

Screenwriting Mantra: Minimum Words, Maximum Impact

The origin and importance of one of the best screenwriting mantras... ever!

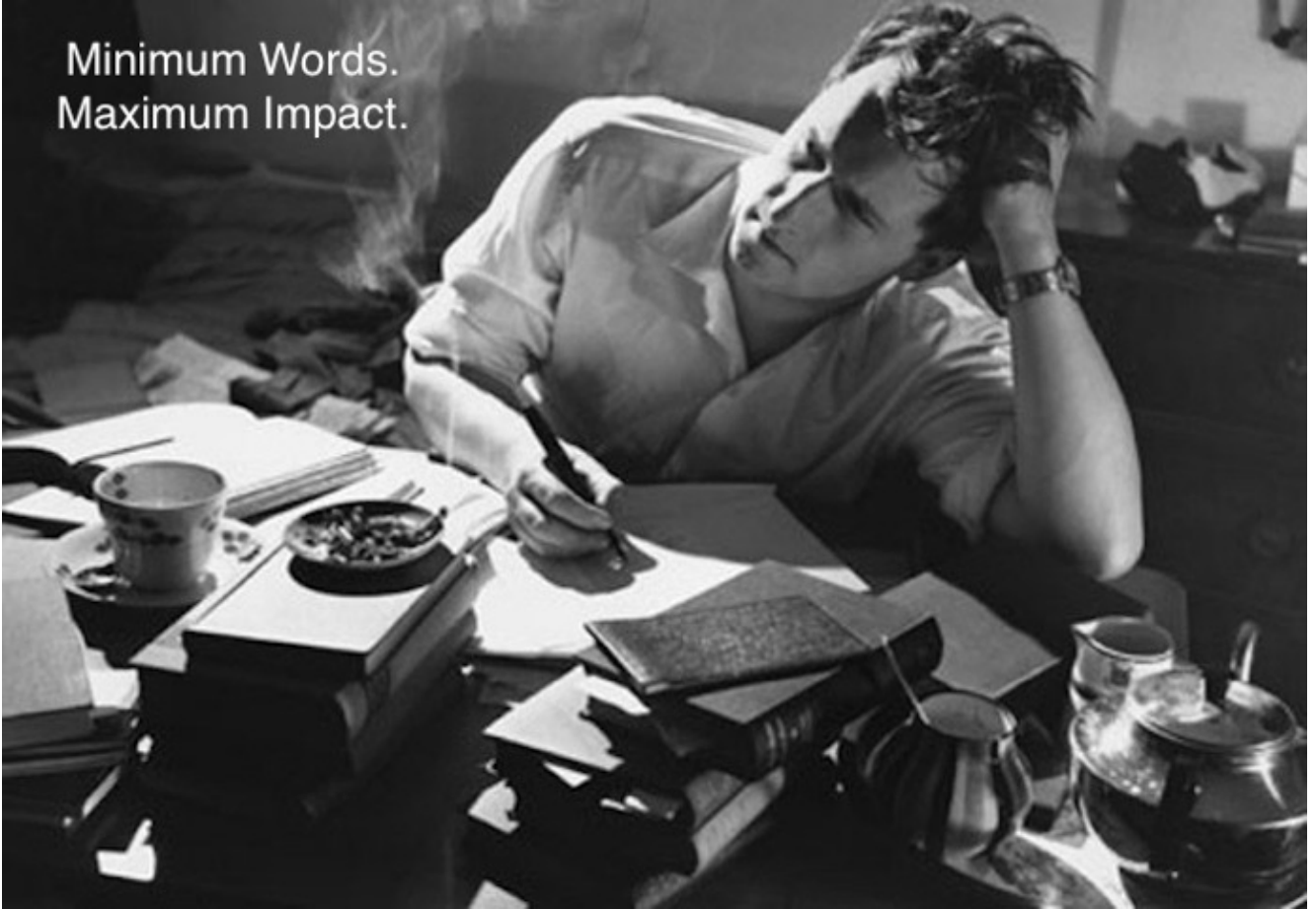
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I know the source of this mantra. It was one of my online screenwriting students. During a weekly live-chat session. I was going on and on about the importance of writing tight, taut, lean scene description, make it easy on the eye, clean on the page, really getting on my bully pulpit. Then a student typed:

Minimum words, maximum impact?

Here I had been guilty of the very thing I was decrying, then — boom! The perfect comment. Four words. And maximum impact indeed!

Minimum Words.
Maximum Impact.



Screenplays are a unique form. Unlike novels which can be hundreds, even thousands of pages long, a feature length script is typically no longer than 120 pages, even less nowadays with action, comedy, and horror scripts clocking in at 90–95 pages. Simply based on the fact that you have a limit to the page count means you should be mindful of how you approach your use of words when handling scene description.

Beyond that, there is an aesthetic consideration. Scripts filled with black ink are not only less pleasant to look at, they're harder for a reader to get through. White space is more attractive to the eye, which can have a psychological effect on a reader, and can make a script a better read. In truth, I've known some script readers who have told me they hate reading scene description and often will skip big

blocks of it to read the dialogue. Why? Because dialogue margins are narrower and therefore easier to read.

But there's an even more important reason why we need to be incredibly choosy about the words we use when writing scene description: To make an impact on the reader. How do we do that? Strong verbs. Visual nouns and adjectives. Tight paragraphs. Good, lean imagematic writing. Here's an example from the beginning of *The Matrix*:

INT. HEART O' THE CITY HOTEL

The Big Cop flicks out his cuffs, the other cops holding a bead. They've done this a hundred times, they know they've got her, until the Big Cop reaches with the cuffs and Trinity moves --

It almost doesn't register, so smooth and fast, inhumanly fast.

The eye blinks and Trinity's palm snaps up and the nose explodes, blood erupting. Her leg kicks with the force of a wrecking ball and he flies back, a two-hundred-fifty pound sack of limp meat and bone that slams into the cop farthest from her.

Trinity moves again, BULLETS RAKING the walls, flashlights sweeping with panic as the remaining cops try to stop a leather-clad ghost.

A GUN still in the cop's hand is snatched, twisted, and FIRED. There is a final violent exchange of GUNFIRE and when it's over, Trinity is the only one standing.

18 lines and a ton of action. Average paragraph length: 2 lines. And note those descriptors: *flicks*, *inhumanly fast*, *blinks*, *snaps*, *explodes*, *erupting*, *kicks*, *wrecking ball*, *flies*, *limp meat and bone*, *slams*, *raking*, *sweeping*, *leather-clad ghost*, *snatched*, *twisted*, *fired*, *gunfire*. You could almost just read those key words and get a sense of

the action.

Of course, the mantra pertains to dialogue as well. I've heard an anecdote about one of the first things Clint Eastwood does when he agrees to act in a movie is take a red marker and cross out half of his dialogue. Movies are primarily a visual medium. While important, creating moments where with a minimum of dialogue we let the emotion of the scene work its magic in subtext and silence is most often the preferred way to go.

File this one under "less is more."

Minimum words, maximum impact.

For other Screenwriting Mantras, go [here](#).