Pre-Production: Script Breakdown

Script breakdown is the process of analyzing your script to determine all of the components out of which it is made. During script breakdown, you’ll systematically build lists of everything from characters, props and locations to special effects, and costumes. But script breakdown is much more than a simple inventory. The process of breaking down your script and the analysis and decisions you’ll make when doing your breakdown will generate the data that is required to prepare a budget and schedule your shoot.

Breaking down a script is not just a suggestion, it is an essential step towards starting your production. During the script breakdown process you’re going to create a number of lists and schedules, but more importantly, you’re going to develop an understanding of your script that will be necessary for answering the thousands of questions that will come up during production. This familiarity with the script will allow to effectively deal with the changing conditions and concerns of a complex shoot.

Depending on the length and nature of your script, you can use just about any method to break down your script. Obviously, there’s little to do if your script involves just one or two characters and is set on a single location. However, no matter how complicated your script, it’s important to perform a systematic, thorough breakdown.

For simplicity, we’ve chosen to divide the realm of digital video production into two categories: A/V and Feature. A/V productions are the traditional industrial, corporate, multimedia or advertising productions that are usually small-scale productions, frequently shot in a studio and rarely requiring more than a day or two of shooting. Training videos, corporate presentations, news features, or simple stand-up pieces targeted at multimedia CD-ROMs and web sites are examples of A/V productions. Feature productions are larger productions targeted for theatrical, video or TV release, and are usually shot on many locations over weeks or months.

Breaking down an A/V Production

Though A/V productions are typically shorter, simpler productions, script breakdown is no less important. As in a larger production, time is money and the breakdown process is where you’ll define the lists and procedures that will ensure the best use of your time as well as help you decide what you can and cannot afford.

To begin breaking down a script, you need to divide it into sections. With a feature script this is easy because features are already divided into scenes. But A/V scripts are not necessarily written as separate scenes. However, you can usually find some natural break or segments in your script, no matter what it’s structure or content. If
it’s a corporate presentation, perhaps there are different speakers or changes in subjects, news features may have changes in locations, multimedia shoots might have many different characters. Whatever the nature of your shoot, take your script and try to divide it into discrete chunks. Now take each chunk and begin to break it down.

Create a separate “breakdown sheet” for each section. Give the sheet a sensible title and even a description of the scene if necessary. Different members of your crew may need to read these sheets and it’s important that they understand which segment of the production you are referring to.

On each sheet, list the characters/actors that are required for that scene as well as props, locations and sets. If this is a multi-camera shoot, list how many cameras you’ll need and what type of crew you’ll need (number of camera operators, technical director, sound, etc.). To the best of your ability, list the type of lighting you’ll need. Is this a studio shoot using studio lighting? If so, make a note of what kind of lighting configuration you think you’ll need (standard 3-point lighting, limbo lighting, etc.). By listing all of the different production set-ups you’ll need, you can more intelligently schedule the shooting of different segments. For example, if you can immediately see which scenes need a particular lighting setup, you can schedule those scenes together to save time on redundant lighting changes.

List all of the supplemental materials that might be required for this segment. Are there special guests that must be contacted and scheduled? Are there video segments that will be inserted on-line? Finally, list any special requirements this scene may have and the relevant crew and preparation. For example, does the scene require blue screen photography for later compositing? If so, you’ll need special set and lighting crew. Or perhaps the scene has particular audio requirements such as pre-recorded music or a microphone set-up for a live music performance.

Your main concern is simply to create readable, understandable lists of every element that will be required to shoot each scene. This is your chance to learn about all the props you’ll need to gather, and all of the phone calls and schedules you’ll need to coordinate. This is also the data that you’ll use to begin the budgeting process discussed in the next chapter.

**Breaking down a feature production**

Breaking down a feature is much more complicated than breaking down an A/V production because shooting a feature is much more complicated than shooting an A/V production. Because a feature shoot is much longer, typically involves many more actors and crew-members and can require locations spread all over the world, your breakdown chores can be much more complicated.

Usually, you’ll do two breakdowns for a feature production. On large productions, a preliminary breakdown will be performed by the production manager to facilitate budgeting. Once the budgeting and storyboarding are completed, the first assistant
director will perform another, more detailed breakdown and then prepare a shooting schedule.

Whatever your role—producer, director, production manager if the job of script breakdown falls on your shoulders, there are a number of computer programs that can help you through this complicated procedure. However, despite the power of these programs, we recommend some combination of computer automation and manual organization. Script breakdown is your chance to dissect your screenplay, understand how it works, and get a handle on everything that is going to have to happen to get the script produced. If you leave too much of the work to the computer, you may not have enough information in your head to be able to make intelligent decisions and choices during a busy production.

To understand the full importance of script breakdown, it’s necessary to understand how breakdown relates to scheduling your shoot. It is during the script breakdown that you will begin to make logistical decisions about which scenes will be shot together, which scenes will require new camera set-ups, how much shooting will be done during the day and how much at night and night and so on. As you gather this information, you will be better prepared to build a schedule that is efficient and, in the case of working with union actors and crew, cost-effective.

The ultimate goal of script breakdown and scheduling is a Strip Board, which serves as your shooting schedule. Comprised of vertical, movable strips, a strip board includes a separate strip containing all information required to shoot each scene of your movie. Each strip is printed in a different color, letting you quickly see which scenes are interior or exterior, day or night. Because the strips can be physically moved around the board, you can quickly and easily experiment with different schedules and re-arrange your schedule in the event of troubles: bad weather, sick actors, etc. Scheduling is covered in chapter 2 of The Digital Filmmaking Handbook.

It’s good to understand what your ultimate breakdown concerns will be even as you start your preliminary, simple breakdown. At this point, your concern is to perform a breakdown to gather enough information to begin your budgeting process.