Screenwriting Basics

From idea to your first short script, with the format professionals use.

Start with a logline

A logline is your story in one sentence: a character, a goal, and what stands in the way. "A shy boda boda rider must win a city-wide race to pay for his sister's school fees, but his rival owns the only working bike shop." If you cannot write the logline, the story is not clear yet.

The three-act structure

Act	Share of script	What happens
1. Setup	About 25%	Meet the hero in their normal world. Something happens (the inciting incident) that forces a choice.
2. Confrontation	About 50%	The hero pursues the goal, obstacles grow, a midpoint twist raises the stakes, and everything seems lost near the end.
3. Resolution	About 25%	The climax: the hero faces the biggest obstacle, using what they have learned. Show the new normal.

Characters people care about

- Give your hero a clear want (external goal) and a need (what they must learn).
- Make the antagonist believe they are right.
- Reveal character through choices under pressure, not description.
- Let every main character speak differently.

Screenplay format in brief

One page of a correctly formatted script is roughly one minute on screen. Use 12-point Courier. Key elements:

Element	Example
Scene heading	INT. MATATU - NIGHT
Action	Rain hammers the roof. AMINA (20s) grips her phone.
Character	AMINA
Dialogue	We are not stopping until Nakuru.
Parenthetical	(whispering)
Transition	CUT TO:

Writing dialogue

- People rarely say exactly what they mean; let subtext do the work.
- Cut greetings and small talk unless they reveal something.

- Read every line aloud. If it is hard to say, rewrite it.
- Avoid explaining what the audience can already see.

Your first short script: a plan

1. Write a logline.
2. List five key moments (beats) from start to finish.
3. Write a 5-page draft in one sitting without editing.
4. Rest for a day, then cut 20%.
5. Get two people to read it aloud and note where they stumble.

Free tools: Trelby and Celtx (free tier) handle formatting automatically. You can also write in any word processor using the layout above.