **Dialogue pass**
- **Production pass**

Go through the script several times, each time focusing on a different element. Your last pass can be the "production pass" where you make adjustments to ensure the script can be shot within your means.

ACTION ITEM: Make notes on your completed script and revise it multiple times, focusing on story, character, dialogue, and production on each individual pass.

STEP 10: MAKE THE FILM

Once you've spent so much time and effort writing a great script, it might be tempting to try to option it, or use the script to raise money to turn it into an even bigger production. Resist this urge. Many filmmakers fall into the trap of writing something they become so attached to that it sits in a drawer waiting to get made the "right way" for eternity.

If you've written something using the guidelines I've shared here, you should be ready to start making a version of your movie immediately. And if you follow through until the end, you will have accomplished something 99% of filmmakers aspire to - make a feature film of your own. Feature films produced on the most limited means have won awards at major festivals and launched storied careers - and there's no reason to imagine any less of your own work and potential.

For more, check out my [No-Budget Feature Film Blueprint](#). It's a short but highly actionable video course with a step by step workflow to start making a movie today - on any budget and so that it fits into your daily schedule, even if you work full time. Check it out [here](#).

ACTION ITEM: Don't let your script die in a drawer. Make it into a movie.

NO-BUDGET FEATURE FILM BLUEPRINT

The vast majority of filmmakers have not made a feature film because they have not found the time or money to do so. My “No-Budget Feature Film Blueprint” (a practical video course) offers the solution to this age-old dilemma, using unconventional tactics that re-invent how a movie can be made.

In this course, we cover:

- Solving time and money issues when producing a feature
- Building a schedule around your lifestyle
- Optimal no-budget screenplay formats
- Cinematography for a no-budget production
- Casting no-budget productions
- No-budget locations & permit free options
- Finding likeminded collaborators
- Balancing multiple roles without sacrificing quality
- \$0 post-production pipelines
- Much more!

[START MAKING YOUR MOVIE TODAY](#)