One of the buzz words at the 2002 Screenwriting Expo in Los Angeles was "verticality." Speaker after speaker urged beginning screenwriters to make their scripts "vertical." What exactly does this mean?

Let me begin by putting the "vertical script" in context.

**Horizontal Reading vs. Vertical Flowing**

Reading is a horizontal experience. We begin at the left of the page and read across to the right of the page, drop down a line and repeat the horizontal sweep of the reading experience. Most of our reading is done this way.

The screenplay, however, is unique as a written document. It is not a literary document, which is to say that its primary purpose is not to be read and enjoyed for its artistic use of language. A screenplay is but the first step on a long journey toward producing a film, and this is why many people have pointed out that the screenplay is the "blueprint" for a movie. It is not an end product but the first step in a process.

In fact, in the beginning, screenplays are not read at all: they are skimmed. Think about this. Remember when you were in college and behind on your reading and had to skim text for a test? What was easier to skim, highly dense language in long paragraphs composed of complex sentences or short snappy writing in very short paragraphs? The latter, obviously. Why? Because the eye didn't travel horizontally for information so much as down the page, vertically. Vertical writing is easier to read quickly than horizontal reading.

This means a vertical style of writing is perfect for the screenplay. Screenplays need first to be read rapidly, skimmed, for story, characters, genre, budget and other practical concerns of importance to a potential producer. The easier the writer makes it for a reader to get into the story and these other elements, the better the chance for garnering interest in a script.

**Making a Script Vertical**

How do you make a script vertical? You write snappy simple sentences in short paragraphs. This also is
known as adding "white space" to a script. The vertical script is a script filled with white space.

Let me give some examples. Here is a paragraph from a student script:

Derek is walking across campus. All over, there are students reading copies of the official campus newspaper and Derek's magazine. One girl, ANNA KABIS, is laughing hysterically. She is young and beautiful. Derek stops and stares at her. A friend of Anna's is reading over her shoulder, a look of shock on her face.

The writing style here is good: clear, simple sentences. However, the verticality is poor. Let's make this passage vertical:

Derek is walking across campus.

All over, there are students reading copies of the official campus newspaper and Derek's magazine.

One girl, ANNA KABIS, is laughing hysterically. She is young and beautiful.

Derek stops and stares at her.

A friend of Anna's is reading over her shoulder, a look of shock on her face.

Notice how much easier it is to skim the latter version for its essential information: the eye races vertically down the page, rather than more slowly across the page. This is the vertical style of screenwriting.

There's a hidden advantage to this style for the writer. By isolating the paragraphs this way, the writer is implicitly directing the movie! Each of the four short paragraphs suggests a new shot: a wide shot of students, close on Anna, back to Derek, back to Anna. Writers, forbidden to direct the movie, nonetheless can influence the flow of images by isolating new shots in new paragraphs.

Let me close with an example from my own work. My new script Love in the Ruins ends with the protagonist, an art student, working on a new painting. Here is how I originally wrote it:

In a lower corner, under the dark shapes of destruction, he begins painting a new theme, less abstract than the rest, and what takes shape is the small figure of a woman in a brightly colored hijab, the figure of Hayaam, her back to us, overlooking the rising dark swirls and shapes of destruction like a misplaced flower, an oddity of brightness in the overwhelming dark presence of the canvas.
Now this is much, much, much too literary in style for a screenplay! Yet I wanted to suggest the poetic quality of the painting with poetic language. Here is how I revised the description:

In a lower corner, under the dark shapes of destruction, he begins painting a new theme, less abstract than the rest, and what takes shape is...

--the small figure of a woman in a brightly colored hijab,

--the figure of Hayaam, her back to us,

--overlooking the rising dark swirls and shapes of destruction like a misplaced flower,

--an oddity of brightness in the overwhelming dark presence of the canvas.

In other words, I didn't change a word, I just rearranged how the description flowed on the page, making it more vertical.

The vertical script should be a quick, clear read, the eye racing down the page, not across, as if the page itself were a long strip of film passing in front of the eyes. Adding verticality to your script has no down side.

Charles Deemer is the author of Screenwright: the craft of screenwriting. He teaches screenwriting at Portland State University. His new book is Selected Stories and presently he is converting his screenplay Love in the Ruins into a novel.

"Making Scripts Vertical" Copyright © 2003 Charles Deemer. All Rights Reserved.