

The Inciting Incident

WHAT IS AN INCITING INCIDENT?

This is an event which gives your main character (your protagonist) a major problem. The rest of the script should show how s/he reacts and overcomes this problem. Remember, you're going to have to write between 100 and 120 pages, so make the inciting incident big enough to force your protagonist to react strongly.

In this chapter we look at some examples. **Here** is the first:

Your hero Daniel is at a dinner party. There's an empty chair beside him and everyone asks him where his girlfriend Emma is. He doesn't know and looks worried. The telephone rings and the hostess answers it. She looks shocked as she listens and tells Daniel that Emma has just been arrested by the police after a great deal of money was discovered in her car. They are now on their way to question him. Dan is stunned, but we see from everyone's reaction that they think Daniel is implicated.

This scenario forces us to ask questions. Where did the money come from? How did it get into Emma's car? Why has Emma been arrested so quickly? Are Daniel's 'friends' correct in suspecting that he is involved? What is he going to do now?

HOOKING THE AUDIENCE

As writers, we need to make the inciting incident powerful enough to hook the audience. One way to do this is make the audience identify with your hero/heroine *before* the inciting incident, i.e. make them care about what happens to Daniel and Emma. If you don't care about your main characters, why should the audience follow their story?

To demonstrate how you could do this, let's start the scenario above with another scene. This time we open with Daniel and Emma having a wonderful time on an exotic island. I'd use a series of shots to show how happy they are without any dialogue. Then I'd finish this scene with some dialogue: Daniel proposes and Emma accepts. Then I'd cut straight to the dinner party scene.

Now the audience will be far more curious by Emma's absence and will be more involved with both characters. By cutting from a proposal scene to a dinner party the audience will be curious to know what exactly happened between scenes 1 and 2. Has Emma done something illegal? Is Daniel involved? Or have they both been framed and, if so, how are they going to clear themselves? We are worried for them because we saw how happy they were in the first scene.

This is a simple but effective technique for involving your audience at the beginning of your script.

Here's another scenario:

Susanna, your heroine, has to have a DNA test. (You decide why – make it powerful.) She's appalled to discover that her

beloved father isn't related to her at all. Her life is turned upside down as she's always felt secure knowing that her parents are devoted to her and each other. She now feels angry and betrayed by her mother and goes on a quest to discover her true background. (If this was a thriller, you could make your heroine's quest a roller coaster of false leads, recriminations and shocking discoveries which force her to confront her mother in a powerful climactic scene.)

But you have to make us care about Susanna's journey of discovery. One way to involve us would be to have flashbacks to scenes of Susanna's idyllic childhood with her parents. Once we see how happy the three of them are, we want to know what happened to make Susanna's mother have a child with another man.

EXERCISE

Write an inciting incident for your screenplay.

Remember to show the incident in the most visual way you can. Use the minimum of dialogue and try to move the story forward by using character actions and reactions.

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Writing Powerful Opening Scenes

Where are you going to start your story (your point of entry)? The opening of any screenplay must have a great 'hook' to ensure that the reader continues reading. Most script readers won't read beyond the first ten pages if they're bored or confused so make sure they aren't!

Let's look at how you could open a screenplay in a variety of genres using a number of techniques.

A SCI-FI OPENING

FADE IN

COMPUTER SCREEN

So close it has no boundaries.

A blinking cursor pulses in the electric darkness like a heart coursing with phosphorous light, burning beneath the derma of black-neon glass.

A phone BEGINS to ring LOUDLY. The cursor continues to throb until

MAN (V.O.)

Hello?