

LEARNING MADE EASY



3rd Edition

Screenwriting

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Discover the story
only you can tell

Transform your story into a
screenplay or web series

Market and sell your
screenplay to Hollywood

Laura Schellhardt

Writer & Associate Professor of
Instruction at Northwestern University



Screenwriting

3rd Edition

by Laura Schellhardt

Writer & Associate Professor of Instruction,
Northwestern University

FOREWORD BY John Logan

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Foreword

So you want to write a movie. Where do you start? My personal advice to aspiring screenwriters is always the same: If you want to write, read. Start with Shakespeare. He will teach you everything you need to know about drama. Read everything. Read slowly and carefully. Read aloud and open yourself to emotion. Hamlet and Falstaff and Iago and Cleopatra and Rosalind will teach you about dramatizing character and conflict. Shakespeare's glorious combination of prose and verse will teach you about language. *King Lear* teaches you tragedy. *As You Like It* teaches you comedy. *Antony and Cleopatra* and the *Henry IV* plays teach you both.

Then go back and read Aristotle's *Poetics*. Then you might treat yourself to Ibsen and Chekhov. If you're feeling really madcap you might then move on to Sophocles, Euripides, Shaw, Pinter, Beckett, and O'Neill.

And then read *Hamlet* again.

My point is you must be a *dramatist*, a theatrical storyteller, first and foremost. The structural concerns of the ideal three-act movie structure or perfectly timed "inciting incident" must be entirely secondary to your passionate desire to tell the story honestly. Be an artist first, then a technician.

My dear friend Laura Schellhardt, the author of the book you are holding, offers some valuable advice on ways to approach writing a movie. She presents any number of provocative and clever ways to understand the screenwriting process. Used wisely, this book can help you hew your way through the very dark forest of screenplay construction.

I leave a final bit of advice from my frequent colleague, director Ridley Scott. After I delivered a particularly mammoth draft of *Gladiator*, Ridley turned to me with a wry smile and said, "John, write less words."

So, I guess that covers it. Read lots of words, and write less of them.

—John Logan

John Logan's film works include *Gladiator*, *Any Given Sunday*, *Star Trek: Nemesis*, *The Time Machine*, *RKO 281*, and *The Last Samurai*.

Introduction

Screenwriting *For Dummies*? If this book wasn't part of the *For Dummies* series, I might've thought twice about writing it. After all, the last thing the world needs is another dumb screenplay. But rest assured that by "Dummies," I don't mean you. This book isn't for dummies — quite the opposite, in fact. Writing is challenging work. You have to decide who and what to write about. You have to figure out how to expand your chosen subject into a 110–120 page story. To do that, you need a newly organized daily routine. Finally, when you finish your script, you have to introduce it to Hollywood. To do that, you need some industry tips and marketing strategies. That's a lot of work.

So I repeat, this book isn't for dummies. This book is for writers — beginners, advanced, and anyone in between. This book is for both teachers and students — of cinema, of theater, of life. This book is for film-lovers and filmgoers and for dreamers of all sorts. If you have an active imagination, curiosity, and a sense of adventure, welcome. This book just may be for you.

About This Book

To say that I enjoy writing would be an understatement. I *love* writing, and I *love* films, and I fervently believe that screenwriting is a craft worth pursuing. I also believe that it's a demanding craft with many facets to consider. Most screenwriting books cover one of those facets in detail — how to write a first draft, how to find an agent, how to sell your script to the industry, and of course other topics. There's nothing wrong with focusing on one portion of this complicated art form, but if you have the space, why not tackle it all? This book has the space. From finding an idea to spacing it on the page to marketing it in Hollywood — in this book, you can find out about the screenwriting process from A to Z (or Action to Zoom in film lingo.)

This book isn't heavy on special conventions. But it does have a few, and here they are:

- » I reference a lot of films, plays, and television shows in this book, and to help you locate them in the text, the titles are in bold italics. For example, ***Lord of the Rings*** would look like this in the text.
- » I also reference novels because screenwriters often adapt novels for the screen. These titles appear in regular italics, for example *The Cider House Rules*.
- » Short stories and poems appear in quotes; for example, "The Lottery."
- » Websites and email addresses appear in monofont.
- » Important words or terms to know also appear in *italics*.

Screenwriting is an art, a craft, and a business. For your convenience and sanity, I've divided this book into five parts, each dedicated to one part of the process:

- » **Part 1, "So You Want to Write for Pictures":** In this part, I introduce you to . . . well, to yourself — to your screenwriting self, that is. Artists sense the world in a slightly different way than people in other professions do, and screenwriters are no exception. These chapters focus on developing a writer's "eye" for detail, a knack for finding ideas, and the ability to organize a busy calendar around the expansion of those ideas. If you've ever wondered how it "feels" to be a writer, turn to Part I and find out.
- » **Part 2, "Breaking Down the Elements of a Story":** This part tackles all the building blocks of a story — the sequence of events, the characters, the conflict, and how the whole thing sounds when you toss those elements together. It also touches upon your responsibility to the moviegoers who eventually journey through that story with you.
- » **Part 3, "Turning Your Story into a Script":** Part 3 involves the nuts and bolts of turning your story into something you can sell to Hollywood. From outlines to format to revisions, these chapters detail how your film should look both on the page and in the mind's eye of your reader. I also discuss how to adapt other mediums — poetry, fiction, theater — to the screen. And if you're writing with a partner? Flip to Chapter 18 for some tips on collaboration.
- » **Part 4, "Selling Your Script to Show Business":** Part 4 involves switching hats from artist/creator to businessperson. You have a product to sell — actually, you have two. You want to market your script, yes, but more importantly, you want to market yourself as a writer. This part helps you narrow your market and package your work accordingly. It then guides you through the crazy world known as show business — step by star-studded step.

» **Part 5, “The Part of Tens”:** I toss around a lot of examples in this final part. Want to know who’s made a successful living as a screenwriter? Here are a few examples. Want to know who’s “one-to-watch?” Here are a few examples. Want some scripts worth reading or a heads up on some screenwriting myths that you may want to avoid? That’s right, here are a few examples.

I’ve also included samples of traditional screenplay format, as well as examples for a movie musical and a web series in this book’s appendix.

Foolish Assumptions

You know what they say about assuming, but sometimes it just has to be done. Although this book is for a wide variety of people, I did assume the following about you when writing it:

- » You enjoy writing or think that you might.
- » You’ve written a script or are looking to start one.
- » You’ve been to at least one movie and enjoyed yourself.
- » You believe that good stories can change the world.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, icons in the margins highlight certain types of valuable information that call out for your attention. Here are the icons you’ll encounter and a brief description of each.



TIP

Keep a lookout for this icon. It signals timesaving shortcuts and tricks of the trade.



REMEMBER

This icon either suggests a theory worth bearing in mind as you read the ensuing text, or it reiterates advice from a previous passage that may be relevant again.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon references screenwriting terms or showbiz jargon. If you’re in a hurry, you can skip these alerts and still understand the chapter. But you may find the definitions helpful.



WARNING

This icon alerts you to a theory or practice that may be detrimental to your writing routine or career. Don't skip these paragraphs; you'll regret it later!



TRY IT

Many chapters contain a sidebar, flagged with this icon, with an exercise for you to try. These exercises are optional, but they're meant to further develop your screenwriting skills.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the information and guidance related to screenwriting provided in this book, you get access to even more help and information online at dummies.com. Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet. Just go to www.dummies.com and search for "Screenwriting For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

You can go anywhere you want in this book! Read it according to your personal needs as a writer or a writer-to-be. If you want to start at Chapter 1 and read the book cover to cover, great! If not, that's fine, too — you won't hurt my feelings. The information in this book is accessible and relevant regardless of your journey through it.

Also, no two writers are after the same information, and this book is designed with that thought in mind. Read it in order or jump around. Worried about writer's block? See Chapter 14. Want to protect your work? Flip to Chapter 19. Not sure where to begin? This book has two, count 'em *two*, tables of contents. The Contents at a Glance gives you an overall picture of what you can find in this book. Skim through it and see what ropes you in. Or simply close your eyes and point. When you find a topic that interests you, you can go straight to that chapter or read the detailed table of contents for exactly what to expect. Every chapter stands on its own, so skip around at will.

1

So You Want to Write for Pictures

IN THIS PART . . .

Discover the art of screenwriting, including finding inspiring stories and adapting ideas from other sources.

Learn how to think visually and build visual moments.

Find out from other writers what works (and what doesn't) and develop your own story ideas.

Explore the creative process of screenwriting and practice honing your form, technique, and discipline.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Thinking visually and developing a writer's mind
- » Approaching screenwriting as a craft
- » Finding inspiring stories
- » Putting your ideas on paper
- » Revising your work
- » Adapting ideas from other sources
- » Selling your script

Chapter **1**

Introducing the Art of Screenwriting

Screenwriting is a craft, and like any craft worth pursuing, you can never know too much about it. You wouldn't tell a doctor to stop scrutinizing advances in medicine, would you? Can a teacher ever learn enough about education? This chapter provides a glimpse of screenwriting and tells you where in the book you can go to find more information on each topic mentioned. Consider this chapter your preview of coming attractions.

In The Mind's Eye

Quick — in what children's book does a character require green glasses to enter a city? If you answered *The Wizard of Oz*, you're right. Dorothy needs green glasses to enter the Emerald City. And while they cut this detail in the film version, the example is nevertheless relevant to screenwriting. It's a question of vision — what do you need in order to see where you're going?

Screenwriting requires a unique vision, eyes trained to scan the world with particular acuity. It seems silly to say that screenwriters look at the world with a visual eye. Of course, they do. Doesn't everybody? After all, looking is a visual act.

And yet, there's a distinct difference between what screenwriters see and what people in other occupations see. Screenwriters break the world down into visual clips or scenes — in other words, into moving pictures. Also, screenwriters visualize these scenes while doing more than observing the world around them. Consider for a second that it's also possible to see moving pictures while

- » Reading a novel, a play, or a poem
- » Reading the newspaper
- » Listening to music
- » Listening to someone else's story



TIP

Screenwriters look for moving pictures in everything, though some sources yield more than others. Want to know how your vision stacks up? Find a public place, sit down with a pad and pen, and write down what you notice. Then flip to Chapter 2 and find out how visual your eye really is.

Developing the Writer's Mind

Imagine a storage facility, with aisles of file cabinets, some overflowing and some empty but for one scrap of paper. Or imagine a playground full of children, yes, but also with people you wouldn't expect to see. Maybe two construction workers are playing basketball, or a few CEOs are eating donuts on a bench; people of all ages and from all walks of life are occupying the same space. Or imagine a long hallway full of doors. Occasionally, people emerge, have an exchange of some sort, and return behind those doors. Now imagine a blank canvas. Paints and brushes sit nearby, but they remain as of yet unused. Any one of these spaces may resemble the mind of a writer.

Writers collect and store tons of details. They amass images, scraps of conversation, intriguing characters, sounds, expressions, slang, and more. They also design what they discover. Add some boots, some dust, and a gun — *voilà*. You're in a western. Dim the lights, strip away the color, and give everyone a cigar — presto! You have the black-and-white, suspense-filled world of a film noir. Introduce a robot and a time machine, and suddenly, the world becomes science fiction. This is how writers spend much of their time — not exactly a dull profession. So I suppose that the question here is, "What does your mind look like?" If you want to find out, turn to Chapter 3.

Approaching Screenwriting as a Craft

Writers take their vocation seriously. They'll do almost anything to inspire that muse, and I do mean anything. Rumor has it that

- » Alexander Dumas color coordinated his paper with the type of fiction that he was writing. Blue paper was for novels, yellow paper was for poetry, and rose-colored pages were reserved for nonfiction.
- » Mark Twain and Truman Capote had to write lying down.
- » Ernest Hemingway sharpened dozens of pencils before he wrote.
- » Willa Cather read the Bible before writing each day.
- » Poet John Donne liked to lie in an open coffin before picking up a pen. Now there's a story for you.

I'm not implying that to take up writing you have to become an eccentric, but that may happen of its own accord. Writing is both fun and frustrating; it requires flights of whimsy as well as hard work. It's equal parts imagination and preparation. Striking a balance between the two worlds is a constant challenge. Catching the muse is one thing, but keeping it with you is another — that's where the tools of the trade come in handy. If you want a glimpse of some of those tools, turn to Chapter 4 where I discuss the craft of screenwriting. You find advice on how to flex your imagination, channel it onto the page, and maintain the writing schedule necessary to do both.

Finding Your Screenplay's Story

So how do writers find material? It depends on the writer, of course, but in their ongoing quest for stories, writers resemble any or all of the following:

- » Archaeologists
- » Detectives
- » Gardeners (plant a seed, and it will grow)
- » Reporters
- » Research analysts
- » Scavengers
- » Secret agents
- » Voyeurs

Great stories abound; you just have to know how to catch them, or hunt them down, as the case may be. You should also know what details attract you to a story. Are you a people person? Do locations draw you in? Are you compelled by certain kinds of events? You want to consider these questions before your story search begins. Chapter 5 helps you pinpoint your interests and unpack your idea in the quest for the story only you can write.

Working through the Writing Process

Once you find an idea, you have to develop that idea. The development process isn't unlike chaperoning several restless children across the country in a small car. You're likely to hear the following questions over and over:

- » How does the whole thing start?
- » What happens next?
- » Who are these people?
- » What happens next?
- » What's the problem?
- » Does that make sense?
- » What happens next?
- » Can we go any faster?
- » Are we there yet?
- » Why, why, why, why, why?

The journey can drive you nuts without a good road map, and in screenwriting terms, that map is known as *plot*. I consider plot to be so important that I dedicate three chapters to it — Chapters 6, 7, and 8. After all, every story has a beginning, middle, and an ending (though they're not always shown in that order), and the same questions apply to each part. There's another set of questions for character building in Chapter 9 and yet another chapter (you guessed it — Chapter 10) dedicated to orchestrating language for those characters once you know who they are. As you may suspect, without a navigation panel, you're in for a long, bumpy ride. So if you want to pacify that back-seat yammering, turn to Part 2 and start reading. Otherwise, you're liable to pull the car over and walk home.

Formatting Your Screenplay

Here are a few things that I've figured out about the screenwriting trade:

- » Always look before you leap.
- » People do judge a book by its cover.
- » Actions speak louder than words.
- » Brevity is the soul of wit (and most films, I might add).
- » Show, don't tell.
- » You never get another chance to make a first impression.

You don't have much control over most aspects of the screenwriting profession. Ideas often arrive unbidden, characters sometimes dictate what they want to say, the ending of your story may change several times, and you may wind up in a different genre. And when you're talking about Hollywood, forget it. The business is always in flux. One day, they're looking for war films, and the next day, they want candy and roses. Often, industry executives don't know what they want until someone bucks all the trends and writes something fresh.

One of the only things a writer has complete control over is the script's appearance, and in this industry, appearance is everything (at least at the beginning). So how wide should your margins be? How do you introduce a scene? Where do you insert special effects? And how long is too long? Getting readers to flip past the cover is half the battle, and correct formatting may ensure that they do so. For more on formatting your script, flip to Chapter 15, and if it's formatting templates you're after, we have an appendix for that.

Constructing Your First Draft

By the time you sit down to write your first draft, you'll be armed and dangerous. Among other things, your arsenal will include the following:

- » Strong characters with goals and dreams
- » Equally strong conflicts
- » Pivotal locations
- » A sequence of action-packed events

- » Remedies for writer's block
- » A solid writing routine

So now that you're considering a first draft, how good are you at puzzles — or at weaving, matching, or redecorating? Screenwriting requires all these skills. Crafting a draft is really a matter of arranging your information into some desired form and then linking each moment together.



In screenwriting terms, your *catalyst* or *inciting incident* propels the action into the big event, which then shuttles the story toward a *midpoint* after which it rises to a *climax* followed by a *resolution* of some sort. Make sense? If not, don't fear; just read Chapter 16.

Rewriting Your Script

So, what do you have in common with Gillian Flynn, Zadie Smith, Ernest Hemingway, Junot Diaz, and screenwriter John Logan? Before trying to answer, consider the following facts:

- » It took Gillian Flynn three years to finish her bestseller *Gone Girl*.
- » Zadie Smith spent almost two years crafting the first 20 pages of *On Beauty*.
- » Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times.
- » It took Junot Diaz 10 years to complete *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.
- » John Logan spent more than 10 years rewriting his play ***Never the Sinner***, during which time he removed a dozen characters.

So where do you fit in? All these anecdotes involve revision, and if you're serious about completing a script, you're going to encounter that process as well. Have you heard the phrase "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"? Well, in screenwriting, success arrives in stages, and you almost always have to try, try again. First drafts are generally dynamic, but they're also unruly, which is why many writers believe that the real writing occurs in revisions. The phrase most often applied to this principle is "Writing is rewriting." Your first draft is written for the story and for you. Your internal editor isn't invited to that party. But in the revision stage, the editor steps in, sizing up each moment and weighing how it affects the whole. And will your script take you 10 years to complete? I hope not, but if you're worried that it might, flip to Chapter 17 for extensive advice on revisions.

Adapting Your Screenplay from an Outside Source

Have you ever read a story or watched a play and thought, “This would make a great film!”? If so, you’ve experienced the first step in the adaptation process: identifying a source. You can adapt all kinds of material for the screen. *Memento* began as a short story written by the director’s brother, *Chicago* was originally a stage musical, *Hidden Figures* was a nonfiction book. In Hollywood, primary source material is referred to as *IP*, which stands for intellectual property, and if adaptation excites you, strong IP abounds.

Adaptations are challenging for many of the same reasons that writers are drawn to them. They provide instant character recipes, events, and themes that seem destined for the screen. Yet somehow, a writer must find a way to make an original piece out of what they’re given. In a way, adapting is like getting two pieces of art for the price of one. So if you’re interested in adapting a work into a screenplay, flip to Chapter 18 for a few tips on the process.

Selling Your Screenplay to Show Business

With all the creative work you’re doing, it’s easy to forget that filmmaking is a business as well as a craft. When you’re through with revisions, you become the CEO of your own private company. That company is you. Selling your work is an entirely different part of the process; therefore, it requires a new arsenal: determination, confidence (even if it’s feigned), a positive attitude, a marketing strategy, a creative network, and a knowledge of the business and its players.

There are so many paths into and within Hollywood that you almost need a map to know where to begin. Should you approach an agent or manager first, and if so, how? Should you send your script to producers, and if so, how? Should you seek out studios or independents, contests or festivals, television or film? Is it best to self-produce a short film or a web series and garner attention via social media? And how, oh how, do you protect yourself and your work in the process? Part 4 is dedicated to strategy, both personal and professional. Consider the chapters in Part 4 your map into show business.

JUST FOR FUN

Are you a movie buff? Here's a little project to test your movie-trivia expertise. Know nothing about films but interested nonetheless? Consider this a project to launch your movie-trivia expertise. After all, you can never know too much about your craft of choice.

In the left-hand column, I list famous film quotations. In the right-hand column, I include the films that made them popular. How many lines can you trace to their source?

1. "I gave her my heart; she gave me a pen."	a. <i>Back To The Future</i>
2. "I am Groot."	b. <i>The Princess Bride</i>
3. "Now you're in the sunken place."	c. <i>Raiders Of The Lost Ark</i>
4. "I see dead people."	d. <i>Say Anything</i>
5. "I do wish we could chat longer, but I'm having an old friend for dinner."	e. <i>Ferris Bueller's Day Off</i>
6. "You're a good man with a good heart, and it's hard for a good man to be king."	f. <i>Jaws</i>
7. "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father, prepare to die."	g. <i>A Few Good Men</i>
8. "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads."	h. <i>Get Out</i>
9. "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop to look once in a while, you could miss it."	i. <i>Silence of the Lambs</i>
10. "It's not the years, honey, it's the mileage."	j. <i>Black Panther</i>
11. "You're gonna need a bigger boat."	k. <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i>
12. "You can't handle the truth."	l. <i>The Sixth Sense</i>

Answers: 1-d, 2-k, 3-h, 4-l, 5-i, 6-j, 7-b, 8-a, 9-e, 10-c, 11-f, 12-g

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Distinguishing screenwriting from other art forms
- » Envisioning the visual life of a screenplay
- » Crafting visual moments
- » Organizing images to create the desired effect

Chapter 2

Preparing to Think Visually

So you want to write for pictures, huh? Are you sure? Of course, you're sure, you scoff. You love movies. You have ideas for movies all the time. Yes, I say again, but are you sure that it's a movie you want to write? Is your idea best suited to the cinema, or would it be better served as a novel, as a stage play, or as a television drama? Perhaps the images in your mind are best expressed as a series of poems? For beginning writers, the line between those mediums may blur, but they're different forms that require different sensibilities. Screenwriting, in particular, is a visual art. It demands that a writer look at the world with new eyes, swiftly condensing action and physical detail into moving pictures. Do you have those eyes?

This chapter dives in to various literary forms, noting their similarities and their differences, in an attempt to help you view the world with the eyes of a screenwriter.

Is It Cinema? Considering Other Mediums

When people talk about movies, they're generally referring to films that they've seen, rarely to films that they've read. When they want a good read, they pick up a novel, a short story, or a magazine. A select few pick up a collection of poetry,

but rarely does anyone reach for a movie script, despite its availability. For this reason, the public (beginning writers included) is more familiar with other forms of writing than it is with screenplays, so when a creative idea strikes, that idea is much more likely to lend itself to a medium other than film.

The jump to cinematic thinking isn't such a grand one, however, and the transfer from one mind-set to the other begins with a quick glance through those other literary forms. If you've struck upon a story already, you may want to peruse the following sections with that story in mind. Try to imagine it in each form. Doing so can help you clarify what aspects of the story lend themselves to cinema, and what aspects match other venues.

Is it a screenplay or a novel?

Literary fiction makes up more than 80 percent of what people read these days, but it has little in common with screenwriting. Although the forms share an attention to detail and a tendency toward multiple characters and locales, fiction writers spend pages telling readers what screenwriters convey in a few well-chosen images.

In fiction, the mind of each character becomes a landscape. More time is spent exploring thoughts, emotions, and memories than is spent depicting action or crafting dialogue. In film, the opposite is true. A screenwriter can't just say a character mulls over their bad day. They have to show how they feel about it through images or action. Also, in fiction, the author tends to emerge in the form of a clear narrative voice, while screenwriters often strive to fade into the background.

Basically, you know that your idea may be better served as a novel or short story if

- » It has copious characters, plotlines, and locations.
- » The action moves between the physical and psychological worlds of each character with ease.
- » The characters' internal conflicts are as important as their physical actions.
- » The story requires more than 200 pages to be explored fully.
- » A clear narrative voice (or several clear narrative voices) guides the action.
- » Many events are described in detail, but few are shown in action.
- » Symbols and foreshadowing abound.

If you discover that your idea lends itself more readily to the page than the screen, never fear. Virtually every story has cinematic possibilities; the trick is to discover them before you start to write.

Is it film or theater?

Though theater is growing more physical in nature, stage plays have traditionally relied on language to convey action, character, and theme. As a general rule, plays depict in dialogue what films depict in physical action or image; although, like everything, there are exceptions

Unlike screenplays and novels, which bounce from locale to locale, introducing character after character, stage plays generally limit themselves in cast size and number of settings. Plays with large casts often ask actors to take on multiple roles, and plays with many locations tend to use lights, sound cues, and props to suggest leaps between locations. Plays rarely try to re-create public locations as realistically as film does. (To do so wouldn't be financially or artistically wise.)

To break it down, your story idea may work better as a play if

- » You can tell the story in 90 pages or fewer.
- » The story concentrates on a handful of characters in a handful of places.
- » Characters reveal themselves through dialogue or speeches more often than through physical action.
- » The story benefits from interaction with a live audience.
- » The action suggests a heightened reality or is surreal/absurd in nature.



TIP

The line between a theatrical idea and a cinematic one is often vague, and films are also becoming more theatrical in form and style. *The Favourite*, for example, is structured like a female-centric Shakespearean drama with flourishes of farce. So if you're unsure whether you've dreamt up a play or a film, try to imagine your story as a series of pictures. If those pictures keep talking to you, you probably have a play. If your mind jumps from image to image, and if every image is full of physical action, you may be ready to write a screenplay.

Is it a movie, visual art, or poetry?

Poetry and studio arts share several elements with cinema. They rely on quick clips of words or images, often sensual in nature, which encapsulate an event or a tone. Film also relies on the organization of pictures to convey plot and emotion. Poetry employs metaphor, allegory, and rhyme, while visual art uses color, light, and the strategic manipulation of an image to communicate its central design. These forms generally aren't substantial enough to support a lengthy text; they instead hint at a larger story or provide a limited portion of it. Their subjects are better served in a few well-crafted stanzas or in one print altogether. In a way, a screenplay continues where the poem or visual piece leaves off. It tells the "before and after." It expands the subject into an idea that can sustain a dramatic through-line.

Your idea may work best as a poem, a song, or a visual art piece if

- » The subject appears in a flash of color or light, or as a single image.
- » The subject feels stationary in nature.
- » The story lends itself to metaphor and rhyme.
- » The story requires a verbal chorus to set it off.
- » You imagine the image as a photograph or a portrait.

Poems and visual art pieces aren't often transformed into film, but they can easily become the inspiration for one. If you see your piece as a series of photographs, imagine them moving. Imagine all the photographs that go in between and then ask yourself how you might get from one image to the next. You may discover a film idea after all.



TIP

Finally, if you're excited about one of these other forms, it's not a bad idea to pen a short story, memoir, or stage play first. Hollywood snaps up dynamic source material quickly because it's less risky than taking a chance on an unwritten idea. In many cases, writing in another medium might be the fastest route into show business.

It's probably a screenplay if . . .

- » Events reveal themselves in image and action.
- » The story contains a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- » It suggests moments of intricate detail.
- » It has a *hook*, an aspect of the idea that will grab attention immediately.
- » It wants to be told in 100 to 120 pages.
- » The story suggests the possibility of an equally compelling subplot.
- » The story has the potential for commercial appeal.

Screenplays subsist on the visual details of every scene, and you may be surprised by how many details you find when you know how to look. Consider this example: Harold comes home from work early, hears a noise upstairs, creeps up to investigate, and discovers that he's being robbed.

Look at each portion of that scene closely. How would you break the action up? A novel might describe every nuance of the action, as well as Harold's heart beginning to race and the little voice inside his head screaming to run away. It may flash to a memory from Harold's childhood of older brothers jumping out to scare him from behind closed doors. In a stage play, audiences may hear Harold's car in

the driveway moments before keys jingle in the lock and Harold enters the room. After the sound effect, Harold slowly climbs the stairs. You may see what happens next or just hear the next bit as it unfolds offstage. Want to distill it even further? How about condensing the experience into one photograph or portrait? Perhaps a shot of a man ascending a staircase into a darkened hall, or a shot of his hand on the doorknob upstairs. All these forms are possible visual representations of the fear involved in this scenario.

A screenwriter, however, breaks that scene into a handful of pivotal moments and then hunts for visual details in between. A screenwriter envisions Harold's blue Chevy pulling into the drive, and then his feet crossing the front lawn. He stops to grab the mail; then his keys jingle in the lock. The door opens to reveal his face when he hears the noise from upstairs. Perhaps his eyes narrow at the sound; perhaps he hesitates before one hand grips the banister and slides steadily up the rail. Remember, in film, your eye can go anywhere. Individually, no one piece makes sense, but organized in a particular way, the pieces paint a vivid and generally silent story. Dialogue may be layered on as necessary, but in screenwriting, the visual circumstances exist first.



TRY IT

A NOVEL APPROACH TO FILM

The fastest way to understand the differences in artistic mediums is to move between them yourself. The following selection is from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, a novel that has been made into a film on several occasions. This particular scene takes place in court.

"It happened, that the action turned his face to that side of the court which was on his left. About on a level with his eyes, there sat, in that corner of the Judge's bench, two persons upon whom his look immediately rested; so immediately, and so much to the changing of his aspect, that all the eyes that were turned upon him, turned to them.

The spectators saw two figures, a young lady of little more than twenty, and a gentleman who was evidently her father, a man of very remarkable appearance in respect of the absolute whiteness of his hair, and a certain indescribable intensity of face. His daughter had one of her hands drawn through his arm, as she sat by him, and the other pressed upon it. She had drawn close to him, in her dread of the scene, and in her pity of the prisoner. This had been so very noticeable, so very powerfully and naturally shown, that starers who had had no pity for him were touched by her; and the whisper went about, "Who are they?"

"Witnesses." "For which side?" "Against." "Against what side?"

"The prisoner's."

(continued)

(continued)

The Judge, whose eyes had gone in the general direction, recalled them, leaned back into his seat, and looked steadily at the man whose life was in his hand, as Mr. Attorney-General rose to spin the rope, grind the axe, and hammer the nails into the scaffold.”

After you read through the selection several times, try to envision it as one image — a photograph or a painting perhaps. Will you portray the woman, the woman and her father, or the entire court? If you have a lyrical bent, try your hand at a poem or a scene from a stage play. Finally, distill the scene into five images, and try envisioning it as a film.

What You See Is What You Get: The Visual Life of a Screenplay

If your script becomes a film, a director and a cinematographer will eventually haggle over the composition of each shot and the overall look of your piece. Among other things, they discuss the following elements:

- » **Central image:** Which character, object, or environmental element is meant to take focus? All movie scenes are based on distinct images that, together, create meaning, but at least one visual detail should catch and keep the audience’s attention.
- » **Color:** What colors pop out or highlight the scene, and what is the overall look? Is the moment realistic or surreal in nature? Compare the look of a Spike Lee “joint” to a Wes Anderson film, and you see how important color choices can be.
- » **Light:** What time of day is it? What season and weather conditions are at work? Is a specific lighting source suggested, and if so, what is it? The shots in *Ice Storm* are bleak and overcast, in stark contrast to the caustic brightness of films like *Eighth Grade*.
- » **Movement:** This element refers to the quality of movement both within each scene and between shots. Do your images dart about in a dangerous fashion as in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, or are they languid and expansive, as in *Portrait of a Lady On Fire*?
- » **Sequencing of detail:** How a scene unfolds is as important as what happens within it. In other words, what details do you reveal and when? *E.T.* has a scene in which the alien hides among stuffed animals in the daughter’s closet. That moment is successful because when the mother opens the door, the camera pans slowly from left to right, glancing past a stationary E.T., just as the mother does. The audience doesn’t know where he is until that moment, either.

- » **Sound:** What sounds fill out your location? Do any of them conflict with the emotional content of the scene itself? *The Sound of Metal* gradually moves from raucous noise to silence, as the protagonist loses his hearing. By the end of the film, the audience is left with only memories of what events sound like, just as he is.
- » **Location:** In life, you can't always choose where important moments occur. In screenplays, you can. The location of each shot should be a specific choice on the part of the writer. It underscores the content of the scene. It's no accident that the tragedy in *Dead Poets Society* takes place in a gorgeous New England landscape during a particularly beautiful winter's day.
- » **Contrasting elements:** Some moments benefit from pitting opposing energies against each other. In many romantic comedies, one person walks the streets alone, surrounded by happy couples. In *Parasite*, one family crams themselves into a leaky basement apartment, while another family enjoys more space than they know what to do with. The intended emotion of a scene is often magnified by the addition of its opposite form.
- » **Symbol and/or metaphor:** Depending on how it's shot, an image can simply help establish a scene or provide a metaphor for the entire piece. In *Titanic*, the image of the necklace disappearing into the ocean takes on much greater significance after watching the ship go down and the protagonist's love interest disappear beneath the water as well.



REMEMBER

The key to understanding the visual world of a screenplay is the key to understanding any medium. You want to view the world as that kind of an artist. Read scripts, see movies, and practice looking at the world with an eye toward image. Eventually, the ability to break life into a series of pictures becomes second nature.

Crafting images from the outside in

In this first technique, you concentrate on one element off the list above and create a visual moment with that element in mind. After you can picture that element clearly, choose another element and layer that choice in, and so on. Your goal is to imagine a visual moment that satisfies all the senses. For example, say that you've chosen the element of light. You decide that the light in your image comes from a single candle. Next, you choose the location and decide that the candle illuminates an abandoned warehouse. You might choose sound next and layer in the dripping of water in the distance, or the scuttling of rats. You get the idea. By the time you're done, you have a complete image in your mind's eye. That image may or may not suggest a scene or a situation. Regardless, you're training your imagination to create something from nothing.



TRY IT

CREATING A SCENE FROM THE GROUND UP

Try to create a short scene, one image at a time. This project may help you detail a previously conceived story, or it may simply help strengthen your imagination.

Beside each category, I include a key visual detail. Let the first detail guide you to an image, and then layer the next elements around it. If you find one suggestion uninspiring, skip it or replace it with something that fits what you've already envisioned. When you're done, keep any part of the scene that intrigues you and disregard the rest.

Central image: A broken porch swing

Color: Red and white

Light: Several flashlights clicking on in succession

Movement: Frantic and clipped

Sequence: From the porch, to the yard, to the beach, to the boathouse, to the ocean

Sound: The chopping of wood

Location: A once-stately home

Contrasting elements: Laughter and tears

Symbol and metaphor: Footprints on the sand

Crafting images from the inside out

In the second method, you begin with a preconceived scene. This method is particularly helpful after you've settled on a story idea and have a few moments devised within it. Once you've built that scene, start stripping it away, one detail at a time.

For example, let's say this is your scene: The sound of sirens. Red and yellow lights flash through the space, illuminating the scene of a car accident. It is nighttime in the city and raining. Doors open up in a building down the way, and teenagers flock outside. A school dance has just let out. Boisterous music filters through the streets. Some of the kids notice the accident and linger to watch. Others hurry home or take off hand in hand down the street. A hubcap spins off the car, rolls for a stretch, and clatters on the ground.

Which detail would you eliminate first? What's the last detail remaining? Do you leave your audience with the sounds of laughter or with the image of one teenager staring in terror at the hubcap? Try reversing the order in which you eliminate them. Which order feels right? In this way, you find out how the scene should organize itself and which details you're particularly attached to.



REMEMBER

When you hunt for images at the beginning stages of the screenwriting process, you essentially become both director and cinematographer for the piece. Although every visual detail won't make it into your script, it won't be because you haven't thought them through.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Finding out from other writers what works (and what doesn't)
- » Defining and blurring genres
- » Thinking like a writer
- » Identifying story ideas that work

Chapter 3

Diving Into the Screenwriter's Mind

With the variety of movies that launch each year, you may think the only thing screenwriters share in common is their profession. Like most artists, screenwriters have different methods of finding an idea and developing a story. Some ransack the local libraries, writing between ever-growing stacks of books. Some voraciously consume podcasts, YouTube content, or blogs. Some haunt coffeehouses, waiting for the next great conversation to pick up nearby. Some writers interview, and some adapt. Were you to question a handful of writers, your head would soon whirl with differing approaches, advice, and techniques. So where should an aspiring writer begin?

For starters, take a closer look at writers. Literally. Look at them. You may notice a glazed or faraway glint in their eyes; their heads may tilt to one side as if listening for something behind them; their speech may clip along mechanically. Overall, you may feel that they're really somewhere else. And why not? After all, they're working. Just because they're not sitting in front of a notepad or a computer doesn't mean they're not working.

A screenwriter's sensibility resembles that of a conscientious parent who has children romping upstairs. Writers never know when something more important may call them out of the room. A screenwriter moves through the world with a heightened awareness — a writer's awareness. Can you develop this sensibility?

Sure. It just takes practice and a few friends who are willing to put up with the new, perhaps improved, you.

Finding Your Feet: How to Learn From Other Writers

The first step in approaching any artistic medium is to surround yourself with examples of the art form. If you want to paint, you go to a museum. If you want to compose, you buy scores of music or frequent concert halls. If you want to write movies, you do two things: First, you study the impact of films firsthand by going to the cinema. Second, you read screenplays — lots of screenplays. The time you dedicate to reading reaps great rewards.

Here are just a few of the many things you garner by reading other writers:

- » **Multiple points of view:** The most compelling stories are told again and again. They continue to be written because each writer has a unique approach. Reading other writers forces you to consider similar stories from not-so-similar angles.
- » **Clarity of opinions and ethics:** The most powerful screenplays ask difficult questions. Considering those questions as you read can help clarify your own set of beliefs.
- » **A sense of language:** Strong writers possess a large vocabulary and an understanding of grammar. Different writers use different words in different ways. Learn from them.
- » **An understanding of format:** Many new writers know what they want to say but are unsure how to lay it out on the page. Reading other screenplays familiarizes you with the format.
- » **An enjoyable way to spend a few hours:** Screenplays are fun, fast reads. Reading one is like traveling without standing in line or spending more than \$10 on airfare.

Finding screenplays to read is now a fairly easy endeavor. You can read most popular scripts online for free (see the appendix for suggestions on where to look.) I encourage you to examine failure as well as success here. In addition to watching great movies and reading well-constructed scripts, study some box-office bombs and scripts that failed to tell a compelling story. (The two are not always mutually exclusive.) If you can identify what components of the story caused it to fail, you may be able to avoid the same fate in the future.



REMEMBER

All in all, reading screenplays provides a familiarity with the craft itself. You learn through osmosis — the gradual, often unconscious absorption of details. Reading screenplays regularly can prepare you, and often encourage you, to sit down to write with confidence.

Reading for dramatic intent

After reading a screenplay once through for the general story, you may try scanning it again to concentrate on one portion of the development. Among the items to track are

- » How the writer develops characters
- » How the writer structures crucial events
- » What images the writer repeats and why
- » How the writer transitions from scene to scene
- » The writer's dramatic intent

The first four items on the list tackle how and when the writer reveals relevant information. Detailing the people in the script, divulging key secrets, and manipulating images are all part of character and plot development, which I discuss further in Part 2. For now, I just concentrate on the final item on the list — dramatic intent.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Dramatic intent, also known as the *premise*, refers to the screenplay's specific purpose or design. It alludes to the main question the screenplay raises or the thought a writer attempts to communicate through story.

What's the writer trying to say? What does the writer want to know? Keep these two questions in mind as you read for dramatic intent. The most powerful scripts stem from a great need: the need to understand life and human behavior or the need to communicate a message to a chosen audience. This need determines the screenplay's subject. So when you are looking for dramatic intent, keep an eye out for three things:

- » **Point of view:** Who or what does the writer want you to root for? To condemn? Does the writer have an opinion on the events you're watching, and how do you know? If you can answer these questions, you've probably located the writer's point of view.
- » **Theory:** Does the script present a hypothesis that the action then tries to prove? Look at the movie *Get Out*, a horror film tackling (among other things)

the way white liberals perpetuate and benefit from systemic racism. Each scene reveals another truth that generations have attempted to ignore or to hide.

- » **Questions:** What questions keep you reading? Which ones crop up again and again? Every scene in the movie *When Harry Met Sally* asks the question, “Can best friends sustain a romantic relationship?” Generally, the characters’ answers to the question suggest the story’s conclusion.

The most compelling screenplays engage the audience with the inquiries or opinions. If you answer the main question in the first few frames, people have no reason to continue watching your film. If you ask the question in a variety of ways, people can form their own answers. Present several arguments, and they may even change their opinions once or twice. In other words, give audiences the ability to participate in your story rather than simply observe it.

Why read for dramatic intent? Screenwriters write in part because they have something to communicate. If you can locate another writer’s intent, you may discover how to craft scenes that present your own. Look at scripts you admire. What questions do they pose? What about those questions keeps audiences guessing, or on the edge of their seats, or both? If you can locate the thematic questions of other films, you’ll quickly discover what themes sustain an entire draft, and which fall short.

Recognizing a screenplay’s genre

Scroll through Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, or HBO and jot down the categories their films are grouped under. These categories suggest each movie’s genre.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A film’s *genre* refers to the artistic category it belongs to. The genre is determined by a distinctive style, form, or content. It sometimes alludes to the way writers approach their subject. Comedies and dramas, for instance, approach the same subject in very different ways.

The most common genres include

- » **Comedy:** Comedies approach subjects with humor (of course). *Dark comedies* and *romantic comedies* fall within this genre. Dark comedies, such as *The Favourite*, tackle heartbreaking or frightening material in a comic way, and romantic comedies like *Crazy Rich Asians* explore that crazy thing called love.
- » **Drama:** Dramas tend to be true-to-life stories of a serious nature. They may contain humorous moments, but the overall effect is poignant and sometimes tragic. *Moonlight* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* are examples of this genre.

- » **Sci-Fi and Fantasy:** These movies take audiences to a future time frame or an imaginary world. The characters may or may not be human beings, the rules of science may not apply, and the locations may or may not resemble ours. The *Matrix* films and *Pan's Labyrinth* are successful examples of these genres. Sometimes executives want “grounded sci-fi” which generally means the story is character-driven and/or it seems more plausible than fantastical. Movies like *Arrival* and *Melancholia* fit this bill.
- » **Action and Adventure:** These films portray characters tackling dangerous events in an atmosphere of excitement and suspense. The characters may be on a quest, as in the *Indiana Jones* series, or they're in combat against a formidable enemy, as in *Love and Monsters*. Generally, they encounter both — they're on a quest and must defeat the foe before they can complete it. There's also a sexier, more glamorous subset of this genre that films like *Baby Driver* and *Atomic Blond* fit into.
- » **Family:** If you can take your children to see a film, it probably belongs in this genre. Family movies generally lack cursing, sexual content, and graphic violence. They prioritize hope, which we can all use a little more of these days. For this reason, they have the G or PG rating. This genre may include animation. *Akeelah and the Bee*, *The Mitchells vs. The Machines*, and *Soul* are some successful examples of this genre.
- » **Movie Musicals:** Though cinematic musicals used to be included in the Family genre (and many still are), they're fast becoming their own genre with wider audience appeal. Hits like *Prom*, *La La Land*, *The Greatest Showman*, and *A Star Is Born* are a few recent examples. (For more about this movie musicals and how to craft one, see Chapter 11.)
- » **Horror and Suspense:** These two genres attack the same subject in different ways. *Horror films* tend to be more graphic in their violence, such as the *Saw* series, *The Quiet Place*, or *Hereditary*, while *suspense films* depict a steadily unfolding mystery. Virtually every Alfred Hitchcock film falls within the suspense genre, as do *No Country For Old Men* and *Night Crawler*. Horror-suspense hybrids, like *Parasite*, are also increasingly common. When deftly executed, both genres make you want to lock all the doors and turn on the lights.
- » **Art House and Independent:** These often low-budget films don't hail from large production companies. *Minari*, *Driveways*, and *Shirley* are some successful examples. These films often allow more creative freedom, which may account for their acute sense of style.

Many of the strongest scripts combine genres, thereby appealing to a broader audience. *Star Wars*, one of the most successful movies of all time, is both a sci-fi film and an action/adventure. *E.T.*, another blockbuster hit, is a sci-fi and a family film with elements of adventure. *The Shape Of Water* straddles the line between

sci-fi and romance. If you can identify the genre (or genres) of any movie you see, you learn the kinds of events associated with it. Although there's no strict formula for each genre, an intimate knowledge of the categories can help you identify your own.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Hollywood execs often reference the “Four Quadrants” when speaking about audiences they want to appeal to. Those quadrants are males under 25, females under 25, males over 25, and females over 25. A four-quadrant movie is one that appeals to all those demographics. While many genres aren't age-specific, it helps to know which quadrant(s) these genres generally appeal to and which defy demographic expectations.



TIP

Knowing the identifying elements of each genre isn't just useful to you as a storyteller; it's integral to your success in the business as well. You'll need to reference examples of your genre in pitch sessions, in part to articulate how your story differs from those, and in part to prove how much you know about the market. I encourage you to binge-read screenplays of each genre online. I've included information about which sites host that material in the appendix.

Art and Life: What's the Difference?

Well, for starters, yes, art and life are different, and acknowledging the difference is important, if only to give direction to your work. Much of what you write will stem from personal experience, events relayed to you, or stories you pull from primary sources like the news.



REMEMBER

Just because it happened, doesn't mean that it's noteworthy, let alone screen-worthy. An essay on what you did for your summer vacation may not be the best source material for a film — unless, of course, your summer vacation involved a torrid love affair, a deep-sea adventure, a family crisis, or a revelation on what it means to be human. If that's the case, it may have potential. If not, abandon the premise and move on, because it's probably not art. You may, however, find yourself writing what you think *should* have happened in any given moment. Hindsight can be a great cinematic aid.

Art serves a purpose. Depending on your affiliations, you may believe life does as well, but art is generally striving to do at least one of the following things:

- » **Clarify an experience.** Life moves so quickly, it's often difficult to know the significance of a moment while it's in progress. You may be distracted by family, friends, or career and miss the importance of events as they occur. Art

places you in the spectator's chair so that you can view the larger picture and perhaps understand situations more completely.

- » **Interpret an experience.** It's not enough to live through a moment; human beings usually want to know why that moment occurred. This desire for understanding is the reason therapy is such a lucrative profession. Art scrutinizes events and presents opinions on why they transpired while offering thoughts on the consequences.
- » **Provide catharsis.** I don't go to movies simply to watch a story unfold. I go to the movies to feel something — to be enraged, awestruck, horrified, elated, and so on. I go to the cinema to be moved. Art allows audiences to experience a release of emotion, also known as a "catharsis."

What do these three goals have in common? They rely on an artist's selectivity. To clarify an event, you must break it into moments and place those moments into a comprehensible sequence. To interpret an event, you must have an opinion on it, and that opinion will dictate which portions of the event to script. To provide catharsis, you must strategically build a scene to emotionally affect an audience.



REMEMBER

Screenwriters aren't documentarians. They don't strive to recreate life exactly as it happened; they sift through life and choose which parts to show you, in what order, and for what purpose. Moreover, they do so in the most visually informative way. So while life may certainly inspire your art, and art may inspire your life, they're not the same thing. One you have control over; the other you do not.

Developing an Artistic Sensibility

You have probably heard the saying "Imitation is the oldest form of flattery." I'm not suggesting that you copy the stories, or even the style, of other writers, but you should try moving through the world as they do.

In the old stereotypes, writers don all black and scowl at the world while scribbling furiously in a notebook, or they subsist on coffee and cigarettes while scribbling furiously in a notebook, or they drink heavily while scribbling furiously — well, you get the picture. Although you can certainly offset your creative anxiety in healthier ways, that stereotype does contain a small grain of truth: Writers are always scribbling, into a notebook or otherwise. Their senses are story-ready, carefully selecting details from their environment and sequestering them away somewhere for the next great script. Some writers are born with this awareness, but most hone their skills with each new project. To develop this sensibility in yourself, you need to take a closer look at the details writers collect and how they select among them.

What a writer sees

Imagine that you attend a school reunion with all the usual trappings: a welcoming committee equipped with name tags, tables piled with food, a beverage bar, party decorations, and perhaps a band. Most guests find old friends, socialize a bit, and call it a night. Those guests are not writers.

People-watching is not just a hobby for screenwriters; it's part of their job. A screenwriter notices the tight smiles on everyone's faces, their quizzical looks before they remember someone's name, the one-time football star drinking too much in the corner, the former sweethearts who exchanged glances and then left arm in arm, and so much more. The writer can also re-create the scene in such a way that those images are evident to a casual observer. Under a writer's discerning gaze, these moments flourish and may quickly become the next scene in a script.

The writer's process is no different from any type of physical training. People-watching prepares your eyes to catch certain details — in particular, details that personalize the moment. You might include those details in your own work later, or rework them to fit your needs. Some of those details include

- » **The scene's overall layout:** Screenwriting consists of visual images constructed in a telling way, by which I mean with choice details in mind. When you enter a space, test how quickly you can assess it, close your eyes, and then re-create it. How would you write it down so that someone else imagines the same space?
- » **Anything out of the ordinary:** Scan the scene for unusual details. What seems out of place? Who seems ill at ease? The security guard sporting a black eye or the table of sports enthusiasts drinking hot cocoa? Many stories rise out of something curious.
- » **Telling looks or exchanged glances:** If someone stares at another person for any length of time, usually something's going on. They may be recalling a past visit, trying to catch the person's eye, or checking up on them for someone else. If two people exchange glances, a silent conversation is underway. Watch and see whether you can translate what's being said.
- » **Loaded gestures:** Many conversations take place in a single gesture. A father puts his hand on his son's shoulder — this movement may be menacing, commanding, or supportive depending on how it's executed. The gestures of any given moment become a silent score of what's going on beneath the conversation. If you can track the gestures, you can re-create them later.
- » **Personality quirks:** Someone's eccentricities, physical and emotional, immediately distinguish that person from others. Twin brothers may look,

walk, and talk alike, but one of them may dress with care while the other seems to own a single sloppy outfit. If you watch the world long enough, you soon acquire a list of personality traits ready to enhance any character you create.

Looking at the world this way eventually becomes a habit. Your eyes automatically adjust to the process. When that occurs, you may be ready to retrain the next sense — your sense of sound.

What a writer hears

Imagine the school reunion. Interesting visual images crop up all over the place now, but what sets them off? Is it the loud dance music, the constant whispering behind you, the clinking of glasses in a toast, or the flash and click of numerous cameras? Screenwriters pick up on all sorts of sounds that enhance a scene. Try locating the following in your own surroundings:

- » **Noises that suggest the event:** Many scenarios come equipped with their own soundscapes. You'd be quick to distinguish a christening from an accident site, even with your eyes closed. Whether your scene takes place outside in a field or inside a prison cell, the surrounding noises immediately provide an atmosphere for your piece.
- » **Noises that punctuate the scene:** You may notice a sound that enhances the moment. If you're watching a man cry softly to himself, the laughter of two lovers nearby may enhance the man's loneliness somehow. In the film *Little Children*, Kate Winslet is often surrounded by laughing children and young couples in love. The sounds that emerge as a result further enhance the despair she feels over her failing marriage and her guilt over an affair.
- » **The rhythms of conversation:** Every conversation has its own unique tempo. The pace of the voices, the repetition of phrases, the moments of silence — a screenwriter listens to all these things. Silence, in particular, can be as effective as dialogue, if not more so, and it certainly contributes to the punctuation of conversation. Listening to the rhythms of conversation helps you compose your own dialogue.
- » **Slang and jargon:** These terms refer to words and phrases that suggest a culture, a socio-economic background, or a profession. They suggest character immediately, sometimes even location. Filmmaker Spike Lee often utilizes street slang to differentiate between cultures, families, and prejudices. Television shows like *Grey's Anatomy* rely on hospital jargon to give them a believable edge.



You're not responsible for including all the sounds that you discover in the body of your script. However, if you can close your eyes and hear a scene, you'll be better able to write it. Sound is often a more intimate way of understanding your story. Because the noise represents the world of your characters, this process may also help you understand their internal dilemmas as well as the external ones.

What a writer remembers and what a writer forgets

Enhancing your perceptive skills can be a full-time job. When you consider the volume of compelling images around you, it's a wonder that most screenplays aren't four hours long. After your senses adapt to this new process of viewing the world, recording those details is the easy part. Like spring-cleaning, the difficulty comes in selecting which few you want to keep and letting the rest go.

Of course, which exact details a writer cherishes and which they dismiss will vary according to personality. However, if you're stumped as to what to hold on to, consider the following information.

It may be important to remember

- » **Details that create a compelling image:** By a compelling image, I mean a visual moment that is full — full of tension, full of emotion, full of personality, full of life. A screenwriter's job is to grab an audience's attention through such images. You should be able to see a character's emotional state on-screen. Remember what catches your eye in this way. For more information on crafting a compelling image, see Chapter 2.
- » **Details that raise a question:** Questions are the key to strong writing. Personal questions fuel the desire to write and find answers; the characters' questions determine the choices they make throughout your story. Any detail that forces a question is worth remembering.
- » **Details that tug at your moral or ethical code:** Hopefully, every script you write will serve some purpose — to inspire, to provoke, to inquire, to entertain, and so on. In order to communicate clearly, a writer needs to know what they stand for and why. Any details that refute or support your own views may come in handy later.
- » **Details that establish a debate:** Many films rely on ongoing arguments to bolster the momentum. Whether the argument exists between characters or audience members, if your script sparks a debate, it successfully engaged someone. Watch for the moments in real life that elicit arguments of various kinds.

» **Details that help you understand the human condition:** Most art strives to understand life and its injustice, its irony, its savage nature, and its glory. Once in a while, you encounter a moment that provides a piece of the human puzzle. Remember those moments above all.

If the detail in question doesn't fit into one of these categories, it may be worth abandoning. Remember that you construct every image with an aim in mind. If the details you include distract from or compete with that aim, getting rid of them isn't only a good idea — it's your job.

Consider this example: I'm constructing a scene from the school reunion, and I want the audience to focus on one girl hovering by the buffet table stuffing food into her purse. If her eyes dart over the crowd, if she has the hollow look of a woman who hasn't eaten in a while — these are details to preserve. They strengthen the tension of the moment. The fabric of her purse, the size of the table, the number of brownies she takes — these details are unimportant. They distract from the scene's primary focus — the action of a person quietly stealing food.

This process also becomes second nature as you orchestrate your own work. The screenwriter's job is to tilt the audience's head toward the most dynamic portion of each scene and let that portion jump into the next. Eventually, the story becomes so clear that it demands the necessary information and refuses the rest for you.



TRY IT

JOURNALING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

This project may help jump-start your newfound artistic sensibility.

Carry a notebook with you for the next few days, a small one not likely to attract attention. You can also record your thoughts on your phone or type them into a notes app, if you find either approach more efficient.

After you find a comfortable place to observe your surroundings, begin composing two lists. In the first list, include any visual details or images that you see. The list doesn't need to be in any particular order. Just record whatever your eye lands on as it moves across the space. In the second list, keep track of any and all sounds you hear around you. Depending on your location, you may be able to close your eyes. See how specific you can be, from the conversation behind you to the fans buzzing overhead. When you've done it in one location, try it in the next. Eventually, a pattern may emerge.

Want to take the project a step further? Select two details from each list and combine them in a new scenario. How may the images be connected? How can the sounds help set that relationship off?

Recognizing a Story When You See One

If your curiosity is intact, many situations will command your attention. Sometimes, you may feel as though the more events you discover, the more ideas you have to investigate. By the time you're 15 years old, you probably have enough material to generate numerous screenplays. Yet only a few of those ideas will become stories that become scripts, and many will slip away.

Why is this the case? Often, just because a story interests you doesn't mean that it's film-worthy. It may only interest you for a few days, you may not have the experience to truly understand it, or it may generate an opening image and little else. Chasing every idea that comes your way is exhausting and often futile. Knowing how to recognize a sustainable story when it appears saves you time and ensures you a greater chance at cinematic success.

Identifying the call to write

Take a second and think about the stories you remember from your childhood. Recall the events that happened to you as well as those moments that someone else relayed. What is it about these moments that remains with you? Can you pinpoint why they may have lasted in your memory?

The call to write generally emerges after some stories have suggested themselves to you. If you've come to this book with an idea in mind — one that's been pestering you for a long time or one you'd feel ashamed to ignore — your idea probably has staying power.

If you have come to this book curious about the craft with a pocketful of ideas all equally compelling in some way, you may want to sit with them for a while until one calls to you louder than the rest. Take a second to look at the reasons you may be called to write:

- » You write because you have something to say and only you can say it.
- » You write to immortalize an event you've discovered or lived through.
- » You write to immortalize an important human being.
- » You write to better understand life or the human spirit.
- » You write because an idea thrills you, and you want to share that thrill with other people.
- » You write because an idea enrages you, and you want to share that rage with other people.

The items on the list are purposefully grandiose in scale. You may also be called to write as an outlet, as writing can be a fun way to let off steam, so to speak. That kind of writing is important for your emotional well-being, but it won't necessarily elicit a palpable story. These reasons will.



If you have been called to write a story, it will plague you. Other stories may whisper to you and float away, but some will tug at your sleeve awhile, growing stronger by the day. If characters, scenarios, or themes present themselves to you on a regular basis, the time has probably come to answer the call and start writing.

The four important P's of story

After you select one story to focus on (or after the story selects you, as the case may be), you need to piece it together. A screenplay takes form as you begin envisioning the four basic components of storytelling:

- » **People:** Who is in your story? Imagine everyone for now, from the waitress in the diner to the love interest; you can always trim the cast list down later.
- » **Place:** Where does your story occur? Does it span a concentrated amount of time in one location, or do you envision jumping between numerous time frames and locales?
- » **Picture:** What do you see when you think about the story? What images, colors, textures, movement, and so on? What does your story look like?
- » **Plot:** What are your story's pivotal events? In its most basic sense, plot refers to what comes next. (I cover plot in greater detail in Chapters 6, 7, and 8.)

If your idea is a strong one, envisioning these components isn't difficult. Sometimes, a story survives even if you only have one piece to the whole puzzle. But you need to see one piece fairly clearly for any type of script to evolve. Remember, you're just imagining the details now. You'll script them later, after lots of research and dream time.

Finding an opening image

The beginning of any story is magical. You may feel as if, after stumbling around in the dark, you come across one image from which anything is possible. If you have identified the four P's of your story, you'll have several sets of images to choose from:

- » **Person:** If you start with a person, who is it, and what are they doing? *Promising Young Woman* revolves around men who sexually prey on vulnerable women. It begins with a group of men in a bar eyeing an intoxicated woman who slumps in a nearby booth. The men clearly like what they see.

- » **Place:** If you start with a location, where is it, and how does an audience discover it? Many movies that take place in a major city fly over the ocean before finally landing on the skyline in question. This technique keeps the audience guessing for a few moments before landing somewhere concrete.
- » **Picture:** Perhaps another type of image begins your piece. The image of a smoking gun lying on the sidewalk certainly pulls an audience in and suggests a conflict that we have yet to discover.
- » **Plot:** If your story centers around a few major events, beginning the story in the middle of one of them may be a good idea. The movie *The Rookie* begins with a ball game in a run-down field decades earlier. That field later becomes an important baseball diamond for the entire town. The more active, the better with this technique. Tossing your audience into an action sequence is a great way to grab their attention.

If you know what you want to say, you'll know which image to begin with. After you settle on one, you need to spur that image into action and, eventually, into a scene.



TRY IT

CRAFTING A SCENE FROM A SINGLE IMAGE

You have developed several clear images, and you'd like to construct something more. Here's a technique that I call the Great What If that may help you generate some more material, using what you already have.

The Great What If refers to a set of hypothetical situations that you layer on top of your chosen image that spur it into action. The What If could alter or enhance any portion of the image itself. The trick is to pay close attention to what happens *after* you pose the hypothetical.

For example, suppose that I settle on the image of a child playing jacks on a front porch. Here are some what-if scenarios that I may layer on:

- What if it's midnight, and the child has been playing for days?
- What if the ball slips out of their hands and falls between the floorboards?
- What if someone interrupts the game by stepping on the jacks and kicking the ball off the porch?
- What if someone starts whispering in the child's ear?
- What if every bounce of the ball causes the earth to shake?

Each one of these hypothetical situations forces a change, thereby nudging the image into action. The possibilities for change are endless. You may come up with several opening moments for your script by utilizing this technique. Write them all down. Eventually, one moment will emerge victorious.

- » Exploring the creative process
- » Strengthening your imagination
- » Honing your form, technique, and discipline

Chapter 4

Approaching Screenwriting as a Craft

I begin writing workshops by posing the question, “Do you think that someone can teach you how to write?” Although most people attend workshops expecting to be taught something related to writing, the response to this question is nevertheless mixed. One theory, floating around for years, implies that artists are born, not made; and many people fear that they lack the natural abilities of a writer. This fear is often so great that it prevents them from putting pen to paper at all.

To this theory, I offer a resounding “Hogwash!” A skilled writer must possess three qualities: the desire to tell stories, the experience to round out those stories, and the stamina to see them through to completion. You may come into the world with these qualities or discover them later in life. Most new writers possess the desire and some experience, but few possess the endurance necessary to finish a work. They have a storyteller’s imagination, but they lack a sense of craft. Without that sense, their stories remain ideas forever or meander around on the page until the writers give up. This chapter takes a closer look at natural talent and offers advice on how to further your own. It then outlines techniques designed to funnel that talent onto a page.

In a way, this chapter is about elusive words — words like *talent*, *imagination*, and *craft*. The essential ingredients for an artist all elude concrete definition. It seems

only appropriate then that I begin with the most maddeningly intangible word of them all — *creativity*. Actually, the fact that creativity has no concrete definition is rather fitting. As soon as you concoct one, some creative individual will no doubt arrive to question its validity and suggest an alternative. So rather than try to define the indefinable, I just concentrate on what elements seem to be involved.

Invoking the Muse: Examining the Creative Process

At first glance, creativity involves problem solving — or, in other words, questioning opinions, theories, and challenges as they arise, and suggesting new ways to approach them. I don't mean to imply, however, that creative people sit around waiting for problems to arise; they don't. Creative people are inherently curious. They pose questions that no one else has thought or dared to ask. In this way, creative people seek out problems *and* attempt solutions. Writers are no different. The most common problems that a writer faces are the following: Which story do I tell? and How do I tell it?

In recent years, scientists and sociologists from all over the world have taken an interest in the process of creative problem-solving. They believe that many people encounter the same five phenomena on the journey toward a solution. They label these five stages as

- » **First insight:** The stage in which an idea or a question suggests itself. This is the moment that a writer discovers a story or the seeds of one.
- » **Saturation or the “input” stage:** The period of study or investigation that ensues. Any research a writer does — interviews, people-watching, reading, studying other films, daydreaming, and so on — falls under the category of saturation.
- » **Incubation:** A period of reflection to process the new information. For a writer, this time generally involves working through the idea on a page, sharing the idea with friends, and good old-fashioned waiting for inspiration.
- » **Illumination:** A moment of inspiration when a possible solution suggests itself. When writers talk about the muse, they mean the moment of illumination.
- » **The verification or evaluation stage:** The testing period, during which the writer determines whether their solution really works.

None of these stages has any set length of time, although most writers experience illumination as a brief, often unexpected flash. Some writers spend years researching a story, some only a few days. Some find inspiration right away, but for others, the incubation time feels endless. Regardless, though no two writers arrive at a story in the same way, they tend to share these five stages. So the next time you're tearing out your hair because a story eludes you, never fear. It's part of the process.

Imagination: Your Creative Arsenal

Aspiring and established artists alike often spend years fretting over the notion of talent. Chiefly, what is it, and do they possess it? My general reply to writers who inquire, "Do I have talent?" is, "I don't know. Tell me a story."

Without definition, the notion of talent is so grandiose that it seems to belong in a mystical realm of its own. Talent is something you're born with. Talent means that you're skilled in some area. Talent allows certain blessed individuals to channel words onto the page while others go crazy waiting for inspiration. All these statements are true. They're also vague and of little help to writers struggling to better their dramatic abilities. Yet, substitute the word *imagination* for talent, and the question of whether you possess it may become clear. You probably do.

Writing talent is generally a mixture of life experience and the ability to imagine beyond it. You have, in however many years, constructed a creative arsenal comprised of the following:

- » Anecdotes
- » Beliefs
- » Dreams
- » Emotions
- » Fears
- » Images
- » Legends
- » Opinions
- » Memories
- » Questions

This arsenal is, in a sense, your talent pool. It informs your choices as a human being and a writer, and it can't be taught. Your ability to access that arsenal and convert it into stories, however, is an acquired skill that begins with the writer's strongest muscle: the imagination. When flexed on a regular basis — through artistic exercise and constant writing practice — the imagination will generate material for you. Your best bet is to prepare that muscle now.

Flexing the imagination

Separating talent from craft is important. Talent is something you have, and craft is something you garner. Each element is controlled by a different mode of thought. For a better explanation, take a look at Table 4-1. It illustrates how each mode looks at the world.

TABLE 4-1 Talent versus Craft

Talent Notices	Craft Records
Interesting conversations	Specific words and phrases that make interesting conversations unique
Dynamic stories	Intriguing actions and potential beginnings, middles, and ends
Compelling people	Details of personality, motivation, and appearance that make a compelling person stand out
Inspirational environments	The color, composition, light, and textural elements of inspirational environments
Grand emotions	Situations leading to and away from grand emotions; words and actions that reveal them
Eye-catching images	The physical construction of images, possible scenarios surrounding them, and metaphors associated with them

Notice a pattern? Talent, or imagination, selects the material while craft searches for ways to translate it onto the page. Your first job as a writer, then, is to surround the imagination with as many options as possible. The more you learn and the more you see and hear, the more ideas you have to choose from later on. Here are a few simple, inexpensive ways to begin flexing the imagination:

- » Attempt a crossword puzzle.
- » Cook a meal for at least four guests.
- » Do something that scares you.
- » Exercise (any physical activity will do).

- » Frequent public spaces (safely, of course).
- » Listen to music.
- » Look through scrapbooks.
- » Read and/or watch the news.
- » Read, read, read.
- » Rewrite an age-old story.
- » Keep a personal journal.
- » Take up photography.
- » Travel someplace new.
- » Visit a museum.
- » Write a letter to someone you know.
- » Write a letter to someone you don't know.
- » Write a letter you wish someone would send to you.

Your goals when flexing the imagination are simple: Stimulate the senses, learn as much as you can, and document what you find.



REMEMBER

This part of the writing process should be fun. If nothing on this list interests you, find something equally stimulating that does.

Putting the imagination to work

The imagination's first official job is to hunt for a story. And because the imagination can only hunt in fields that the artist has explored, a writer should strive to be "multitentacled," as John Logan of *The Aviator* fame puts it. This means having a hand in as many pockets of knowledge as possible. You never know where a story resides.

First off, make a list — mental or actual — of areas you know little about. Try to record at least three people or events from any or all of the following categories that you want to investigate:

- » Athletes and athletics
- » Current events
- » Economics
- » Education and social reform

- » Environmental and agricultural concerns
- » Historical eras and/or events
- » Legends and myths
- » Other artists
- » Other cultures
- » Politics and political activism, past and present
- » Religion and faith
- » Science and/or scientific discoveries

The list isn't meant to overwhelm you or to make you feel ignorant in any one area. Its purpose is to challenge you to search beyond what you already know. Researching any one of these fields grants a writer unending possibilities, it broadens their talent pool, and it forces the imagination to ask the question, "What if?" What if you wrote about the Berlin Wall? What if you set your story in England after the Great Plague? Which angle would you take? Which story would you choose? Remember that everything you learn informs your work.

There's a common adage in the entertainment business that encourages writers to "write what you know." I find that sentiment limiting because it implies that the only events open for consideration are those you've experienced directly. Does it help to pull from your past when scripting a story? Yes, it will immediately ground the work in authentic detail and understanding. But writing is also about generating empathy for and about people who differ from you. I think a far more compelling adage would be "write what you want to understand." (For more on how to craft such experiences responsibly, see Chapter 12.) These lists should help you identify what those subjects might be.

If an idea still eludes you, consider the following four arenas. Most stories spring from one of these sources:

- » **Current events:** Glance through the paper, listen to public radio, or watch the evening news. You find yourself besieged with story possibilities. Seek out unlikely sources as well. The obituaries and the classified ads suggest both quirky characters and lives worth celebrating. The controversial film *Munich* was based on the Munich Massacre. *The Pursuit of Happyness* is based on the real-life story of Chris Gardner, who went from being homeless to running his own brokerage firm.
- » **Fiction:** These stories emerge almost entirely from the writer's imagination. They may materialize as original human adventures like *Parasite*, *Bridesmaids*, or *The Sound of Metal*, or they may take on some new world altogether as in

Star Wars, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *Black Panther*. In this type of film, the characters and structures in place may be loosely based on the human experience, but details of location and culture remain unique.

- » **Historical accounts:** History provides some of the most compelling stories. The events are generally documented in some form and may suggest characters and pivotal events right away. A quick glance through articles, criticism, personal letters, journal entries, literature, and art of the time may also suggest language and images that will be crucial to your piece. Such movies as *12 Years a Slave*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Apollo 13*, and many others capitalize on historical sources. There's a difference, though, in how you approach work from the distant past, as with films like *The King's Speech*, *Hidden Figures*, and *The Courier*, versus more recent events or events that might still be unfolding. If you pen films like *Spotlight*, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, and *Fruitvale Station*, you need to navigate questions like "how soon is too soon," and "do I have enough distance to see this event clearly," while depicting current events.
- » **Personal experience:** Here's where the old adage "Write what you know" comes in. Situations that you've lived through or that have been handed down to you are often easy to envision and already hold personal meaning. The characters, usually based on people you have an intimate knowledge of, tend to emerge quickly as well. The challenge is to extend the event's significance beyond your own experience and create characters that differ from the real people. *Minari* is based on the filmmaker Lee Isaac Chung's upbringing, just as *Moonlight* is loosely based on co-screenwriter Tarell Alvin McCraney's childhood.

Fictional stories require a writer to concoct details from scratch and, therefore, require a slightly different approach. I refer to original plot development in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. The other three sources, though — historical accounts, current events, and personal experience — involve actual occurrences, so your approach to those stories may be similar. Start by asking the following questions:

- » **Is my film a biopic or historical fiction?** A *biopic* is a film that dramatizes the life of a real person, usually a public or historical figure. The objective of a biopic is to retain the accuracy of events, even as you condense, enhance, trim, or fabricate parts of the story to convey your point of view. Films like *La Vie En Rose*, *Coco Before Chanel*, *Judy*, and *Judas and the Black Messiah* are a few (of many) examples. The primary goal is to share that person with the world. Historical fiction, on the other hand, relies on fictional protagonists, elements, or a genre to explore past events. The story might be entirely fabricated, utilizing a real era or event as a backdrop. The protagonist might be fictional while supporting roles are not. *Inglorious Basterds*, *Amadeus*, and *Titanic* are examples of historical fiction.

- » **What exactly do I know about the account?** Record as many details as you can recall. Where did it take place, and during what period of time? How did it start and end? Who was directly involved and/or affected? What is your sense of the account — was it funny, tragic, foreboding, awe-inspiring, intimate, or epic? The more you can record now, the easier it will be to assess what kind of research or dream work you'll need to do later on.
- » **How reliable are my sources?** Historical documentation is often recorded from a point of view. The Wall Street broker's account of an economic crash will be far different from that of someone who lost their lifesavings. Family stories are similar in this regard. Most people only remember how they were personally affected by events. Finally, these days the media often choose sensation over strict fact when composing a report. Check your sources and check their particular bias. If you can only locate one side to the story, imagine another.
- » **What don't I know?** Even after extensive research, your story will undoubtedly have holes. Consider this dilemma to your advantage as you can dream up action to fill those gaps. The most compelling scripts often emerge from events you know little about, because they create mystery, and they demand that the writer dream up some answers.
- » **What interests me most about the event?** The answer to this question will keep you writing long after the novelty of the idea has worn off. Often, the most intriguing parts of an idea are those that you know the least about or those that elicit some strong emotion — fear, confusion, anger, awe, and so on. This is your angle on the story and what makes it unique.
- » **What interests me least?** This question will help you edit or pare down your script. Taking on an entire event is difficult, and doing so often weakens the effect of a storyline. *The Queen*, for example, follows Queen Elizabeth II's life at the time surrounding Princess Diana's death. It does not tackle her childhood, her early years or much after the funeral; that would be an impossible film to sit through. After you know which details interest you least, imagine how the story shifts without them.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Creating a script based on real events is a common but challenging process. A precarious balance exists between preserving the essence of a situation and crafting an original version of the story. You want to maintain the integrity of a historical moment while lifting it into the heightened realm of drama. The artist's right to dramatize and shape real events around a specific purpose is known as *artistic license*. When employing artistic license, you're using real events as a blueprint for a largely fictional work.

When tackling real events, you should consider the following at all times:

- » Your emotional distance from the event
- » Your personal judgment of the proceedings

Emotional attachment to a subject may enhance or destroy your script. It often impairs a writer's clarity and the clarity of the final product. Here's the test: Can you imagine changing key elements of these people — their opinions, their fates, their genders — if necessary? If you can't imagine changing them, don't write them yet. You should be able to see the people in your script as characters that you can alter to fit your ultimate design.



Don't judge the characters in advance or you unwittingly delegate an audience to the role of passive observer rather than active participant. In other words, don't create good or evil characters; create human beings that perform good or evil actions. Let audiences judge for themselves. Films like *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* and *Hustlers* showcase criminals who we have great compassion for, and they're far more compelling as a result.

Identifying your writing voice

The term *writing voice* is often used interchangeably with the word *style*, yet they differ in one small regard. Your writing voice determines what catches your attention and what you want to communicate. Style refers to the techniques and language you choose to communicate with. Your voice stems from imagination; style stems from knowledge of craft.

You already possess an artistic voice. It's the result of your life experiences thus far, and it will shift as you experience more. Unsure of what that voice sounds like? Try answering the following questions. The answers may suggest your unique way of viewing the world.

- » What subjects are you drawn to and why?
- » What kind of stories do you pursue? Comic or tragic? Supernatural? Realistic or surreal? Romantic?
- » What is the scope of the stories you're drawn to? Intimate, epic, familial?
- » How do your stories reveal themselves? Through character, dialogue, image, or an equal mixture of the three?
- » What kind of language do you use when expressing yourself? Poetic, terse, lengthy, mysterious, clever?

- »» How do you move from one image to the next? Chronologically or out of sequence? Quickly or in slow motion? Do images blend together or cut back and forth?
- »» What patterns, if any, exist in your previous works? Consider works of any kind; don't limit yourself to writing works.
- »» What do you find funny and why? Identifying your brand of humor is one of the fastest ways to find your voice. It also guides you to which genres of film you might excel in.

Every writer experiences and expresses events in a unique way. The result? Many different films about roughly the same subject. Consider this scenario: A woman is sitting at a window table in a coffee shop. She's reading a book and drinking espresso. She twirls a pen in her right hand between sips and occasionally glances up to scan the street before retreating back to her book.

Hand this image to three screenwriters, and you'll end up with three diverse scenes. One writer begins with the image of the hand twirling the pen and then slowly moves up the arm to the eyes staring out at the street. Another writer pays close attention to the book itself, zipping from the blue cover to the title to the first page, keeping the woman's face in shadow. The third writer reveals the whole scene at once, allowing the audience to guess the situation. All approaches stem from one image, yet they differ in several distinct ways:

- »» The order in which details are revealed
- »» Color
- »» Texture
- »» Light and shadow
- »» Pace between details
- »» The proximity to the subject

While I caution against adding specific camera directions to your story because it distracts readers from your narrative, you should certainly think like a camera when scripting your images. How would you have revealed this image? A note of warning, though: Voice and style are not something to lose sleep over. If you continue to test your imagination, if you continue to read and reflect and question, they'll take care of themselves.



TRY IT

THE IMAGINATION PROJECT

I find newspaper headlines useful for many purposes — from story suggestions, to plot twists, to revision work. They're also grand for strengthening the imagination.

I list five unrelated headlines below. Choose the one that catches your attention first. Don't think too hard in making your decision; the first choice is usually the instinctual favorite and the place to start. After you've settled on a headline, let your imagination twist it into one image. Who or what is in the image, where are they, and what might be going on?

- "A Pardon For Walter Burnett"
- "Dinosaurs Flock To The Field"
- "Ice Cream Social Gets the Cold Shoulder"
- "Ten Saved, Three Still Out There"
- "Diamonds Missing From Local Ballpark"

Created an image? Great. Now imagine an audience in a darkened theater. You're about to show them this image. How will you do it? Concoct at least three versions of this moment, bearing in mind the elements of style: color, texture, the order of details and the pace between them, light and shadows, and the proximity to the subject. Record each version and compare. Which one do you like best? Although this is predominantly a project for your imagination, you may also discover something about your writing voice in the process.

Craft: A Vehicle for Your Imagination

After you've defined talent and discovered how to access it, the more difficult work can begin.

As I suggest in the "Imagination: Your Creative Arsenal" section, earlier in this chapter, there is a difference between a talented individual and a writer. That difference is known as *craft*. Craft acts as a shuttle between the idea and the finished screenplay; it's how you get from one part of the process to the other. I may harbor many creative ideas on how to build the perfect car, but I wouldn't try until I'd taken Automotives 101. The same is true of writing. Ideas do not a screenplay make. You need a sense of craft.

So what is craft exactly? Or rather, what does it involve? On a general level, it can be broken into three elements: *form*, *technique*, and *discipline*.

Form

Form refers first to the dramatic structure of the work you're creating. Films generally require a clear beginning, middle, and end — though they're not always revealed in that order. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, for example, bounces between past and present, as the characters' memories are slowly erased. The three parts of the story still exist in this film; they just exist out of order.

Form also refers to the script's technical format. Novels exist in chapters or lengthy sections separated by jumps in time or narrator. Plays exist in scenes or vignettes arranged in a particular way on the page. Screenplays are generally divided into three acts with particular attention to font type, page layout, and length. Having a concrete knowledge of both dramatic structure and screenwriting format is important. While your formatting should remain consistent, you may eventually stray from traditional story structure. However, learn the basics first. They tend to work. I talk more about both parts of form in Part 2.

Technique

Even without a definition for craft, you probably know a well-crafted film when you see one. In such scripts, the writer demonstrates an ease with any or all of the following elements:

- » Action
- » Character depiction and growth
- » Choice of location
- » Conflict
- » Description
- » Dialogue
- » The manipulation of theme
- » The use of time

Technique refers to the “how” of all these elements. There are as many ways to reveal any one of them as there are types of films. For example, if your story's main event involves a murder in high society, will you underplay its effects in favor of character development à la *Gosford Park*? Will you render that event via the

comic murder-mystery style of a film like *Knives Out*? Or will you write another *Parasite* and spend your time steadily generating paranoia and desperation until murder feels like an inevitable outcome?

How you tell your story is infinitely more important than what's being told. In the hands of a less skilled writer, the quiet family drama *You Can Count On Me* would hold little impact. As it stands, the characters' ordinary dreams are portrayed in such extraordinary ways that the story feels as important as any epic. It's all in how a writer conveys information. I detail each of the listed story elements individually in Chapters 6 through 10.

However, I should detail three elements of technique now. They are the foundations of clear writing — dramatic and otherwise — and they affect all elements of a story. They are

- » Vocabulary
- » Grammar
- » Organization

Consider these items your big guns, so to speak. Strive to master each, if for no other reason than that they help you control your stories. Have a clear idea but no clear thought on how to express it? A knowledge of these three items can help.

Vocabulary

As a writer, a limited vocabulary thwarts your ability to travel. Think about it. Want to travel to Britain for your film about the bourgeoisie? How will you craft the characters without a sense of language? If a Duke opens his mouth in the first scene and says, “Hey guys, like, what’s going on?” you’re sunk. Look at verbal masters like Spike Lee. He realistically conveys multiple ethnicities and educational backgrounds through the vocabularies of his main characters alone.



WARNING

It’s important to note that every so-called rule will eventually be broken to great acclaim. Studio executives jump at stories that defy categorization, as long as the writer knows *why* they’re breaking expectation or form. For example, anachronism is in vogue right now, as a result of movies like *The Favourite* and television shows like *Bridgerton*, *Dickenson*, and *The Great*. These shows incorporate language, customs, and music that don’t technically belong to the era they’re depicting. It’s a way to modernize a historical piece, and it often creates an immediate relationship between the writer and the audience. It feels a little like the writer and actors are winking at the viewers as their expectations are broken. Again, it comes back to your intention. If you intend to immerse me in a real event, then you want your design, vocabulary, and behavior to match the times. If you want to

comment on an event, modernize an event, or compare past to present, then breaking with tradition might be wise.



TIP

It never hurts to have a running list of writers and the words they brandish. I encourage you to sift through writers of all types when compiling your own collection. If you're looking for words with a poetic lilt and a Southern bent, Tennessee Williams is your man. Want your language discerning and lush? Read Toni Morrison. And for one- and two-syllable words that resound together with ten times their individual worth, read Robert Frost. This list acts as a reference guide should you need a quick lesson in one vocabulary or another. That way, if you do write a film on the British bourgeois society, you'll know to read Charles Dickens.

Learn to love words — words like baggage, scrumptious, contrivance, wicked, daft, okey-doke, crackers, keen, wily, and winsome, to name a few of my favorites. Each one packs a different wallop (another great word). Respect their differences, respect what they do, and accrue as many as you can. You should always have a dictionary and a thesaurus nearby, either in book or internet form. The more you know, the more places you can go.

Grammar

Ah, the dreaded grammar. For many people, it conjures up visions of pop quizzes and school reports. If this is what you imagine, don't worry. Does it help to have a comprehensive understanding of language and its structure? Yes. Should you bolster your grammatical skill? Probably. Can you write scripts even if you scraped through high school English? Yes. You just need to know the basics. Because books on grammar abound, I offer you a few beginning tips:

- » **Differentiate between character voice and scenic description:** Few people speak in grammatically correct English, and it's a good thing. You'd be bored to tears if they did. Your characters will speak in different ways, with different grammatical structures. Write them as you hear them; don't get hung up on grammar. You are, however, also responsible for description — of location, of character, and of action. You want that portion of your script to be clear, efficient, and effective. Description is where the grammar lessons come in handy.
- » **Be consistent with sentence structure:** Do you need to write in complete sentences? No. You should, however, at least know how to construct a complete sentence, which requires a knowledge of nouns and verbs, and you should be consistent with whatever sentence structure you choose. If your description begins in phrases, stick with phrases: "Enter Allen. Goes to door. Checks outside. Closes it again and hurries upstairs." If you prefer full sentences, "Allen enters the room. He goes to the door and checks outside. Satisfied, he hurries upstairs," and then maintain this choice throughout.

- » **Consider your tone:** A film's tone can be conveyed in any number of ways. Often the pace of your scenes, the height of your language, or the attitude implied in description and dialogue convey how you want the story to feel. You might write "the teenager rolls her eyes" before she says "Obviously." Or you might simply add the parenthetical "(duh)" before her line so the actor delivers it with irritation. One technique conveys tone through action, the other through dialogue. Consider how you want to cue your actors and your readers into tone.

- » **Avoid the royal "we":** Many writers use the royal "we" in description, alerting the reader to certain details in the scene. For example, "Sam enters. We see that Sam is concealing something under a jacket." I caution against relying on this technique too frequently. Drawing attention to the reader distances them from the story; your screenplay suddenly becomes a script with an audience and not a world of its own. Also, if you simply write what happens as it happens, the reader will envision it. You might write "Sam enters, concealing something under a jacket." I see it, you needn't tell me that I do. Reserve the royal "we" for details in the scene meant only for the audience and the camera. If in the middle of a party, for example, the image of a car appears out the window, you might say, "In the window, we see a car approach." We see it; the characters don't.

- » **Eliminate excessive adjectives and adverbs:** The resounding rule here is when in doubt, cut them out. You can't avoid all descriptive words; if the wallpaper is stained and peeling, you should tell us that. However, the addition of a few lines of dialogue often alleviates the need for adjectives. You don't need to tell me the mountains are beautiful if a character says, "They're more beautiful than I'd imagined." If the day is hot, let it affect the characters in the scene. Discovering a detail is much more effective than being handed one. You can exchange most adverbs for a strategically chosen verb. Why not replace "Anne walks quietly upstairs" with "Anne tiptoes upstairs"? Or "The castle is heavily guarded" with "Hundreds of soldiers guard the castle"? Verbs are powerful words. Trust them. Let them work for you.

- » **Avoid passive voice:** Your high school teachers and I may share one thing in common — our opinion of passive voice. It probably irritated them, and it irritates me. Active voice means that the subject of the sentence does something, as in "Molly washed the car," "Harold sweeps the floor," "Margaret plays the piano." Passive voice means that something is done to the subject of your sentence: "The car was washed by Molly," "The floor is swept by Harold," "The piano is played by Margaret." Feel the difference? The first sentences are accessible; they have energy and life. Passive voice tempers that energy, making the sentences safe. Screenplays are about action, so write them with active strokes.



As with all rules, after you master the basics, you can branch past them should the need arise. The preceding rules are intended as guides toward more effective writing. What you do after you absorb them is up to you.

Organization

If art is in the details, the writer's voice is most often in the organization of details. Organization asks two questions:

- » What do I want to reveal?
- » How do I want to reveal it?

It asks these questions of every portion of the screenplay, from the overall plot structure to the dialogue in-scene to every sentence of description. You're writing for an audience; you want to lead them somewhere. Smart organization clarifies what information that audience receives first and toward the middle, and what the writer's saving for last. If you want a crash course in organization, watch murder mysteries like *Knives Out*, *Clue*, and *The Girl on the Train*. The goal of the entire genre is to keep you guessing.

If a woman is reading in a cafe, do you want my eyes to travel from her hands to the book she's reading then to her face? If so, your first line of description may read: "Manicured fingers wrap around a book. It's a copy of *Crime and Punishment*. The reader turns a page, and the book tilts for a second, revealing a brunette with a murderous expression." If she turns her head to reveal a scar on her cheek, even better.

Now, there's a reason for organizing your sentence in this way. Want an example of organization at its best? The opening sequence of *The Big Chill* jumps between various people receiving bad news and clips of one man getting dressed. In the final shot, the man's sleeves are cuff-linked. Both his wrists have been cut and stitched over. In this way, the writer waits until the last moment to reveal that the man being dressed is dead. Your organization is important. It tells a reader, a director, the camera, and, therefore, an audience how to watch your film.

Discipline

Imagine that you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, or that you own and run a small business. Imagine, for that matter, that you're a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker. It probably wouldn't occur to you not to show up to work one day. People are counting on you, there's money to be made, and the job requires your presence. Now, imagine that you're a screenwriter. It shouldn't occur to you not to show up to work. The same principles apply.

Discipline is what separates a writer from someone who likes to write. It may be the most important element of craft. Why? You can find hundreds of reasons *not* to write: You have children to look after; you have meetings to attend; you travel constantly; you have phone calls to make or errands to run or emails to send; basically, you just have no time. I'll tell you something: None of that is going to change. If you're a writer, you have to find time to write.

If you want to churn out a 120-page script, if you want to churn out more than one, you have to consider writing your job. I repeat: It's not a luxury; it's your job. Maybe it's your second or third job, but it's a job, nonetheless. Procrastination is what separates would-be writers from actual writers. So first things first — you need a place to work, and you need a working schedule.

Creating your workspace

In theory, a writer requires only two things of a workspace: It should be yours, and it should have a door that closes. In order to concoct cinematic worlds on the page, you need to shut out the one outside. That said, you need a few other accouterments as well. The following lists outline both necessities and possible additions to any writer's office.

You will need the following:

- » A computer and a working printer with easy internet access
- » Extra ink cartridges and printing paper
- » Pads of paper
- » A stash of pens and pencils
- » Microsoft Word or a screenwriting formatting program like Final Draft, Celtx, or Movie Magic
- » A quality dictionary and thesaurus (online or otherwise)
- » A way to back up your writing files

You may need the following:

- » A bulletin board for images and other research
- » Index cards for arranging scenes
- » A way to play music (for some writers, music is essential)
- » A timer for timed writing projects

You also won't need certain items in a writing space. Televisions, cell phones, and video games all hinder writers from completing a project in peace. If you must have a phone in the space, make sure that you can turn it off or silence it as necessary. Be cautious with email. You may need email for your work, but it may also prove a distraction. Seek privacy at all costs. After all, this is your job we're talking about.

Managing your time wisely

The most prolific writers write habitually. They punch in every day, and they get the job done. Or perhaps I should say, they get the job done *because* they punch in every day. Think about it. Of the numerous things you do with your life, which of them are routine? Brushing your teeth, walking the dog, going to business lunches, exercising, carpooling, making phone calls and, oh yes, writing. If you want to make it into that workspace every day, writing has to be part of that routine.

If you think this is impossible, think again. Try revising your schedule with the following rules in mind:

- » **Prioritize the time.** Your writing time has to be as important, if not more important, than some of the other things you have to do during the day. Alert your friends and family of your schedule to avoid unnecessary interruptions. Place it high on your list of priorities.
- » **Plan ahead.** Don't wait to see how much time each day allows you; plan your work time in advance. Set up a weekly schedule, if not a monthly routine. A schedule is important. Chisel out the time.
- » **Show up.** The muse is just another word for the imagination, which, if you remember, is a muscle. If you tell yourself that you're going to write, that muscle prepares to do so. If you don't show up, you confuse that muscle and therefore the process, and it will be that much harder to write the next time.



TIP

People often ask me, "Do I have to write at the same time every day?" Ideally, yes, because it makes the process easier. If you write at the same time every day, your mind eventually shifts into writing mode at that time. You find yourself prepared to write before you even sit down. However, schedules these days are fierce and often don't permit continuity. If this is the case, choose another scheduling goal. Do you have a few hours? Promise yourself that you'll write for two hours regardless of when they occur. Setting a page requirement is another option. Promise yourself five to ten pages a day and fill those pages when you can. It may take some doing, but with these tips in mind, you'll be off and running, or should I say, and *writing*. Of course, you should also write when the muse appears, whether it's on schedule or not!

2

Breaking Down the Elements of a Story

IN THIS PART . . .

Practice unpacking your idea, including identifying your audience, creating backstory, and writing for tone.

Craft your story's beginnings, structure the first moments, and develop the conflict.

Move the story forward by building your story's action, creating tension, and introducing compelling obstacles.

Develop a convincing conclusion by tracing character arcs, avoiding destructive elements, and knowing when to end the story.

Build your characters by showing their physical world, exploring their psychology and physique, and making their world cinematic.

Develop dynamic dialogue by carefully choosing your characters' vocabulary and rhythm.

Learn how to write a musical or create a web series.

Determine which stories are yours to tell and tackle difficult material with integrity.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Sparking your interest
- » Identifying your audience
- » Creating backstory
- » Identifying your story's tone
- » Organizing the action with a time clock
- » Choosing to start writing
- » Applying Aristotle's *Poetics*
- » Writing the all-important synopsis

Chapter 5

Unpacking Your Idea

So you have an idea for a screenplay. It interests you; you've mentioned it to your friends, and it interests them. You're convinced that it may even interest people other than your coworkers and immediate family. Fantastic — now what?

An idea is just a glimpse at the whole story. Your imagination sparks, and for a moment, an entire chain of events presents itself. Unfortunately, unless you have a sense of how to pin those thoughts to a page, they may disappear again. Your next step involves fanning that initial spark into a flame and then into a fire. Thus, an idea becomes a story; a story becomes a script.

I Have This Great Idea. Now What?

Can you identify which part of your idea excites you most? Do you know why it may excite someone else? Any idea of what genre of story you have and what keeps the action moving forward? These next few paragraphs highlight what steps the screenwriter must take before beginning the writing process.

Identifying your interest in the idea

Before you tackle writing an entire draft, think about why and how you discovered the idea in the first place.

Picture it: You're enjoying a night on the town with friends when suddenly, an attractive somebody catches your eye. Your heart skips a beat, and your mind begins to race; in other words, you're hooked. You must get to know this unique somebody new.

Freeze. Before pursuing this mysterious stranger, ask yourself two questions: Why this person, and why now?

What attracts us to another individual is generally clear: their blue eyes, their contagious laugh, the way they tilt their head when they smile. The journey toward a story isn't so dissimilar from the scenario just depicted. You'll be excited by your first idea. Your heart may race; your breath may catch; you may want to run out and alert the media. Flirting with an idea is a wonderful feeling, but it's also temporary. Just like forging a relationship, completing an entire script takes effort and determination — not to mention hours of time spent at a computer or notepad. You're about to commit yourself to that effort, so pinpoint *why* your idea's necessary while it's still fresh in your mind.

Ask yourself these questions: Was my idea sparked by

» **An event?** If an event sparked your idea, how did you discover it? Was it an article that you read in a newspaper, a story relayed to you by friends, or did you witness the incident firsthand? Re-creating the scene helps keep your initial excitement alive. Also, be as specific as you can in what you remember. For example, you're at a football game when it starts to snow. The crowd begins to leave, but you notice one fan in the front row cheering the team on despite those walking past. This incident alone may spark an idea for a story, but look carefully. Is it that general image you're intrigued by, or the fact that the fan cheers louder the harder it snows, or is it the way they refuse to take their eyes off the field? Isolating the details may provide information that you'll need later.

» **A person?** If a person caught your eye, your imagination may be creating a character. Try to recall the person in question. If you read about them in a book, you may be able to find out more through historical research. If it's someone you know, you may be able to watch them more closely or interview them. If it's someone you glimpsed in passing — a woman feeding pigeons on the cathedral steps, for example — you'll need to think carefully about why that person grabbed your attention. Was it her physical appearance — how her hair matched the matted feathers of the birds? Her vocal tone in calling them to her? Or was it something that she did? Eventually, you'll be creating characters for your own script, so practice re-creating the people you observe now.

- » **A conversation?** Sometimes, you can grab an idea from something you overhear. Whether you're eavesdropping or debating a point with a friend, conversation sparks vivid images. Why? Generally, the conversations that I remember are those told with great conviction. They're already interesting, which alleviates the need for me to make them so. Also, it's easy to get a sense of people by what they choose to say and how they say it. An overheard conversation may well become a scene in your script or suggest several characters, so try to remember what you heard and how it was said. (I detail more exact ways to document those pieces of information in the next section.)
- » **An image or location?** You may find yourself inspired by an isolated image or an environment. Again, ask yourself what specifically draws your attention here. David Mamet's play (later a film) ***Glengarry Glen Ross*** was inspired by time spent in a real estate office. The details of that location — the fluorescent lights, the peeling wallpaper, the cigarette stains on the chairs — all informed the final product. Memorize the details of your image, from the placement of objects to the sounds and smells of a locale. They may color your eventual story.
- » **Another art source?** Perhaps other artistic mediums provoke you: photographs, paintings, literature, other plays, or films. Scan each selection you find. What fascinates you about it? The use of shadow, the texture of paint, a fleeting moment with a character? Your work may begin where another artist's ends. The Oscar-winning script ***Shakespeare in Love*** was the result of a number of Shakespeare's plays and several imaginative writers. Bo Burnham wrote ***Eighth Grade*** after exploring hours of middle-schooler's personal YouTube channels and Snapchat content.

Documenting your interest in the idea

After you've narrowed down the origins of your idea, document them in some way. You're not unlike a detective in this sense; you've found clues to your story, so you'll want to refer to them later on. Here are a few suggestions on how to document your idea:

- » **Write it down.** The sooner you capture the moment, the more details you'll catch. Write down everything that occurs to you — the time of day, where you were (or are, if you're that fast), what you noticed first, and so on. If you're an artist, sketch the image if you like. Memories tend to fade, so keep a notepad with you (especially in the car and by your bed) and write quickly.
- » **Record it.** If you're lucky enough to have a smartphone or a recording device with you when an idea strikes, by all means, use it. Obviously, you don't want to invade another person's privacy, but if you're privy to an interesting

conversation, it's always better to capture it firsthand. It's also safer to take notes this way while driving.

- » **Take a picture.** Having a camera ready is never a bad idea. Your cell phone (if it has a camera) works well for this activity, too. Like scribbling in your notebook, snapping photographs of what catches your attention may become second nature. Because photography is a visual medium, it may also help you to see the world as a filmmaker might.
- » **Acquire the source.** Pocketing part of the moment may also help jog your memory. For example, if you're out walking and you notice a trinket lying on the sidewalk, let your imagination go. Thousands of stories may come to mind: a lover's quarrel, a lost family heirloom, and a childhood game. You might keep the trinket to remind you of those story ideas later on.

When you've become adept at pinpointing where your idea began and documenting the source, you may notice a pattern in the subjects you're drawn to. People may interest you, locations may not. Sounds may capture your attention. Perhaps you find yourself collecting paintings of children, workmen, or landscapes. That pattern may suggest where your strengths lie as a writer or what kinds of stories you're drawn to right now. For the time being, be diligent and remember that knowing what drew you to your story in the first place will keep you writing long after the initial excitement over the idea wears off.



TRY IT

EXTENDING AN IDEA INTO A STORY POSSIBILITY

If you're interested, this project motivates your imagination and generates story options. Find something or someone to observe. When you notice a change in the behavior, in the environment, or in the image, come up with three possible reasons for the change to have occurred.

For example: You observe a girl on a park bench. Periodically, she pulls her hair in front of her face, as if hiding. Here are three possible reasons she does that:

- She's sensitive about a scar she received as a child.
- She's avoiding an old flame who just walked into the park.
- Her behavior is a secret sign between her and another person in the park.

Those are just three possible motivations that may lead to a story idea. Now, you try it.

Getting to Know Your Audience

Screenwriters write for an audience. Sometimes, that audience is small and defined; sometimes, it's a general age group; sometimes, it's your Aunt Betty or people like her. Whoever it may be, that audience and your awareness of it keeps your writing distinct, efficient, and honest. Writing is a form of communication, so it's important to determine who you're talking to and why they might want to listen.

Matching the story to the audience

Even if your goal is to write a script that delights audiences of all types and ages, you may want to consider who it will realistically reach. If your story involves graphic violence, it probably isn't for children. Similarly, certain kinds of audiences are statistically proven to frequent certain films. It may be advantageous to know who you'll probably sell the most tickets to when it comes time for your movie to be released.

The following sections cover some questions to ask yourself when identifying your audience.

What do you like about your story?

Generally speaking, if you're excited about an event you've witnessed, someone else will share your enthusiasm. The more passionately you recount that event, the larger your audience will be. I know very little about the stock market, but the whirlwind energy of the trading-room floor makes me wish that I did. The movie *Wall Street* transformed that energy into a box-office hit.

Using the information you've collected on your story so far, clearly define three things that you love about your idea. I call them "those three things." Those three things keep cropping up when you talk about your idea and never fail to reignite your enthusiasm. Does your story take place in Italy, a location that enchants you? Is your main character a brooding youth with a secret profession? It may be something as vast as a landscape or as minute as the image of children running across a beach — if it excites you, write it down. You will return to those three things later for inspiration, scene ideas, and tone. They will also help define your audience.

Who shares your taste?

The quickest way to discover your audience may be through a quick scan of your social circles. Who among them holds similar views on entertainment, politics, or personal relationships? Who might share your interest in those three things that

you've discovered in your idea? The people you identify and people like them will undoubtedly make up a large portion of your audience. If those people vary in age, gender, and social makeup, your story may have a universal or mass appeal. If they all resemble you in form as well as opinion, you may be writing for a target audience.



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A *target audience* is a film industry's best guess as to who might spend money to see your film. This statistic is generally compiled through surveys and test audiences, and by comparing your script to others of similar subject, budget, or genre. Remember that films are marketed in a variety of ways. The audience you attract determines that marketing approach.

Who might your target audience be?

Identifying your target audience is really a matter of understanding what kind of people need to see your film. Take a look at this list for some ways that you might approach finding out:

- » **Compare your idea to existing stories.** It's never a bad idea to know what films are similar to yours and what kind of interest they generated. If you're writing a story about a man-eating crocodile, you may find it helpful to know who liked the movies *Crawl* or *Jaws*.
- » **Know which category of film your idea fits into.** Scroll through any online movie provider and jot down the categories that interest you. Assuming that your story becomes a movie, would it eventually be streamed under Comedy or Romantic Comedy? Drama or Suspense? Adventure, Thriller, or Sci-Fi? Those categories come equipped with their own audiences.
- » **Pitch your idea to different types of people and record their response.** Mention your idea to people you don't know very well, and a pattern may emerge in their responses. If the same type of people — all artists, all stockbrokers, all athletes — respond in a positive way, they may be your target audience.



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A *pitch* is a brief summation of your movie concept that emphasizes its exciting and novel qualities. Pitching an idea isn't unlike selling a product; it requires a dynamic presentation and a solid knowledge of your story's strong points, such as its tone, genre, and what existing films it resembles. It may also include what actors you envision for the roles and who your audience could be.

I discuss crafting a pitch in greater detail in Chapter 20.

THE PROS AND CONS OF FOCUSING ON AUDIENCE

Locating your target audience may help clarify your story, but it may also hinder your creative freedom. The following two lists suggest possible arguments in each direction.

Pros:

Your target audience may help market your script. Think of audiences as customers. If you know who your customers are, you may know how to reach them when it's time to sell your product. If children are your target audience, you may advertise during afternoon cartoons; if avid sports fans are your target audience, you'll advertise during the Super Bowl.

Your target audience may suggest research possibilities. Target audiences enjoy similar things. If you know what they like to see, you'll know where to look for existing inspiration. If children are your target audience, you'll have an assortment of literature, TV shows, films, video games, and parenting resources to research while gathering ideas for your own script.

Your target audience may help answer questions on tone, conversation, and subject matter. You're bound to find a handful of films out there that resemble yours in some way. Watching them may provide examples and inspiration on how to approach writing yours while highlighting what's unique about your point of view.

Your target audience is one of the first questions studio executives will ask about when you're pitching. Being able to discuss your intended audience with ease will make buyers more likely to trust you.

Cons:

Your target audience may distract you from your original story. Investigating stories similar to yours, cinematic or otherwise, may be detrimental to your storytelling. You may doubt the power of your story in comparison to others. You may also find other writers influencing what you come up with.

Your target audience may cause you to stereotype your characters. Discovering what types of characters target audiences are drawn to isn't difficult. If you become too eager to please an audience, you may fall back on writing stereotypes and clichés instead of complex individuals.

Your target audience may affect the depth of your dialogue. Target audiences see similar films, and similar films often sound alike. In trying to please your audience, your choice of language may lose its unique edge by catering to what they like to hear.

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Bear in mind that films with the same audience as yours may be radically different in story and not at all threatening to your process. You may see your story so clearly that researching someone else's film couldn't possibly alter it, or you may think it best to write this first draft without distraction.

My general advice is to write your first draft with someone you love in mind. If you imagine your first draft as a love letter to someone, it helps focus your energy on the people, events, and themes you care about most. After you have a first draft, then identify your target audience and revise with it in mind.

Connecting with your audience

Certain story elements are almost always appealing to large audiences, and many of them date back to the first tales ever told. Here are some surefire ways to connect with an audience. See whether they exist in your own idea.

Passion

People go to the movies to see life painted in bold strokes. I don't go to a movie to see stories that are less interesting than my own; I go to lose myself in worlds of greater adventure, comedy, frustration, and truth than my own. In other words, I'm after passion. Look at the following list of universal passions and see whether they exist in your story idea:

- » Love
- » Hatred
- » Joy
- » Hope
- » Greed
- » Envy
- » Awe
- » Fear
- » Betrayal
- » Grief
- » Triumph

Other passions exist, but many of them fit into one of the preceding categories. Love, for example, may be broken down into infatuation, lust, and obsession. Fear may be divided into confusion, distrust, and panic.



WARNING

Notice that I'm *not* choosing words with a vague connotation but rather, strong words that suggest action. A crush isn't nearly as interesting as an obsession, nor is a spat as exciting as a battle. Choose words that suggest something is at risk in your story. Search for words that raise the stakes.



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Raising the stakes is a term that alludes to those elements of your story that are at risk and worth fighting for. The people in your script must want something desperately, to the point at which they feel they'll die if they don't get it. By raising the stakes, you're making it more important that they achieve their goals. In the movie *Inside Out*, parts of a young girl's personality struggle to return to the control room in her mind, before her entire life falls into chaos. The writer begins by showcasing what happens when one part of her mind takes over, then raises the stakes by making mental balance impossible for a period of time.

Mystery

Great stories ask great questions, or they present situations in which questions abound. Look at your idea. What questions do you have? Does your story's mystery lie in an event, a person, or both? If I witness two characters whispering to each other, I'll at least wait to see what was said. If a character behaves in a way that seems out of the ordinary, I'll want to know why. *Searching* revolves around the disappearance of one man's daughter. He's left searching her smartphone and computer to discover what happened to her. Our questions are the same as his throughout — who was she really and what did she have to hide? Questions give you somewhere to go, which, in screenwriting terms, means another scene to write. The more questions your idea raises, the easier it will be to transform it into a full draft.



REMEMBER

Creating scenes full of mystery keeps an audience leaning forward in their seats. Omitting necessary story information will confuse and frustrate your audience. Mystery occurs when you've set the scene but left out the reasoning behind an action or a conversation. Remember that mystery occurs when you have a guess about what's going on but want to know for sure.

Spectacular events

Thousands of people in the United States flock to fireworks displays every Fourth of July. Why? In part, they attend to foster a sense of community, but they also go because they're drawn to the enormous demonstration of beauty that fireworks provide. Audiences like to be thrilled, shocked, and dazzled, and screenwriters are in a perfect spot to capitalize on that desire. From the battles in *Wonder Woman*, to the desert chase scenes in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, films continually rope us in with

their own version of visual fireworks. Your spectacular event may be as large as a volcano eruption or as small as a red balloon disappearing into the sky. Both scenes command an audience's attention, and an audience that gasps together, stays together (at least until the credits roll).

Knowing What Happened Before Your Story Began: Creating the Backstory

Most writers dream a little before they tackle writing their scripts. Actually, they dream a lot. Before you craft an environment, you want to know its history, its geographical location, and its condition. Before you write a scene between parents, you want to know what attracted them to each other, how long they've been together, how many children they have, and the like. Before your characters go to war, you have to know what moments in history led them to that battlefield.

The ability to write complex events inhabited by complex people comes from knowing everything you can about why those events occurred and who those people are. The details you unearth may not all make it into your final draft, but they will add texture and depth to the eventual script. Compiling that information now will also allow you to write with fewer interruptions later because you will have answered many questions in advance.



Backstory refers to everything that occurred in your story's past. A character's backstory may include family background, job history, past romantic relationships, and any memories that continue to haunt your protagonist. The backstory of a situation includes events that led up to it and a suggestion of why that situation's occurring now.

Identifying the elements of a backstory

You may find it helpful to invent your script's history one section at a time. Just as detectives follow a certain line of questioning, so will you subject your story to an inquisition of sorts. Here's a list of categories that you may want to consider in your search for a backstory:

- » **Convictions and beliefs:** What are your character's political, social, and economic views? Does your character have any theories on life in general or in detail? How did they come to feel that way?
- » **Education:** Consider both formal education and acquired education in this category. Where your character went to high school may be as important as the three months they spent on the streets playing the drums.

- » **Family background:** Invent your character's family history, including the aunt they were named after but never see. Friends are included in this category as well.
- » **Geographic location:** Detail any environment that helped shape your character's present circumstances. Create everything from the climate to the socioeconomic makeup of the community to the carefully manicured lawns.
- » **Key past events:** Virtually every main event in your story will be possible because of something that's occurred in the past. What events led up to those in your story, and why did they occur?
- » **Past successes and failures:** People are shaped in part by their best and worst memories. Knowing what your character's track record is may be helpful in certain situations that arise in the script itself.
- » **Phobias:** Your characters' fears dictate what they avoid in life and, in some cases, what's pushing them to succeed. Think specific and general; a fear of rose thorns may be just as compelling as a fear of commitment. The film *Arachnophobia* was fueled by the main character's fear of spiders. Often, you can track a character's personal growth through their phobias and how close they are to overcoming them.
- » **Profession:** How do your characters make a living? Do they enjoy working at the library, or are they biding their time? How did they get where they are?
- » **Quirks:** What makes them unique, physically and psychologically? In *Forrest Gump*, the main character is compiled of odd characteristics, one of which is how fast he can run. A character's quirks can propel your story forward.
- » **System of values:** People differ in where they draw the line between right and wrong. What do your characters value most in themselves? In a lover? In a child? What types of behavior would make them ill?
- » **Talents:** What has your character always been good at? Do they use that talent, or has it gone by the wayside? The film *Hidden Figures* spotlights three black women and their mathematical prowess. *Parasite* tracks one family's ability to infiltrate a wealthy household. These films showcase skills that were years in the making, but it's also possible that your story starts on the day an opportunity arises for that talent to emerge.
- » **Time period:** What part of history are you tackling? Whose history will you portray? Is yours a Civil War story or that of a future age? If you plan to flash between moments in your character's life, how many moments and what were they?

Each of these categories suggests its own series of questions that you might answer about your story. Although it's impossible to highlight everything you discover in a single script, much of your story may come from the information you invent now, and your characters will gain dimension in the process.

Developing a screenplay through backstory

Imagine that you're a tourist in a foreign country — you don't speak the language, the people aren't familiar, and anything might happen to you next. This experience isn't unlike that of most moviegoers. They need someone to lead them through their journey and a guidebook to understand the importance of what they see along the way. You are their guide; the backstory is their guidebook.

A detailed backstory may be your greatest source of support as a screenwriter. It renders your characters unique and colorful, which will inform how they speak and behave throughout your story. It helps establish a clear world for your characters to explore and provides the fuel for most — if not all — of the future scenes in your script.

Consider the information that you have: You've created a time period, an environment, and some character biographies. You may also have envisioned situations leading up to your story's main events. Your next step involves conveying those details to an audience that knows next to nothing about your story.

You can easily convey time periods and locations through costume, dialect, a lingering description of the landscape, or a caption alerting your audience that the story takes place in Paris, 1863. Past events and character traits are often more elusive. Although there's no single formula for using this type of backstory to generate scenes, you may want to consider the following process as a way to begin:

1. Identify the detail that you want to develop.

It might be an event, a trait, a location, a family member, or a friendship. Choose one element. For example, I've decided that my main character moved around constantly as a child and is unable to settle down as an adult. That unsettled sensibility is the detail in question.

2. Visualize three ways the detail manifested itself in the past.

In particular, concentrate on what moments might reveal the detail to a stranger. For example, I envision my character as a young girl. She's kept her bedroom decidedly blank, anticipating the next move. She fidgets constantly in school, often upsetting her classmates. She travels with an imaginary friend — the only constant in an ever-fluctuating environment.

3. Visualize three ways the detail manifests itself in the present.

Every character exists in at least three roles during the course of a day. Your main character might be at once a mother, a neighbor, and a renowned biologist. Decide how the detail affects your character in several venues. For example, I imagine that my character is a marathon dater, unable to settle on

any person for a length of time. She juggles three jobs at once, constantly dashing from one end of town to another. Although she's lived in an apartment for a year, she has yet to completely unpack.

4. Decide which scenes might exist in your screenplay.

Flag any scenario you visualized that will help an audience understand the story you want to write. If more scenarios occur to you along the way, jot those down, too. You'll return to those notes later when you begin piecing your screenplay together.

Again, not every piece of information you devise will find its way into your screenplay. If I'm telling a Civil War story, I may concentrate on my character's political history and ignore their family background. On the other hand, if my Civil War story centers on Abraham Lincoln, his upbringing might be important. The type of story you're telling will dictate which details you reveal from the past. But remember, whether you include it or not, everything you imagine will enhance and sharpen your script.

Identifying the Tone of Your Piece

Distinguishing a film's genre from its tone is important. In Chapter 3, I outline the most common movie genres. They include comedy, drama, action and adventure, family, sci-fi, fantasy, horror, and suspense. You can generally determine a movie's genre by the story's content and the audience that it might appeal to. So if the genre of a film refers to *what* a writer is depicting, the film's tone refers to *how* the writer depicts it.



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A movie's *tone* indicates a certain quality, mood, or atmosphere that the writer establishes through the careful manipulation of the pace, texture, and selected images. Tone can often be understood as the way a movie makes you feel as you watch it. A comedy may feel dark and slightly twisted (*Sorry To Bother You*) or frivolous and light (*Bridesmaids*), depending on its tone.

In creating a tone for your own screenplay, try exploring three pivotal story elements:

- » **Pace:** The speed with which your story is told. The pace is determined by the length of your scenes, how fast your action moves, and how quickly you provide information. It's also sometimes determined by your film's genre. Comedies move faster than dramas. Action adventures move faster than suspense films. (For more on genres, see Chapter 3.)

- » **Texture:** The colors, sounds, and other sensory details that you include throughout. How intimately you depict each scene determines the film's texture.
- » **Tension:** The mental, emotional, or psychological thread between characters. Tension comes in all different forms — angry, uneasy, frightened, and sexual, to name a few. The thread becomes strained as the tension mounts.

You might regard the genre as a kind of spectrum housing various types of comedy, drama, suspense, and so on. For example, the comedy genre includes anything from the coming-of-age awkwardness of *Booksmart* and *Superbad* to the fast-paced chaos of *School of Rock*, to the slapstick family-friendly humor of *Home Alone*. Still unsure? Ask yourself this question: What words would I use to describe the overall feel of my story? Is it secretive or raucous, whimsical or ominous? Any of these descriptions may be your tone.

Why do you need to know the tone of your script? Sometimes, you don't. Sometimes, a tone will suggest itself as you're writing, and you can enhance it then. Sometimes, you'll complete a draft and realize that you've unconsciously selected a tone. However, knowing the texture of your piece in advance may help you decide which details to highlight as you write.

Establishing Your Story's Time Clock

A script that spans several generations will unfold differently from a script that encompasses a few days. Most films handle time in one of two ways:

- » **In one concentrated span of time.** Most great stories occur during one portion of someone's life or in one tight span of history, so most screenwriters restrict their use of time. Films of this nature generally suggest early on what event the action is moving toward and push the audience toward it chronologically, scene by scene. The writer may track several characters simultaneously, but they usually exist in the same time frame and are moving toward similar conclusions. *Juno*, *Personal Shopper*, and *Game Night* are just a few (of many) examples.
- » **Mediating between time periods.** Scripts of this nature also tend to move chronologically toward one goal, but they provide details from the past and the present and, perhaps, offer glimpses of the future along the way. These films often employ memories, dream sequences, and/or flashbacks to advance the action. *Arrival*, *Babel*, *500 Days of Summer*, and *The Social Network* are prime examples of this structure.

Regardless of how much or how little time your story covers, it will eventually culminate in some final event. That event and how long it takes your characters to get there is known as a time clock.



A film's *time clock* refers to the amount of time a writer allots for the main characters to achieve or address their ultimate goal. The time clock gives the story shape — the action must be completed in a certain amount of time or else. The time clock may be a measurable amount of time, or it may be based on some impending event.

Time clocks vary in type and specificity. They may be

- » **Literal:** Literal time clocks are actual clocks that are set from the beginning and mentioned throughout the film. The characters in *Speed* must keep the bus moving over 60 miles per hour to keep the bomb from going off. Their time clock is limited to one tank of fuel. The Spanish-language film *Everybody Knows* begins with a kidnapping and tracks the hunt to retrieve the child before it's too late. In the coming-of-age comedy *Booksmart*, two best friends experience their last chance at a real high school party. Because the audience never forgets that time is running out, these films are packed with dramatic tension. You can almost hear the clock ticking away in each scene, which is why this element is often referred to as the "ticking clock."
- » **Historical:** These films feel like slices of life. The writer makes it clear that they'll present a short period of time that's important for reasons yet to be disclosed. Those time frames may encompass eras or grand events as in *Age of Innocence*, *The Big Short*, and *Spotlight*, or a stretch of time in someone's personal history à la *Selma*, *Carol*, and *Call Me By Your Name*. Audiences remain in their seats because they want to see where the characters will go and because they think that they may learn something along the way.
- » **Psychological:** These time clocks are character generated. They usually involve a personal revelation or psychological breakthrough. *Love and Basketball* is a prime example of a film that works this way. We're waiting for one or both of these characters to realize that they're meant for each other. In *Manchester by the Sea*, Casey Affleck's character is plagued by personal demons acquired from mistakes in his past. We know the movie's coming to a conclusion when he has to face those demons head on. The protagonist in *Eighth Grade* overcomes crippling social anxiety to finally see herself as the capable, funny, and sensitive girl she is.
- » **Competitive:** Like glimpses of evolution, these films are fueled by a survival of the fittest regime. Here, opposing forces battle for final control, and the movie is over when one of them destroys the other one. It's always just a matter of time before something drastic occurs. Audiences don't know when that moment will be, but they know that it's coming. In *The Lord of the Rings*,

it's just a matter of time before the dark lord takes over Middle Earth. Frodo must destroy the ring before that happens. In *Jaws*, it's just a matter of time before the shark (literally) consumes the town. The police chief must destroy it first.

- » **Abstract:** These time clocks are few and far between and tend to be part of art films or independent shorts. An abstract time clock is one the audience may or may not be aware of until the end. It's like the phrase, "My whole life flashed before my eyes. . . ." That can happen in the time it takes for someone to swim the length of a pool or to wake up from a dream. The lap of the pool and the length of the dream may become time clocks. The entirety of *Jacob's Ladder* takes place in one man's dying hallucination. You don't discover that until later, but the writer knows the story's over when the hallucination ends.

Time clocks organize your action, and all great stories have one, so it's best to consider yours now.

Deciding When to Start Your Story

Why start your story now? is a two-part question. It really asks, why should you personally start writing now, and why does your story begin when it does? The first portion of the question can be answered in the following ways:

- » You'll forget the story if you don't start writing now.
- » You'll lose your momentum if you don't start writing now.
- » You've taken time to enhance the idea; the story is becoming clear.
- » You've set aside time in your schedule to concentrate on a script.
- » This is a story that demands to be written right now.
- » If you don't write it now, someone else may.
- » You've put off writing long enough.

Writing isn't unlike a sport. If you practice every day on a set schedule, your muscles will remain supple and ready to work for you. If called to race a marathon, you could do it. Your imagination is also a muscle that will weaken without regular exercise. You've invested time in an idea, and though the initial euphoria may have worn off, you now have an arsenal of creative paths to explore. If the initial excitement remains, better yet. Start writing soon.

Why does your story begin when it does? is one of the most important questions you have to answer before sitting down to write. There are as many different answers as there are types of stories. However, one thing is clear: Your story

begins when it does because something unusual is about to happen. Lives are about to change.

Consider successful movies you know. In *Juno*, the protagonist has just learned she's pregnant. *Parasite* begins the moment a poor family finds a rich household to scam. In *Disobedience*, a woman returns to her Orthodox Jewish community after being shunned for falling in love with a woman. These stories begin at the moment a complete life change occurs for the main characters. Juno needs to decide who will raise her child. The Kim family needs to lift themselves out of financial ruin. Ronit must confront the community who ostracized her. All these movies begin on the verge of a grand shift, and that shift propels the ensuing action.

Try to identify the biggest change that might occur in your own story. Is it a shift within

- » The family?
- » The workspace?
- » The environment?
- » The political, social, or economic scene?
- » A character's romantic or social life?
- » A character's emotional or physical well-being?

Generally, if the story is about to change in one realm, the other realms will shift around it. Should someone close to your main character die, for example, that death might affect their work, their friendships, and perhaps their romantic attachments. Choose the grandest shift you can find and begin your story there.

Why start your story on the verge of something new? Because change is inherently dramatic. Change puts characters in a vulnerable state where they'll have to make choices for the first time. It forces them to rely on their basic instincts to succeed or, in some cases, survive. It allows the audience to learn along with the people they're watching.

Your beginning shift also suggests a time clock for your action. Even if your story is based on a famous person, you can't tackle their entire life; you simply don't have time. Nor would people find it interesting to see every detail dramatized. You'll want to concentrate on a small portion of that journey, and that portion will suggest its own conclusion. In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker begins his quest yearning to avenge his family's murder, and the audience will want to see if he's able to do so. Anything after that attempt is information for another film. Identify this pivotal change in your own story, and you have your opening scene.

Getting to Know Aristotle: A Dramatist's Best Friend

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived from 384 to 322 B.C. So what does he have to do with screenwriting? In some ways — everything. His doctrine titled *Poetics* may be the first text devoted entirely to literary criticism, and the terms he employs within it have become the cornerstones of dramatic arts today. For a writer, Aristotle's six poetics are the building blocks of any well-crafted story.

Aristotle's poetics are

- » **Plot:** A *plot* can be defined as a series of actions, and an action can be defined as an event that causes something else to occur. A boy borrowing his father's car isn't necessarily an action. A boy borrowing his father's car after being told not to do so *might* be an action, as it will undoubtedly spark an argument later on. If the events in your story don't cause other events to occur, you don't have a plot. You simply have a series of events.
- » **Character:** A *character* is any person or presence in your screenplay that is affected by action or causes action to occur. I say "a presence" to allow for the possibility that something other than a human being may be a character in your script. Aliens, elves, or monsters frequent the horror and fantasy genres, and the cast of characters in family movies often includes animals or make-believe creatures.
- » **Thought:** The thought of your screenplay can take several forms. It refers to the initial thought that sparked your interest in the idea as well as the thought you put into constructing a story. It refers to the thoughts that your characters express throughout your script, which may differ widely from your own. It also refers to the points of view that you may want to convey to an audience. In this sense, the thought of your script is often its theme.
- » **Diction:** The *diction* of your script refers to the types of words you choose to depict action. Like fashion trends, words suggest a personality or type. The words you choose can denote a character's education, profession, sexual persuasion, political bent, age, ethnicity, and emotional or mental state. I talk about diction at greater length in Chapter 10.
- » **Music:** Like thought, *music* has several definitions. It can refer to the actual music that you employ in your screenplay, be it the live band you're writing about or any music you hear underscoring your piece. It can refer to the general *soundscape* — sound effects that you highlight or silences between characters. It also refers to the sounds of the words themselves. If you could mute the meaning of each word and concentrate on the consonants, the vowels, and the pace of the dialogue, you'd have the script's music.

» **Spectacle:** *Spectacle* has recently taken on a negative connotation, referring to any expensive, grandiose technical effect that a movie employs to dazzle an audience. Yet, in fact, it originally meant any moment that visually impressed an audience, be it small or grand in scale. The black and white streetscapes of 1970's Mexico City in *Roma* might dazzle an observer, but so might the image of the protagonist clutching a child she's just rescued on the beach. Spectacle moments are often what makes the story film-worthy and unlike everyday life. Without them, the movies would seem dull.

Aristotle's *Poetics* provides a clear road map for any writer. Before you sit down to the page, you may find it helpful to glance through them individually to clarify story choices that you've already made. How do the categories work together? Where do they overlap? Have you been thorough in your research? This process will help you later when you've completed a first draft and face the daunting task of rewriting. I have them pasted above my computer screen for just that moment. They remind me that I need only tackle one component at a time as I go back through with my red pen. Also, if your writing falters, it usually means that you don't know enough about one of these elements. When the poetics are fully realized, your screenplay will sing.

What's It All About?: Writing an Effective Synopsis

The synopsis is one of the great ironies of screenwriting. You spend months, if not years, developing your idea, researching your backstory, embellishing your characters, and clarifying tone. Then, you're asked to condense all that information into a pithy encapsulation conveying everything you've learned so far. It sounds crazy, but it's an exercise that pinpoints the crucial moments in your story while preparing you for the demands of the Hollywood scene, which includes pitching your idea to executives in a few minutes or less.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A *synopsis* is a short description of your screenplay that highlights the main characters and the journey they go on, with particular attention to conflict and resolution. There are personal synopses, written to clarify your story, and there are professional synopses written to sell it. I discuss professional synopses at length in Chapter 13, so let's concentrate on the personal synopsis for now. That's the one you write to synthesize what you discovered and to clarify who the film is for. You'll need that information before you tackle a first draft.

Your ultimate goal is a 5–10 sentence paragraph, written in the present tense, that introduces your main characters, establishes the central conflict, alludes to tone

and/or genre, and suggests your target audience. You should know where the story's headed even if you don't know exactly how you get there yet.

To kick this process off, it helps to break the idea into five concrete sentences. I've included some examples of opening phrases to get you started. The element you're trying to emphasize is in boldface at the start of each phrase.

- » **Character:** My story (insert title here) is about a (insert main characters here) in (insert location here).
- » **Goal:** More than anything, they want (insert hope/dream/passion here).
- » **Journey:** Their journey begins when (initial event here) and they decide to (character action here).
- » **Conflict:** They run into trouble when/with (insert conflict or conflicts here), which they tackle by (character action here).
- » **Resolution:** The story ends when (insert event here), and they discover that (insert conclusion here).

You can alter and rearrange these sentences in whatever way suits your particular screenplay. Your character may not know what they want until circumstances threaten someone they love. Your character probably faces internal conflicts as well as external conflicts. There may be a moment when your character doesn't know what to do next, and a surprise situation forces their hand. You get the idea. Use these five sentences as a launch point and mold them to your purposes.

You may abandon this sentence structure altogether and come up with phrases of your own. However, the elements that I'm choosing to emphasize create the spine of most stories, and you'll probably want to include a version of them in any synopsis you construct.

After you craft that paragraph, infuse it with the following information:

- » Why you're drawn to this story
- » Who you're writing this story for
- » What style or genre you envision

You can mention the style or genre in the synopsis, but it also helps to write in that style as well. If you're writing a comedy, the synopsis should be funny. If you're writing a mystery, you should keep us guessing until the end. Don't be afraid to let your first draft of this synopsis be messy, awkward, or long-winded. Get the important details onto the page and finesse them after. Again, this

synopsis is for you. It's meant to highlight what you know, reveal what you don't know, and crystallize why it's an important story to tell. This synopsis may be vastly different after you write the first draft, but it gives you somewhere to begin.

Once you've written a 5–10 sentence paragraph, try telling your story in three. Now try one. It may seem impossible, but when you're through, you'll know exactly what your script is about.



TRY IT

TURNING YOUR SYNOPSIS INTO A MOVIE TRAILER

Here's a quick and fun way to vamp up your nutshell synopsis. Movie trailers are a film company's best bet for drawing an audience into the theater. They generally employ a combination of vibrant music, quick flashes of action, and a dynamic announcer to rope people in. Imagine that your film is about to be released, and you're in charge of marketing it. Using your synopsis as a guide, write a movie trailer that will dazzle the public and send them to the box office with money in hand. You might also consider the perfect tag line for your film's poster. What one phrase could draw audiences to your movie in droves?

- » Making your opening images memorable
- » Planting your story's conflict
- » Structuring your first moments
- » Exploring successful film openings

Chapter 6

Plot Part I: Beginnings

Plot and character are the pillars of all great stories. Without a solid plot, nothing happens in your screenplay; without compelling characters, things happen, but no one cares. So which pillar do you construct first?

Well, consider that most people approach stories by inquiring, “What’s that story about?” Then consider the question you’ll ask yourself when you reach a stumbling point and can’t generate new pages: “What’s my story about?” Finally, consider the question you’ll be asked most often by friends, family, future agents, and producers when they discover that you’re writing a screenplay: “What’s your story about?”

Yes, it’s the same question, but, more importantly, it’s the *first* question you’re likely to encounter at every stage of the screenplay process. Sure, people will inquire *who* you’re writing about, but they’ll probably do so *after* you’ve supplied a synopsis. And eventually, when you’ve only got five minutes to convince the Hollywood heavyweights of your script’s worth, you’d better have a dynamic plot ready to rope them in. So how do you construct such a plot? It’s an exciting process that begins . . . well, with your beginning. This chapter concentrates on crafting an opening for your story that will entice readers and audiences alike to remain in their seats.

Crafting an Eye-Opening Opener

Imagine you're sitting in a darkened theater, staring at the screen. At first, nothing happens. Perhaps some images dart past as the opening credits role. Finally, the screen flickers to life. You're about to watch the opening sequence of your film. What do you see?

The first ten minutes of every movie determine what an audience expects from the remaining two hours. A story's setup determines, in large part, how your story will unfold. Here are a few things a strong opening should do:

- » Introduce your main character(s)
- » Establish a routine or pattern of life
- » Suggest a conflict that may break that routine or pattern of life
- » Introduce your subplot(s) and suggest their conflicts
- » Set the tone and style of the piece
- » Suggest a villain or opposing force in the story
- » Reveal something important at risk
- » Raise a compelling question

These eight components comprise the rules of your screenplay. By rules, I mean that these components provide the boundaries or structure within which your action occurs. If the movie starts as a horror flick, it shouldn't switch to a light comedy halfway through; if I spend the first 20 minutes getting to know one person, I'll expect to track them through the remainder of the film. These rules are the foundation upon which your audience forms expectations about the ensuing action. You'll fulfill or thwart those expectations as you go, and quite often, you'll do both. So you've got a lot riding on those first moments. How do you craft them to speak volumes in an efficient way? Much as when constructing a three-dimensional puzzle, you build them piece by moving piece.

What to show first: person, place, or thing?

You can't establish all eight components at once; it's too confusing. However, you can determine the primary element of your opening — in other words, what catches your audience's attention first. Consider the following elements in advance.

The people

Movies are always about people. Well, depending on the genre, maybe they're about animals or aliens or creatures from the black lagoon — but the principle

remains the same. Even if you focus on a historical event, you'll be tracking how that event affected a character or a group of characters. For example, the movie *Titanic*, though centered around a great historical tragedy, primarily depicts one couple's budding romance. The audience witnesses the fear, horror, and hope of the event through them.

So first decide whether your script revolves around

- » One person
- » A small group of people
- » A community or nation
- » Several communities or nations

Because your film probably consists of a plot and at least one subplot, you'll want to determine the subject(s) of each.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A *subplot* is a smaller storyline that supports the film's main plot. It generally comes equipped with its own set of characters, conflicts, and actions. The characters in a subplot may or may not be moving toward the same objective as your protagonist(s). For example, Katherine is the clear protagonist in *Hidden Figures*, a biopic about three black female engineers who helped launch John Glenn into space. But her two colleagues, Dorothy and Mary, were equally important to the endeavor, and their storylines provide additional context about the fight for gender and racial equality at NASA.

By determining your film's subject, you'll pinpoint its scope, be it an exacting look at one era of history (*The Crown*), a coming-of-age friendship saga (*Booksmart*), or something in between (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which combines the grand backdrop of 18th century France with an intimate affair between a painter and an aristocrat). You select initial images that suggest that scope.

The place(s)

In a stage play, confining your story to a small number of locales is often beneficial. Movies, however, can lead audiences anywhere: from the office lobby to the city street to the cafe to the cafe's storeroom to a locked cabinet in the cafe's storeroom. A screenwriter has no limit to where they can go. So let me first distinguish between location and location. Sound crazy? It's not, I promise. You can define the word in two distinct ways:

- » **Physical locations:** The site-specific locale of each scene, where every moment takes place

» **Esoteric locations:** The contrasting worlds your script unites — be it social or political spheres, or the internal world of a character

The physical locations will take care of themselves as you write, and they may become overwhelming when considered in advance. Esoteric locations are more important and more manageable. They help both writer and audience understand the story's larger themes. They suggest locations that a writer might periodically return to, images that frame the action like posts in a fence.

For example, the number of physical locations in *Promising Young Woman* is numerous. The writer jumps from a bar to an apartment to a coffee shop to a doctor's office to a college campus to a bachelor party, and back again — these are the physical locations. Yet the movie's core depicts two distinct worlds at war — the world of women trying to navigate the dating scene safely and the world of male sexual predators who often pose as allies. These are the esoteric locations.



TIP

Eventually, you'll need to consider your budget when deciding on elements like location. Small-budget films can't usually afford a surplus of location shifting, so if you're writing for a small production company, you'll want to limit your landscape a bit. However, when you're first creating a story, I suggest dreaming big. Go where the story wants to go; you can always scale back later.

Your use of time

It's crazy to suggest that you'll know exactly where your story's headed at the start of a first draft. Even with a solid outline, the way your story unfolds will no doubt surprise you. But consider how much time your story intends to span because it will affect your opening sequences. You'll also want to know if your plot moves chronologically forward, or if you intend to jump between past, present, and future. I describe dramatic time clocks in Chapter 5, but suffice it to say that scripts spanning generations unfold differently than those spanning a few days or, in the case of films like *The Breakfast Club*, one period of high-school detention.

You'll want to alert your audience early to the time choice you've made. How? If you're writing an epic historical drama, the first image may be of a city that's been destroyed in war. If you're writing an intimate family affair, you may begin with shots of various characters going about their morning routines. If your movie propels the audience ever forward, the audience will assume that you'll continue that trend. If you plan to jump around, you may follow a scene that takes place today with a scene set in 1945. You may allow a character to reference time travel or muse about the future early on, which paves the way for jumps in time later. You can solve the problem in numerous ways, but remember, an audience will assume that your story will be contemporary and chronological unless you tell it otherwise.



TIP

How do you suggest alternate time periods? If you're writing a period piece, you might let the costumes, a description of the city, and the type of vehicles or technology present or absent orient your audience, or you may precede the action with a caption reading, "Italy, 1886." If you're inventing a time period, as many sci-fi films do, find a way to alert the audience that it's about to enter a strange place and a strange time. *Star Wars* launches each movie with an informative prologue that scrolls through space. Whatever technique you employ in the first 10 to 20 pages, you can use it again later because the audience will be prepared.

The atmosphere

Layer in the *atmosphere*, or tone, of your story. Some films do so immediately. Five minutes into the movie *Jaws*, the audience knows that it's watching a horror film. *La La Land* launches with a musical number amidst contemporary Los Angeles traffic. Some films build atmosphere gradually. *Rear Window* begins pleasantly enough with the protagonist surveying his apartment complex via binoculars, but it shifts once he thinks he witnesses a murder. From that point on, the suspense is palpable.

The stakes

The *stakes* of a story refer to what's at risk in any situation. A story about a group of people living off the grid in RVs isn't immediately gripping. If you reveal that those vans are the only thing ensuring their survival, I become invested. That storyline became the critically acclaimed movie *Nomadland*.



REMEMBER

The stakes in a film can be anything the audience roots for or worries about. If the stakes prevent the audience from leaving until after the concluding scene, you have done your job.

Conflict: What's wrong with this picture?

If your opening shots don't grab an audience's attention, you'll have a harder time gaining their interest later. You don't have to shock or horrify the audience to grab their attention; you can seduce, con, humor, or badger them into watching — but for heaven's sake, do something.

After the elements are in place (see the section "What to show first: person, place, or thing?" earlier in this chapter), *conflict* becomes the key ingredient. Conflict sparks action. Conflict raises questions, and the audience's desire to answer those questions creates tension. Keep two things in mind: You have limited time, and you're writing about the most compelling time in your characters' lives. If they've experienced these conflicts before, they'll know how to react, and your story is over. The encounter you're dramatizing is different; it will change lives. So most

screenwriters start as close to that struggle as possible. Generally, the opening sequence does one of two things:

- » **It provides a brief look at the story's platform.** Your characters, like most human beings, have a routine — a “normal” way of life. And what’s crazy for you and me may be this character’s average day. Even if your protagonist never does the same thing twice, that ability to not repeat themselves becomes their routine or platform. Movies that begin with a clear routine provide a suggestion of how the characters may act when that sense of normalcy is disturbed. Harry Potter begins his journey as an orphan being raised by hideous relatives. This is his routine until he receives a letter informing him that he’s a wizard. ***Eighth Grade*** spends half an hour detailing the main character’s anxiety-filled daily routine so that the audience feels a tiny thrill when something new happens.
- » **It starts the story mid-conflict.** These movies plunge the audience into the action at the point of attack. Everything is questionable — who the script is about, what has just gone wrong, how it will affect everything else. Although this method is a great way to jump-start your film, you still need to convey how life looked prior to the conflict so that the audience knows what has been lost. You simply give viewers that information later. For example, ***A Quiet Place*** drops us into one family’s desperate attempt to live silently lest they rouse the attention of sound-sensitive, killer aliens. We glean a sense of their past via behavior, their belongings (or lack thereof), and scraps of dialogue layered in as the film unfolds.



The *platform* of a story refers to any routine or pattern of behavior that exists prior to a life-altering event. The platform may be comprised of habits, job schedules, points of view, everyday routines, political or international stability, and anything a character might take for granted as secure. The *point of attack* refers to the event or the moment in the script where the platform falls apart.

Possible ways to begin your story

There is no one way to start your script. The subject matter you choose to convey and the genre you’re working within determine your opening. However, there are trends in opening sequences, and one may work for you. Many movies convey their choice of opening in one of five ways:

- » **Action:** Start your movie with a chase scene, or a fight, or a feat of extreme daring. If you toss your audience into action, they’ll lean forward immediately, if only to follow what’s going on. ***Kingsman: The Secret Service***, ***The Dark Knight***, and virtually every James Bond film begin this way, among many others.

- » **A long first scene:** These openings firmly establish the initial event, detailing it from various angles and, sometimes, points of view. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Promising Young Woman* are examples of such a beginning.
- » **Fleeting moments:** These openings move through an average day or the initial conflict quickly, often concentrating on the more intimate details of each scene. They may also bounce between locales and characters. *Booksmart* and *The Big Chill* open this way.
- » **A narrator:** Here, a main character talks the audience through the opening sequence, pointing out key details or secrets, perhaps introducing characters along the way. *No Country For Old Men*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* begin this way.
- » **A montage:** A *montage* is a series of shots strung together that launch us through time, generally underscored with music and often without dialogue. The opening sequences of *Juno* and the Pixar film *Up* begin this way.

You'll discover other techniques as you watch movies and read screenplays, but most openings fall within one of these categories. Hopefully, these templates will jump-start your own ideas. Again, though, there is no one way to start a story, and I'd be the last person to suggest that you should follow a set formula. Sometimes, the best technique is to visualize a scene, write it down quickly, and return to polish it later. The subject of your first sequence, the location, the atmosphere, and time frame — these are simply categories waiting to be embellished. Together, they should help you provide a lot of information in an efficient manner and raise at least one question compelling enough to keep audiences in their seats.

Three Compelling (and Contrasting) Movie Beginnings

Everyone's taste in movies differs, so, frequently, the best way to discover how you want your script to look is to study the movies that compel or repel you. After you're aware of what a great opening should do (see the preceding sections), look at the movies you love. How do they set up the action? What information do they immediately transfer to the audience? What images do they use to present that information? Successful beginnings pack as much as they can into a small amount of time.

With so many strong films to choose from, I had a hard time narrowing the focus down to three. However, three it is. I chose these scripts to give you a sense of some different ways to launch equally enticing stories. You can obtain all these screenplays online, so you can track how the images look both on the screen and on the page.

I encourage you to read these scripts as well as see the films. Doing so will help you later when you envision the beginning you want but aren't sure how to lay it out on the page. I track these movies through Chapters 7 and 8 as well to give you a sense of how the writers keep the tension mounting and ultimately conclude each tale. For now, see what you can discover from their opening scenes.

Jaws

Spielberg's 1975 breakaway hit offers one of the most satisfyingly horrific beginnings in film history. The scenes are shot realistically, without distracting technical effects, and capture the audience in less than five minutes.

- » **Scene 1:** A group of teenagers is drinking and chatting around a campfire. A young man and a young woman exchange glances and hurry toward the ocean, tossing clothes off as they run. The woman plunges into the water, while the man struggles with his shoes, obviously quite drunk. The scene shifts below the water, as a shark watches the woman swim. Her feet and arms flail above the creature. Suddenly, she's tugged from below and then dragged, kicking and screaming, around in a circle. The man has fallen asleep on the beach and doesn't hear her continual screams for help. Eventually, she's pulled below. All is silent.
- » **Scene 2:** The chief of police wakes up next to his wife and receives a call that someone has gone missing. He jumps into his truck and drives down a road past a billboard of a girl on a surfboard welcoming tourists to Amity Island.
- » **Scene 3:** At the beach, the policeman and the boy from the previous night discover the girl's severed hand lying washed up on the sand.

As horrible as these opening moments are, I repeat that they're also highly satisfying. Although most filmmakers might have lunged immediately into the grotesque shots of her death, Spielberg waits a bit. He jumps between the woman's perspective at the surface, and the shark's view from below. He doesn't resort to gore, which delivers a temporary thrill. Instead, he underscores the shark's hunt with an iconic soundtrack, making us wait for the victim's inevitable end. The billboard suggests that the tourists will be coming soon — so the stakes and the time clock are set. And we've met the opposing parties — man versus beast.

Lady Bird

This award-winning film begins with this quote by Joan Didion: "Anybody who talks about California hedonism has never spent a Christmas in Sacramento." Whether we're meant to pity or envy Sacramento for its self-restraint is unclear, and *Lady Bird*'s opening scenes visually tease out this idea.

- » **Scene 1:** Mother and daughter lie forehead to forehead in a hotel bed. We watch them sleeping peacefully from above, as a girl's voice asks, "Do you think I look like I'm from Sacramento?"
- » **Scene 2:** The daughter considers herself in a hotel mirror while her mother tidies their room. When the daughter chides her for making the hotel bed, her mother replies, "Well, it's nice to keep things neat and clean," then pauses to push a strand of hair out of her daughter's face.
- » **Scene 3:** The pair drive along an empty country road. Tears stream down their faces as they finish an audiobook of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The daughter muses that their college trip took twenty-one hours and five minutes. She quips that she wishes she could "live through something." To which the mother replies, "Aren't you?" This sparks an argument about why the daughter can't find beauty in the life she has and why she insists on being called Lady Bird despite the fact that her given name is Christine. The scene ends when Lady Bird throws herself out of the still-moving car.

Lady Bird offers a clear example of the "fleeting moments" opening technique. It also sets up a clear expectation: Mother and daughter are close before revealing that actually mother and daughter could not be further apart. In three glimpses of their relationship, we glean a backstory — the "college trip"; we're handed a time clock — the time it takes for Lady Bird to "live through something"; and we're granted a theme-based conflict — she should be grateful for the life she already has. To director/writer Greta Gerwig's credit, we understand where both characters are coming from. Younger audiences may sympathize with the desire to pursue a new and exciting future, and older audiences may recognize that reality doesn't always align with one's dreams. Yet both characters are given an opportunity to voice their desires, so we can't discount either of them. Most importantly, Gerwig showcases how much they love each other before plunging us into their ongoing debate, so we want their relationship to survive.

Moonlight

Although *Moonlight* is based on a semi-autobiographical stage play by Tarell Alvin McCraney, its story is equally personal to director Barry Jenkins. Both men grew up in Liberty City, Miami, where the film takes place; both men attended the same school growing up and were bullied for being artistic introverts; and both men were raised by mothers struggling with drug addictions. The movie unfolds patiently, following protagonist Chiron into early adulthood as he searches for the love and acceptance denied him as a child. Yet, though the movie spans one-third of a man's life, the audience meets virtually every important character in the first 15 minutes.

- » **Scene 1:** We begin in darkness, listening to the sounds of the surf. Then sunlight reveals a large blue sedan rattling to a stop on a Miami street. Juan emerges from the car and approaches a young drug dealer haggling with a

customer. It becomes clear that Juan is the dealer's boss. He's about to leave when young Chiron races past him with a group of bigger kids in hot pursuit.

» **Scene 2:** Chiron tears through tall grass as the older boys chase him. He takes refuge in a boarded-up apartment building, but the bullies pound on the door as he cowers inside.

» **Scene 3:** The bullies disperse, and Chiron explores the empty apartment. His curiosity is shattered by fingers prying a board from the window. Juan steps over the sill and offers to help, but Chiron is clearly terrified. Sensing the severity of the situation, Juan invites the boy to lunch, suggesting it can't be worse outside than it is inside. The look on the boy's face says he's not so sure.

In less than six minutes, we witness the most important events of the film, and we meet the pivotal relationships. Juan and his girlfriend become surrogate parents to Chiron, but his gentle demeanor mark him as “different” for years to come, he struggles to protect himself through adolescence, and any love he finds later is short-lived or hard-won. Jenkins and McCraney also immediately challenge the hardened drug-dealer stereotype by crafting the opposite. Juan is the most compassionate, accepting character in the boy's life. There are no villains or heroes in *Moonlight*. Everyone is a little of both, and that choice is apparent right away.



TRY IT

CONSTRUCT TWO OPENINGS FOR THE SAME STORY

You can approach this project in two ways. You might begin by jotting down a generic scenario to practice on, or you could revisit the synopsis of your own story and begin there. In either case, consider the opening moments with two methods in mind:

- **With a platform:** Construct three images that set up an average day for your main character.
- **Mid-conflict:** Construct three images that suggest the first big change in your character's everyday routine.

After you have each set of images, put them in whatever order raises the most questions in the audience's mind. Could this sequence be a compelling opening for a film? You can also try envisioning already released movies with different openings. Imagine how *Jaws* might look if the writers took the time to introduce the town prior to the first attack. One of these openings is bound to be a more compelling choice than the others.

- » Driving your plot forward
- » Discovering your story's action
- » Using status to create tension
- » Creating compelling obstacles
- » Using your opening to craft new scenes
- » Exploring effective second acts

Chapter 7

Plot Part II: Middles

The middle of a screenplay, otherwise known as the *second act*, is usually the most difficult and therefore the most daunting portion to write. The middle is the longest section, often three times the length of either the beginning or the end. Its aim is to test the main characters' fortitude, throwing obstacle after obstacle in their paths as they charge (or hobble) toward their destinations. Writers often feel emotionally drained after completing this section and/or wretched for having put people they care about through so much turmoil. The middle also demands a writer juggle many tasks: increasing tensions and threats, revealing character secrets, and keeping an audience guessing as the story barrels toward a conclusion.

Many moviegoers visit the restroom during a lull in the action in the second act of a film. Don't let them! (Or at least make them worry that they'll miss something great while they're gone.) Writers anticipate every scene, ignoring what *might* come next for what *must* come next. Then they convince the audience that what's coming is too important to miss. Sound daunting? Read on. This chapter offers advice on how to answer the anxiety-ridden question, "How do I know what happens next?"

Muddling through the Middle

Bravo, you have an opening sequence, and it's perfect! You've introduced your main characters and established the world they live in. Better still, you've suggested what's wrong with the world they live in. You're ready for the next step, and the next step is . . .? In part, that answer depends on you and your writing habits.

There are three common approaches to structuring the remainder of your script, and the one you choose depends upon the level of organization you require to write. Here are the three methods:

- » **Piecemeal:** This method is based on the theory that writers take a journey *with* the character and should sense what happens next. Writers who construct plots this way generally research their stories inside and out, making it possible to visualize each event without outlining it first. You may want to select this method if you fear that an outline will limit your creativity. However, this method offers little comfort if you encounter writer's block.
- » **Constellation:** In this method, a writer preselects three to five pivotal events and then "connects those dots" by crafting scenes between them. This technique works well for writers who both crave and fear the structure of an outline. The targets are chosen in advance, but the path between them remains open to the whims of inspiration.
- » **Full road map:** Writers who use this approach spend more time planning their script than writing it. After constructing a thorough scene-by-scene outline, the writer tracks everything from character changes to secrets revealed to the growing threat (whatever or whomever it may be). The thought of extensive outlining may seem daunting, but it keeps a writer focused and on track. It remains the preferred method of plot construction among screenwriters.

Again, the method you choose depends on your writing habits. I say your *writing* habits and not your personal habits because unorganized people are sometimes meticulously prepared writers and vice versa.

So how much research have you done? How well do you know your characters? If you feel that you have a thorough grasp on the story, if the characters are beginning to speak to you regularly, you may be able to piece it together scene by scene.



REMEMBER

Screenplays are complex works made up of fleeting visual moments. You can easily become mired in details and lose sight of the whole entity. Perhaps the clearest way to choose between piecemeal and the other two methods is to ask, "What will

you do when you forget where you're going?" If your answer is, "I'll look back through my research, reread my current scene, and find out," the piecemeal method might work for you. If the prospect worries you at all, you may want to start with an outline.

From Lights to Camera to . . . ACTION!

Any 6-year-old knows how to tell a story. Human beings are born equipped with a strong desire to understand what goes on around them. If you present an audience with a short film, secretly removing a key frame in the middle, most people will connect the images in some coherent fashion, regardless of the gap. They'll assume that it's supposed to make sense, and they'll concoct a plot that explains that gap until they tire of the effort.

You may therefore be surprised that many adults are afraid of telling stories. They can become suddenly unsure of their once-keen ability to do so. Yet with a few structural reminders, stories generate themselves. And the primary term to understand is *action*.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

An *action* occurs when one event causes or allows another event to take place. Two events linked in a causal relationship comprise an action.

Screenplays subsist on action, and one action is really two linked events. Consider this example: I run away from home. This event in itself isn't an action. If I run away from home *and, therefore*, my mother calls the police — those two events together comprise an action. My mother calling the police (Event #1) can be the start of a new action if, for example, it causes the police department to begin a nationwide search (Event #2).

Want a film example? In the psychological horror film *Babadook*, a young boy draws pictures of monsters and builds weapons to combat them. This behavior feels common enough for a child, until a book shows up at his family's front door, illustrating a monster called the Babadook who torments his victims once they become aware it exists. All of a sudden, the boy's obsession with monsters becomes an action, as it paves the way for combat later on, and the book's arrival becomes an action because it ushers evil into the house.

This distinction is especially important to make in film, where it would be simple to illustrate events without providing the information necessary to link them together. As a way to practice, try visualizing these events:

» A boy disappears.

- » His mother passes away.
- » His father leaves town.

These are three separate events. How might you link them so they become actions? I could rewrite them to read, “In despair over her only son’s disappearance, a young mother dies weeping in her husband’s arms. Unable to return to his now empty house, the boy’s father quietly leaves town.” I’ve now connected them through anguish, but there are many other possibilities.

Action, of course, is just one part of a scene. The following section describes how to use activity to make a scene compelling.

Action versus activity

Beginning writers often confuse action with anything that a character does in a scene. Yet movies are exactly what they advertise to be — pictures in motion. Some of that movement is action, and some is not. You will certainly construct scenes where people demonstrate hobbies, habits, professions, and idiosyncrasies. But these attributes don’t all lead to action; in fact, most of them don’t. A character may be cooking an omelet and planning the next corporate takeover in the same moment. Cooking the omelet is an activity, or *business* in film lingo — it’s a task that a character busies themselves with, but which probably won’t lead to anything beyond breakfast. However, planning the next corporate takeover *will* probably cause other events to occur. It may even result in your next scene. So it’s an action.

Compelling scenes rely on *both* action and activities. Without action, your scene won’t go anywhere; without activities, it’ll be boring to watch. Here are a few ways activities embellish a scene:

- » **They reveal character information: habits, hobbies, and idiosyncrasies.**
Does your character skate, paint, brush their hair 20 times before bed, or collect coins in their spare time? These activities add color, dimension, and texture to your characters. They separate your romantic comedy from numerous others.
- » **They quickly establish location or profession.** If your script takes place in a university during final exams, you may construct scenes in which students huddle together over books. If your protagonist is a teacher, perhaps they are grading papers or preparing for class. Strategically chosen activities provide crucial establishing information in an efficient manner.
- » **They offset and/or counter the way an audience views an action.**
Humans often behave in ways that contradict their actions — it’s in part what

makes them fun to observe. Think about it: The man who is kind and full of good intentions won't interest an audience for long. But if that same man unwittingly causes his company's demise? I'll watch him then, and, moreover, I'll probably root for him to survive the disaster.

Constructing scenes in which the activities contradict the actions may be the key to dramatizing real life. In the film *American Psycho*, the protagonist spends an entire scene comparing business cards with his colleagues. The activity of discussing things like fonts, watermarks, and paper size is seemingly innocuous, silly even. Yet, it stands in stark contrast to the action of the scene – a group of men savagely striving to be the best at everything they do.



REMEMBER

If you recognize the difference between an action and an activity, you can coordinate them in your own structure. The activities embellish your plot; the actions propel it.

Revisiting the story's time clock

If your average 6-year-old knows how to tell a story, they most certainly know when the story is complete. And it's not complete just because they couldn't think of anything else to say. Every story moves to a fixed point. When the story reaches that point, it's over, or very nearly done. More importantly, every story has a problem the characters must struggle to solve. As I discuss in Chapter 5, the story's time clock refers to the amount of time you give them to do so.

Ideally, you have established your time clock in the first portion of your script, introduced the main characters and the central conflict, and thrown your audience a few hints as to where the film may be headed. As the story progresses, then time begins to run out. This phenomenon is based on a theatrical conceit known as *rising action*. The conceit suggests that a story's intensity escalates as it heads toward a conclusion. Rising action means that generally halfway through your second act, the pace of your film picks up.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Rising action refers to an increased momentum of the film's action as it progresses toward the main objective. As a film reaches a resolution, its pace usually increases as time runs out.

Rising action affects both your main plot and your subplots simultaneously. Each storyline has its own trajectory that bolsters the other ones. You may speed each plot along by using shorter scenes, by taking less time between important discoveries, or by making it more important that the characters achieve their goals. This last technique is called *raising the stakes*.



Raising the stakes refers to the increased pressure that a writer puts on characters to achieve their goals or solve a problem. The writer usually achieves this increased necessity by putting a human element at risk — a child, a loved one, the main character's own life — and by shortening the time allotted to succeed. When the stakes are raised, victory becomes a matter of life or death.

Ask yourself two questions as you revisit your time clock. First, are you starting scenes as close to the conflict as possible? Second, are you leading the audience through the most shocking, exciting, funny, or tragic portion of the characters' lives? In other words, the middle of a screenplay is a time when struggle increases and emotions run high. If you haven't written a full outline of the action, you'll want a general idea of how you plan to manipulate your time clock throughout, to propel viewers closer and closer to some climactic or revelatory close.

Status: Where's the Upper Hand?

Audiences thrive on competition. Think about it: The most exciting sporting events are those where the score fluctuates, when control of the game continually changes hands. If you want an invigorating game, watch two equally assertive, equally adept teams vie for one winning spot. If the favored team spends the whole game crushing the competition, fans will leave pleased but uninvested. After all, they hardly exerted themselves on their team's behalf. Their players didn't need support; it was an easy victory. If the opposing team dominates the game, fans will leave furious. Not only were their heroes beaten and humiliated, they hardly put up a fight.

Keep this dynamic in mind as you construct the middle of your script. Exciting cinema resembles a great basketball game. Power changes hands, control over precious cargo is won and lost, wars are fought on both a small and grand scale. A writer heightens the struggle, be it internal, external, or both, and drama is born. So identify your hero, identify your villain, and determine how closely they're matched. What you're tracking here is that crucial and often elusive ingredient known as *status*.



Status refers to control. The character who dominates a scene physically, sexually, professionally, intellectually, or in some other way is in a position of *high status*. They control the action. The characters they dominate are in a *low status* position. Status is based on power and control, not necessarily on expected social rank or class structures.

Status roles affect every kind of relationship, and an alert writer reveals exactly how. Writers act as sociologists in this way, pinpointing the type of relationship

between two characters, determining who controls that relationship, and making educated guesses on what would happen if control changed hands. Those guesses eventually become scenes.

Study the relationships around you and assess where the power lies. Those associations generally fall into one of the following categories:

- » **Social:** Every culture consists of social classes. Even those groups that profess otherwise have some system with which to rank each other. Is that system based on money, political power, physical appearance? Is it an intimate system, employed within one circle of friends, or a complex cultural structure? Often, each tier of a social system can be similarly divided into high and low power roles. High school is a perfect example of an environment where even a subtle shift in one student's popularity can affect their peers, teachers, and family. Movies like *Mean Girls* and *Moxy* capitalize on shifts in social status within peer groups.
- » **Professional:** Unless your character is self-employed and works alone, they are part of a pecking order in their professional world. Most professions rank employees according to their credentials and maintain standards for further advancement. Because people spend entire lifetimes chasing promotion, status shifts in the professional world are full of dramatic possibility. *Sorry To Bother You* and *Clockwatchers* are examples of such a film, as are classics like *9 to 5* and *Working Girl*.
- » **Sexual:** In seduction, one person generally pursues the other. Sexual relationships, from the initial spark to the courtship to the marriage (if they go that far), are all about status games played by both parties. Historical romances like *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, *The Favourite*, and any Jane Austen adaptation are structured around those games.
- » **Intellectual:** Intelligence exists in many forms. Characters may survive through academic achievement, biting wit, or an intuitive intelligence that's sometimes called *street smarts*. In films based on these relationships, the smartest people generally win, and if they don't, the audience sometimes wishes they had. *Hidden Figures*, *The Big Short*, and *Parasite* all operate this way.
- » **Physical:** Here, the person in control is either the one with the most brute strength or the one holding the biggest weapon. Action/adventure films generally rely on these relationships to proceed. *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Black Panther*, and *The Godfather* trilogy are just a few of the many examples.
- » **Personal:** This option refers to the relationship a character has with themselves. They may be battling an individual trait, phobia, addiction, instinct, or, perhaps, a disability for control over their actions. The Oscar-nominated drama *The Sound of Metal* is a clear example of such a film.

The same characters may don several kinds of status in any given story. The bond between a queen and her servant is one that's primarily defined by social rank. However, it may also become an intellectual relationship or even a sexual one. A person plays many roles in any given day. For example, a woman who's at once a CEO, a mother, and a wife may have unfettered control over her company (high status role) but remain timid and withdrawn at home (low status role). A shift in her personal status at home may well affect her corporate dynamic.

So how does status affect the action of a film? Status shifts, no matter how slight, create tension between family and friends, community, or rivals. This tension propels action. Characters will fight to heighten or alleviate that tension, and, usually, the fight to regain stability drives the story forward. If you thrust someone who's unaccustomed to power into the spotlight, they will either fight to maintain notoriety or fight to escape it. If you strip someone of power that they're used to wielding, that person will fight to get it back. This quest is, in part, what drives Cady Heron to desperation in *Mean Girls* and Al Capone to distraction in *The Untouchables*. Whether the characters shift toward or away from control, the change makes them active and compelling to watch.

Writers also continually shift status between the audience and the characters. When characters know something that the audience doesn't, they have the upper hand. If this secret is alluded to or suggested, the audience will wait to discover what it is. They'll participate in the action by searching for clues to the undivulged information. When an audience knows something a character doesn't, the audience has the upper hand. The result is a tension known as *dramatic irony*.



Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows more than the characters. It lifts the audience to a position of advanced knowledge in which they wait for the character to discover what they know. It adds a level of dramatic tension to a scene that would otherwise not be present.

If the audience knows something that a character remains ignorant of, the audience will become invested in that character's well-being, fearing for their safety or cheering them toward discovery. In *Cabin In The Woods*, a group of scientists trick five teenagers into visiting a remote cabin to stage an ancient ritual. The audience is aware of the trial that awaits them, but the teenagers are not. This tension is crucial in a horror film where the writer wants an audience glued to the action. It also exists in comedy. In *Frozen*, loveable snowman Olaf sings an entire song about how much he wants to experience summer. He clearly doesn't know that snow melts, but the audience sure does. Kids especially delight in dramatic irony, because knowing more than the protagonist gives them a sense of power. In both examples, audiences wait for the moment when a character discovers what they already know.

So if the script is your sporting event, shifts in status help an audience keep score. If your players are evenly matched and the trophy worth attaining, everyone will stick around to see who the ultimate victor will be. For more about how status affects dialogue, see Chapter 10.

What's Your Problem? Introducing Conflicts and Obstacles

The dynamic of sporting events is comparable to that of films (see the preceding section). So, too, are their structures. Generally, both venues consist of the following:

- » A team or player to root for
- » A team or player to heckle
- » One goal that both teams are invested in
- » Conditions under which players can achieve that goal

In stories, the player we cheer for is known as the *protagonist* or the *hero*. Anyone standing in their way (that person we jeer at or fear) is the *antagonist*. The goal is what each character wants. It may be a grand, admirable goal, or it may be interesting to only your protagonist. It's only important that the characters feel they won't survive without achieving it. The conditions under which the players achieve that goal are the rules of your film: where the struggle takes place, each character's moral code, the allotted time clock, and so on. The antagonist is the most important element on this list because they are generally the first obstacle you'll introduce.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

An *obstacle* is anything that makes it difficult or impossible for your protagonist to achieve their goal. An obstacle results in tension, as the character struggles to overcome it. That tension is known as *conflict*.

Whereas a ballgame has one antagonist in the opposing player or team, movies employ all sorts of adversaries. A strong film antagonist may be any of the following:

- » **One character (also known as the villain):** Darth Vader, for example, in the *Star Wars* trilogies.

- » **A community or nation:** Sound-sensitive aliens, for example, in *A Quiet Place*.
- » **The environment or a force of nature:** The multiple cyclones, for example, in the movie *Twister*, or forces like the ravaged economy in *Nomadland*.
- » **The protagonist himself:** For example, adrenaline junkie Howard Ratner in *Uncut Gems*.

Any one of these rivals, or perhaps a few in combination, can prohibit a protagonist from attaining their goal. The goal may be power, justice, love, or a seat on the stock exchange. What matters is how committed your characters are to attaining it. The more important the goal is to both the audience and the main character, the more terrifying the antagonist's power becomes. As a writer, the more power you give your antagonist, the more interesting the struggle becomes. The first three obstacles that I mention in the previous list are external, but when the protagonist is working against themselves, as the final option in that list suggests, you're constructing an internal obstacle. Internal obstacles may be

- » A phobia
- » An addiction
- » A psychological or physical illness
- » An overbearing or embarrassing personality trait
- » A debilitating state of mind, such as depression, jealousy, defeat, anger, or indecision

The most compelling films employ both internal and external obstacles. In an effort to make her last week of school memorable, the protagonist of *Eighth Grade* fends off sex-starved teenage boys (external obstacle) while battling crippling social anxiety (internal obstacle). The film *Arachnophobia* is another example of this fusion; poisonous spiders attack the town, and what do you suppose the main character can't stand? You guessed it — spiders.



REMEMBER

An easy victory or a quick defeat offers little satisfaction. Audiences want heroes to beat the odds, to win under seemingly impossible circumstances. Internal obstacles give your characters something to overcome in themselves while the physical action ensues. In a way, that's two conflicts for the price of one.

Keep in mind that obstacles are goal related; they prevent characters from achieving something they desperately want to achieve. If your obstacle isn't strong enough to do so, if it's heavy traffic or the rising temperature or misplaced car keys, it won't sustain a story. These irritations may color your action, but don't rely on them to propel it.

Exposition: From Clunky to Creative

It's sometimes easy to forget that audiences begin their journey knowing virtually nothing about your plot. You have thoroughly researched the subject, and you have spent months (if not years) with the characters — you are a field expert here. But your audience? Sure, they arrived at the theater for a reason; they may have seen a trailer or read a review. But trailers are 30 seconds long, and reviews are generally subjective. The likelihood is that they probably don't know much about your film at all. Audiences need *exposition* in order to understand the story that you already know so much about.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Exposition refers to information that the audience needs in order to understand the present story. The information may concern a character's relationship to others or historical details surrounding an event. One or all the characters generally already know this information. Exposition differs from backstory. Backstory encompasses everything that you've imagined about these characters and their pasts. An audience won't need all this information to follow the story. Exposition strictly refers to details from the backstory without which an audience will be confused.

Exposition is often difficult to reveal in a natural manner. On first try, it tends to feel awkward or forced, like a stutter in an otherwise fluent speech. Why does this difficulty arise? In large part, exposition is awkward to present because it rarely occurs in real life. Most of your characters will share a past, and when you share common experiences with people, you rarely have to retell the whole story to remember it correctly. You discuss those memories with the acquired shorthand that exists among friends, family, and partners in crime. However, stories are written for an audience. The audience didn't experience everything that took place in the backstory, so they'll need more explanation. The challenge lies in providing that information in a natural way, through believable dialogue, consistent action, or dynamic images.

Exposition comes in two types:

- » Information the audience needs but everyone else knows
- » Information the audience needs but only a few characters know

Sharing info the characters know

The first kind of information presents a distinct problem. In most stories, characters already share information about each other, so writers must concoct reasons for them to reveal or relive it. This info may concern their relationships with other characters or details of events that they were all a part of — in any case, it's old

news for them. The world of the audience doesn't concern them; they aren't aware that it exists. So how do you construct scenes that smoke the details out into the open?

Many writers use their opening sequence to handle exposition. Scenes introducing main characters may visually suggest the types of relationships shared, while highlighting their professions, desires, and/or their goals. The first ten minutes may be a series of time jumps that guide an audience through key moments in the past before beginning the present action. In this way, the audience shares past experiences with the characters and begins on the same page (so to speak). You may use a narrator for the same purpose — to alert viewers to details they may otherwise miss. All that said, you can't possibly pack every piece of expository information into the first sequence, nor would you want to. Your opening would then be instructive instead of intriguing. So in crafting your second act, keep in mind these pieces of information that you may need to clarify:

- » A character's successes and failures
- » A character's secret feelings or opinions of another character
- » A character's secret feelings or opinions of an event
- » A character's personal tendencies, including fantasies, addictions, hopes, fears, and regrets
- » Memories that haunt your characters
- » Basic information about any new character you introduce

Remember that any information you share should remain on a need-to-know basis. You may uncover details that, while fascinating, aren't necessary. Exposition is *relevant* information, without which an audience would be confused about the action. For this reason, you need to try to reveal the information at the moment it's most helpful in the most entertaining way possible.

The Big Short is about the 2007 housing bubble, which is a complicated subject that most people don't find entertaining. Therefore, the writers wait to explain it until the market is on the brink of collapse, and then broker Jared Vennett (Ryan Gosling) explains how mortgages work using a tower of Jenga blocks. The information is delivered in a simple, funny way at one of the most stressful moments of the film. If you divulge too many details in advance, those details may distract viewers from pertinent action in the moment, or they may forget them well before they become important. If you wait until the viewers are desperate to understand what's going on, they are likely to lean forward in their seats for the exposition.

Sharing info the characters may not know

The second type of exposition is less difficult to maneuver because it suggests more dramatic possibilities. If one character knows something that the others don't, eventually, that character will confide in someone, and the audience will be privy to that conversation. The character may also have the job of presenting information as needed. In *Jurassic Park*, we learn how the scientists genetically engineered dinosaurs via an animated DNA sequence that plays as part of the park tour ride. Both the other characters and the audience need this information because the remainder of the film takes place in combat against their creations.

Study films with an eye toward exposition and note how they convey necessary information. Does the writer alert an audience to pertinent facts through flashback scenes? Through character confessions? Or does the writer weave the information in gradually, explaining behavior and action as it seems necessary to do so instead of at the onset? Many successful films strive to do the following:

- » Convey most information through visual images rather than dialogue
- » Drop the information in a moment of extreme conflict, need, or humor
- » Only say what's necessary when necessary
- » Avoid didactic speeches
- » Force the characters to work for information they need

For a clear example of an entertaining way to convey otherwise didactic information, look at *Back to the Future*. In this film, Doc needs to explain his time travel plan to Marty. Rather than simply describing it in a formal manner, he creates a scale model of their town square and demonstrates his plans with a miniature DeLorean. The audience (and Marty) can absorb the information more easily because they visualize the plan as Doc enacts it.



REMEMBER

A little information goes a long way. Extraneous details won't hold your audience's attention for long and are easily forgotten.

Note also the difference between exposition and *dramatic secrets*. Secrets are details the writer intends for everyone to discover together, characters and audience alike. That withheld information isn't crucial to the audience's understanding of the script. It comes as a satisfying surprise; it may be something an audience waits for, but the audience understands the drama without it. With exposition, you plant the information when the time is right and get back to the action as quickly as possible. If you're crafty, you can find a way for the information to fuel an event, thereby making it an action in itself.

Determining What to Write from What You've Written

Many writers, beginning and veteran alike, panic at the thought of generating 100 to 120 pages of compelling drama. Yet this dread often exists because they're constantly looking forward, straining to see what comes next and afraid that nothing will occur to them. However, much of the writing has been done for you after you craft your opening sequence. You just have to revisit it and see what you've already done.

Every part of your screenplay will consist of a few choices that rise above the rest. By rise, I mean that they seem to be prominent or important in the scene for reasons that may be unknown even to you as you write. When you revisit your opening scenes, take note of anything out of the ordinary. You're looking for items known as *dramatic plants*, and I'm not talking about potted greens with a flair for theatrics.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A *plant* (in film lingo) is a piece of evidence or information that's strategically placed in a scene in order to be discovered later on. In literary circles, the term *foreshadowing* is used as well, as plants hint at events down the road. As the action progresses, the plant assumes new meaning and may then be reincorporated for greater effect in an ensuing scene. The moment of renewed discovery is called the *payoff*. A dramatic plant may be any of the following:

- »» A key image
- »» A line of dialogue
- »» A motion or a gesture
- »» An object
- »» A costume piece
- »» A song or intriguing sound effect

The key to every strong plant is how you *reincorporate* it into the action later on. Suppose that I construct a scene in which a mother warns her children not to play near the china cabinet, pointing out one bowl in particular that's a family heirloom. That bowl is the plant. You know what has to happen later, don't you? That bowl has to break. Every time a child moves near it, the tension mounts. If it breaks in the next scene, I've robbed my audience of prolonged tension. But if I construct a few scenes in which it nearly breaks, I'm reminding the audience to watch for the impending disaster. And if the mother finally breaks it on

purpose, I've found a surprising conclusion, but one that's perhaps satisfying in its irony.

You'll want to place distance between the plant and the payoff to ensure that the plant has time to acquire meaning. In *Good Will Hunting*, Dr. Maguire (Robin Williams) tells Will Hunting (Matt Damon) a story about missing the World Series to go on a date with his future wife. When Hunting inquires what excuse he gave his friends for missing the event, Maguire says, "I told them I had to go see about a girl." This line rings at the time because it's well constructed and it ends the story. It doesn't show up again until the final moment of the film when Hunting decides to leave town to track down his love interest. The note he leaves for Maguire says, "I have to go see about a girl." Throughout the story, numerous experts try to break through Hunting's stubborn veneer and teach him something. Although this line is funny the first time an audience hears it, by the end, it stands as proof that Maguire taught him something.

Take a look at your opening sequence and circle anything that you might reincorporate later. If you've introduced more than one character, you'll probably want to connect those characters later. If you begin with a crucial image, perhaps you'll revisit it later; if danger lurks in your first moments, you'll want it to return in a different, perhaps stronger guise. If you repeat this process with every scene you write, future moments may suggest themselves to you. You'll worry less about what to write next and concentrate instead on how to get there. The next step is to craft plants from the start and place them in a scene, knowing how you'll use them later.



WARNING

Don't confuse *reincorporation* with *repetition*, though. When you repeat a line, gesture, or image, you return to it in its original shape. If it gains importance the second or third time around, the action has shifted around it, but the image remains intact. The key line in *Good Will Hunting* remains the same even though the character who speaks it changes. The students in the *Blair Witch Project* return to the same clearing in the woods several times before their demise. Because the location never changes, the characters and the audience both realize they must be lost, and panic sets in. By the third time, the clearing takes on a menacing quality.

In contrast, you can *reincorporate* a plant in many ways. In *Jojo Rabbit*, writer/director Taika Waititi returns to images of characters' shoes. The young protagonist's mother ties his shoes in a loving gesture. She dances with him to prove that their life isn't all about war and bigotry. Eventually, shoes become a symbol of love and kindness, and when the Nazis hang his mother and we see her shoes dangling in the air, we recognize that love and kindness are what's at stake in times of war.



TIP

Here's a quick way to define the difference between the two devices:

- » **In repetition:** The plant remains the same, but the action alters around it.
- » **In reincorporation:** The plant shifts to suggest changes that have occurred in the action.

Plants establish a pattern; the payoff represents the satisfying end to that pattern. Returning to an unaltered image or event several times (repetition), lets the audience view it again, hopefully in a different way. The audience discovers new information as the film progresses, so the image acquires new meaning the next time around. Returning to a slightly altered image or event (reincorporation) helps the audience understand changes in the story as a whole. The image becomes a way to gauge the action. Whether you return to an event or image several times or only once, the process of revisiting generally results in a feeling of completion. You'll want to track the plants through your second act to determine which ones you use to enhance your story, and which ones you employ to conclude it.

Three Compelling (and Contrasting) Movie Middles

In Chapter 6, I detail three very different but equally compelling movie openings. So here, I break *Jaws*, *Lady Bird*, and *Moonlight* into their ensuing actions, obstacles, key exposition, and status fluctuations. If you haven't seen any of these films, you may want to rent them before reading the next section, or the outlines will ruin future surprises.



TIP

If you see these films, I encourage you to break them into the individual story components of status, obstacle, actions, and exposition. The pieces will undoubtedly overlap; obstacles cause actions, status shifts result in more obstacles, and so on. Yet by focusing your attention on one component at a time, you garner a familiarity with plot structure as a whole. Hopefully, it'll make the construction of your second act less daunting.

Jaws

Key actions: The second act of this script takes place in two major parts that are separated by location. The first portion takes place in town; the second takes place on the water. Here are the key actions in chronological order.

The mayor decides to keep the beaches open, claiming that the initial death was due to a boating accident. The shark kills a young boy, and his mother offers a \$3,000 reward for its capture. A shark hunter named Captain Quint says that he'll kill the creature for \$10,000. The marine biologist, Matt Hooper, arrives and discovers the false boating accident report. A tiger shark is captured, prompting the mayor to announce the threat is gone. The mother finds out that Police Chief Brody knew about the shark and failed to alert anyone. She publicly blames him for the death of her son. Brody and Hooper discover that the tiger shark isn't the killer, but the mayor refuses to listen. Another man is killed the next day in the same area where both Brody's son and the mayor's children are swimming. As a result, the mayor signs an agreement to let Brody and Hooper hire Quint to kill the shark. The trio sail out to kill the shark, and it puts up a formidable fight — sinking the boat, separating Hooper from Brody, and eating Quint in the process. When the second act ends, Brody must face the shark alone.

Obstacles: The town and the shark are the primary antagonists and external obstacles. Those obstacles collide when the mayor refuses to close the beaches to tourists. This conflict becomes more prominent when the tiger shark is caught and everyone assumes the waters are safe. Brody overcomes this obstacle when the shark threatens the mayor's own children, and he signs an order to destroy it. The battle with the shark is further complicated by the shark's size, strength, and intelligence, a rickety boat, and a slightly crazy captain. The most powerful internal obstacle is Brody's fear of water. He overcomes this terror to finish the job.

Exposition: The audience needs to know that it's the Fourth of July weekend, that Brody is afraid of water, that Hooper has never tracked a great white shark (especially one of this magnitude), and that Quint saw his entire crew get eaten by sharks after a submarine attack in the war. The first pieces of information are conveyed visually and through scattered lines of dialogue. The rest is revealed over the ship's table, moments before the final struggle with the shark.

Status: Status first alters in the political battle between the town and Brody. Brody ultimately triumphs. The battle among the three protagonists is both social and intellectual. Quint owns the ship and has experiential knowledge of sharks; Hooper has the scientific data and is as stubborn as Quint. Brody allows them both to control the hunt until called upon to fight at the end. Their relationship with the shark is obviously a physical fight to the death — when the second act ends, it's unclear which side will triumph.

Lady Bird

Key actions: Because the film spans Lady Bird's final year in high school, the pivotal moments all launch us forward in time. Also, while the story's time clock revolves around her quest to get into an East Coast college, it's her turbulent

relationship with her mother that drives the film to its conclusion. In the film's second act, Lady Bird and her best friend, Julie, join the fall musical where Lady Bird falls for fellow actor Danny. Lady Bird convinces her father to help with financial aid applications despite promising her mother she'll focus on state schools. She discovers that Danny is gay and turns her attention to musician/anarchist Kyle. She abandons Julie for a friendship with popular Jenna. She gets suspended for speaking out at an assembly, which results in a fight with her mother. She loses her virginity to Kyle only to discover he's been lying about his sexual exploits. She reconciles with Julie and Danny and graduates with a plan to go to a state school. At a celebratory dinner, her mother discovers she's been wait-listed at a university in New York, and their relationship falls apart. By the time Lady Bird receives an acceptance letter from that university, her mother is no longer speaking to her.

Obstacles: The key physical obstacles working against Lady Bird's quest to leave Sacramento are finances and poor grades. The key internal obstacles involve Lady Bird's desire to be wealthier and more glamorous than she is, which makes it impossible to appreciate the family and friendships she has. What makes this story so powerful is that the main antagonist — her mother — is as complex and relatable as Lady Bird. We may not agree with how she parents her daughter, but it's clear she loves her. Our desire is therefore divided: We want Lady Bird to get into the college of her dreams *and* we want her to appreciate the person standing in her way.

Exposition: To Greta Gerwig's credit, most of the film's action doesn't rely on information from the past. The only relevant backstory we need is that Lady Bird's father has recently lost his job. Her mother repeats this information whenever she wants to guilt Lady Bird into submission. It therefore never feels awkward or contrived because it arrives in the form of a tactic.

Status: There are two kinds of status in this film: the status that Lady Bird craves, which comes in the form of wealth and popularity, and the ever-shifting status between her and her mother. The first kind of status builds tension because Lady Bird keeps striving to achieve her dreams in unhealthy ways. We therefore worry for her and wait for her to become more self-aware. The second kind of status shapes the film. Lady Bird is an idealist and her mother is a realist, and we bounce between their points of view throughout the story.

Moonlight

Key actions: Of the three movies discussed here, *Moonlight* has the most prominent and unique structure. The film's three acts each track a different stage of the protagonist's life: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. As the protagonist's identity shifts, so do the projected titles of each act. The first act is titled

“Little;” then “Chiron”; then “Black.” Many of the key actions in the second and third acts of this film are continuations of actions we witness in the first.

In the first act, Little wrestles with his only friend, Kevin, out of equal parts fear and attraction. He finds surrogate parents in drug dealer Juan, and his girlfriend Teresa. While Little’s mother loves him, she’s also an addict, coasting on drugs Juan sells, and their relationship is fraught. Haunted by schoolyard taunts, Little begins to question his sexuality. In a pivotal scene, Juan tells Little that when he was young, a woman saw him running barefoot in the moonlight and told him, “In moonlight, black boys look blue, so I’m going to call you Blue.” When Little asks if that’s his name, Juan responds, “Nah. At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you’re gonna be. Can’t let nobody make that decision for you.” This advice marks the film’s key theme and Little’s primary goal — don’t let the world define you. Learn to define yourself.

In act two, Chiron is still an outcast at school where he’s bullied by a boy named Terrel. His mother’s addiction escalates to the point where she steals money from him and prostitutes herself out of their home. He continues to find refuge with Juan and Teresa. Kevin and Chiron share a secret sexual encounter, after which Terrel convinces Kevin to prove his manhood by beating Chiron up. Sick of the bullying, Chiron assaults Terrel at school and is arrested.

In the final act, Black is out of juvie, having relocated to Atlanta. He’s a drug dealer now, overseeing his business via Juan’s car. He reconciles with his mother who’s doing well in rehab. Kevin calls him unexpectedly and offers to cook Black a meal if he’s ever in town. Black drives to Kevin’s restaurant and they catch up over that meal. Kevin invites Black to stay at his place that night, and the two head there in silence.

Obstacles: The obstacles Chiron encounters in the second and third acts of this film are variations on those introduced in the first. His mother’s addiction becomes impossible to combat. The bullies in school force him to hide who he really is. His biggest obstacle is Kevin, who seems like an ally in the first act but becomes a bully in the second. This obstacle not only enhances Chiron’s distrust of personal relationships, but it drives him to create a false persona in order to survive. That persona is the obstacle standing between him and Kevin in the final act.

Exposition: Because *Moonlight* tracks Chiron from childhood into adulthood, exposition is rarely needed. We see the events that shape him, and those events are revisited and evolve as he ages. One of the only examples of direct exposition is when Juan tells Chiron the story about discovering how black boys look blue in the moonlight. That story is necessary for us, as it’s the title of the film, but it arrives at the moment Chiron most needs its message. As a result, it feels like an act of kindness.

Status: Status in this film moves in one direction for our main character — down. From the first moment Little is introduced, he's in a low status position, being chased by bullies through a field. His status in the community and with his mother continues to fall, until violence feels like his only recourse. As a result, the audience is as desperate for him to succeed as he is. McCraney thereby ensures that even a small victory will feel momentous by the end.

- » Pinpointing your story's conclusion
- » Tracing your character arcs
- » Protecting your script from destructive elements
- » Exploring successful movie endings

Chapter 8

Plot Part III: Endings

What if I told you that a story is finished when the characters triumph over adversity, the villain disappears, the conflicts are efficiently resolved, and everyone goes home smiling. You don't believe me? What if I said that your story's finished when the characters, who have undergone so much turmoil that they can hardly stand, finally give up the effort entirely and let the world collapse around them. You still seem skeptical. Well, good for you because, for a compelling story, neither of those endings fits the bill.

Regarding your story's conclusion, I have both good news and bad news. The good news is that if all your second-act pieces are in place — if you have crafted dynamic actions, challenging obstacles, and formidable foes — your ending should write itself. The bad news is that at the end of a first draft, your second-act pieces are rarely in place.

A convincing conclusion is one in which the conflicts that you have inflated in act two find resolution, the characters achieve their goals or stop vying for them, and the new world you've created makes some kind of sense — however unorthodox or uncomfortable that sense may be. Your ending relies on every moment that precedes it. If the second act offers no solution, you'll need to keep working on it until it does.

This chapter offers suggestions on ways to recheck both your opening and second act to steer them toward the appropriate finale and on how to approach crafting that finale when you get there. (For more info on crafting your first and second acts, see Chapters 6 and 7.)

Are We There Yet? How to Know When You're Done

The end of your second act is a precarious place to be. Your protagonist is either embroiled in chaos and ready to abandon hope, or they are just beginning to acknowledge a bright and promising future. The antagonist is closing in, ready to fight to the death if need be, and time is running out. The only question left to answer is, “Will your protagonist succeed?” In other words, will they overcome the obstacles and achieve their goal? After you answer that question, proceed to the following questions. They may help guide you to a fitting conclusion for your script.

- » Has your story been written before? If so, how does it differ from predecessors with a similar concept?
- » Do you understand your characters more thoroughly now than when you began?
- » Are your rules still intact? (See Chapter 6 where I discuss rules.)
- » Have your story's central themes changed? If so, what are they now?
- » Does each portion of your story address those themes or questions in some way?
- » Has your story reached the point you anticipated reaching? If not, are you happy where it is?
- » What has been gained and/or lost for the characters, the environment, and the audience?

The first six questions address elements of your opening and second act, which you may need to adjust in retrospect. If you discover a movie that shares too much in common with your own, you'll want to enhance the portions of your script that make it unique.

You should know more about your characters now than when you started. If you don't, your action is probably fueled by events rather than people. Go back and see what you can discover in hindsight.

The rules of your film refer to its consistency. In other words, are you writing the same film now that you were at the beginning? If not — if characters have mysteriously disappeared, the genre has changed, or the ultimate goal shifted — you'll want to check to see where the plot became muddled. The same note applies to your story's central themes and questions. You may find that the themes you arrive at are more compelling than those that began the journey. If that's the case, rewrite your beginning to match your end.

The final question on the list speaks to the all-important aspects of any film — the elements of epiphany, discovery, and change. Unless your characters have learned something about themselves or the world in which they exist, you won't know how to end your story. The film's final moments rely on an acquired knowledge on the part of your characters and, hopefully, in the audience as well.



TECHNICAL
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An *epiphany* is a sudden, intuitive realization, an unexpected understanding of reality. The key words there are *unexpected* and *realization*. In grand cases, epiphanies are accompanied by a gasp and an awakening of the senses as people struggle to absorb a newfound understanding about their world. In more subtle instances, an epiphany feels like relief at the solution to a mystery. In films, audiences usually experience epiphanies with the characters. In cases of dramatic irony, however, audiences may wait for a character to discover something the audience already knew. Regardless, an epiphany always signals a jolt of awareness in your main character(s), and as a result, it's often the heart of a strong conclusion.

Tracking the change: What's different now?

A strong story chronicles the most compelling moments in a character's life. And the most compelling moments involve the most difficult and, therefore, enlightening transitions. Consider revelations in your own life — moments when you discovered something horrific or awe-inspiring about yourself, your community, or your environment. I'd venture to guess that they included or were followed by personal growth and maturity. Your characters will experience the same phenomenon as the script progresses, and what they learn will affect where you lead them, a journey known as the film's *dramatic arc*.



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A *dramatic arc* refers to the trajectory of a character, a community, or an environment from one state of being to another. The transition can be monitored through changes in behavior, in points of view, or in moral codes that, in turn, alter the story's action.

Reconsidering your story's time clock

Your story's time clock refers to the event your script is tiptoeing or barreling toward. In Chapter 5, I discuss several kinds of time clocks and their advantages; Regardless of which time clock you chose at the start of your story, you should revisit it as you construct your conclusion. If your story is moving toward an external event, as in *Black Swan*, the culminating moments will involve watching an anticipated performance. If your story revolves around an internal crisis, as in *Coda*, your final moments will determine whether the protagonist chooses her family's needs over her own.



TIP

Generally speaking, the film ends fairly quickly after the culminating event. So if you know what the story's time clock is, and if you have built a plot moving the viewers toward it, you'll know exactly what the final moments of your script should entail.

Tracking character arcs

Before you craft a conclusion, look back at what your characters have undergone so far. Hopefully, they've changed as a result. You're tormenting them for a reason, right? It's your job to challenge and, if necessary, harass your characters into a new way of life. They'll become the sum of all the experiences you toss at them, so keep track of those experiences and, more importantly, of their consequences. In doing so, you'll discover the following:

- » Whether the stages of transformation are clear
- » Whether your audience has been privy to the transformation
- » Whether you've omitted key moments in those transformations
- » Who your character may ultimately turn out to be

If your character exits one scene as a millionaire and appears two scenes later begging for change on a street corner somewhere, your audiences won't trust the transformation. Why should they? *You* might know how they got from one state of being to the next, but the audience doesn't, or not yet anyway. The most dramatic scenes in this scenario connect the character from wealthy Point A to impoverished Point B. If you show me their gambling habit, the demise of their business, and a hefty divorce settlement that favors an ex-wife, I'll not only understand their monetary transition, I may even expect it.

The preceding scenario is an example of an external change, which is generally less difficult to dramatize. Those external changes may affect the following aspects of your character:

- » Appearance
- » Mode of expression
- » Profession and/or financial status
- » Circle of family and/or friends
- » Habits, hobbies, and personal tendencies

Many external changes don't necessitate lengthy dialogue. If your main character begins the journey hobnobbing with the elite and ends warming their hands over a back-alley fire pit, I'll visually note the change in their social circle.

External changes generally mark key stages in the story's dramatic arc. In *Hustlers*, nightclub dancer Destiny's rise in power is marked by the trappings of prosperity. In *The Joker*, the protagonist's descent into madness is marked by his increasing violence and the clown persona, which shifts from childish to macabre. However, shifts in the character's physical person or circumstances may also be the result of some internal transformation. Internal transformations include shifts in the character's

- » Psychological health
- » Confidence
- » Anxiety
- » Sexuality
- » Opinions or beliefs
- » Passions or dreams
- » Awareness of others
- » Compassion or lack thereof
- » Religion or faith



External changes are simple to dramatize; internal shifts require more skill. Unless you visually re-create the mental landscape, as the writers do in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Inside Out*, it will be the character's behavior that clues viewers in to the transformation. In *Midsommar*, the protagonist begins her journey as a traumatized outsider, hovering on the edges of her social circle. Her transformation into an unnerving leader is marked by the distance growing between her and her boyfriend, and in the number of new friends she makes throughout the film.

After you know what changes your characters have undergone prior to your conclusion, consider how their transformation affects the world they live in. Ideally, a shift in one arena is reflected in the other and vice versa.

Altering the world of your script

Characters are so closely linked to their environments that it can be difficult to distinguish changes in one realm from changes in the other. You should track these transformations through the first and second acts in order to predict where you'll end up. Here are two important questions to consider while constructing your final landscape:

- » What sort of world have I crafted?
- » Why have I led my audience to that world?

The first question speaks to your script's general climate. By climate, I don't mean the weather. I mean the actual landscapes and the social, political, and economic conditions, all of which may alter with the action. The climate may shift in any of the following ways:

- » Physically
- » Politically
- » Socially
- » Spiritually
- » Ethically
- » Sexually

A change in climate makes something possible that wasn't possible before, or it removes a possibility entirely. In *Lord of the Rings*, a beautiful and serene setting becomes dark and ominous. The landscape shifts, and it becomes more difficult for good to prevail. In *Wolf Walkers*, a father witnesses his daughter's physical transformation, and the spiritual climate shifts. People who once denounced the supernatural find themselves drawn to it. As a result, they view an age-old enemy with different eyes. To further understand what I mean by climate, you may want to complete this phrase:

"My story ends in a world where ____ is no longer possible/acceptable and where ____ can now occur."

You should be able to complete at least one part of that statement by the end of your script. At the end of *The Untouchables*, Chicago is a city where extortion is no longer acceptable and where justice can be achieved. No one has solved racism or sexism at the end of *Hidden Figures*, but the racist argument that black women have no mind for mathematics has been destroyed.

The second question — "Why have I led my audience to this new world?" — speaks to your responsibility as a writer. You're not going on this journey alone. The audience expects to gain or feel something along the way; it expects to leave the film changed. You're giving the audience a gift of some kind — the gift of laughter, of knowledge, and even of pain if enlightenment is the result. Spielberg's *Schindler's List* is an example of a world full of bigotry, destruction, and death. Yet at the film's conclusion, relatives of the deceased leave stones on the graves, honoring the victims of the Holocaust together. The audience may leave feeling horrified and/or ashamed, but it will also remember the victims and the survivors.

The world you craft need not be neat, predictable, or safe. Your audience members probably don't live in a world where all three of those conditions exist, and they

might not believe it if they saw it. Your characters don't need to end up happy or more ethically sound; that phenomenon also rarely occurs in everyday life. However, in order to satisfy your audience, the world you leave them with should do a few things clearly:

- » It should evolve out of the previous action.
- » It should represent the changes that your main characters have undergone along the way.
- » It should allow or prevent your characters from achieving their goals and/or solving their problems.
- » It should offer hope in some direction.

The last item on that list is negotiable, and it's linked to your point of view about the world. However, it also speaks to responsibility. Ideally, your story represents a change for the better or offers that distinct possibility. Yes, your main character may die, but can that death lead to some ultimate good? Two characters who we treasure die in *A Quiet Place*, but both deaths bring the remaining characters closer and more determined than ever to survive in honor of their loved ones' memories.

Crafting your story's conclusion

You can conclude your film in numerous ways, yet the smoothest endings seem to exist in two parts: the climax and the resolution. In a sense, the rising action runs you up the hill where you fight the final battle (known as the climax), and at the end, you roll down the other side of that hill into the resolution. By the end of the second act, you should know roughly what that resolution will be. Even if you're a writer who loathes outlines, you know what your characters want, and you know where they're going. Start painting a picture that tells your audience what you already know.



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The *climax* represents the most intense scene of the film in which the protagonist makes one last attempt at achieving their goal. The climax is the culmination of any struggles or transformations the character has experienced prior to it; it marks the story's final battlefield.

Climax — the final frontier

The climax marks the first and most important part of your story's conclusion. If you've done your job, audiences have some idea of what's coming next, and they're ready for it. Your action up to that point creates expectations that your climax will probably fulfill. But no pressure, right? With so much riding on this scene, it really helps to take it step by step.

A dynamic climax will do the following:

- » **Be the grandest scene in your script in weight, scope, and action.** All scenes lead to this one, so don't disappoint your audience by skimming through the climax. Consider your genre. If your film is a romantic comedy, the romance blossoms or ends here. If your film is an action/adventure, the greatest, most exciting battle occurs here. If your film is a tragedy, the climax marks the time of greatest loss. Remember that time is running out; the actions that your characters once shied away from must happen now if they're to happen at all. If you make bold decisions anywhere, let it be here.
- » **Toss your protagonist into a moment of choice.** Your characters have undergone changes for a reason. They've acquired skill and knowledge and newfound awareness because that expertise will be necessary in the climax. Place your characters in a moment of uncertainty when they must choose how to act and let them use their newfound knowledge to decide what to do. If things simply happen to your main character, the audience will leave dissatisfied, uncertain whether the character is truly strong enough to solve the problem or simply lucky.
- » **Begin at the moment that the protagonist experiences the greatest despair or the first indications of hope.** The choice you make here often determines whether you end triumphantly or with tragic repercussions. A character who begins the climax in anguish has nowhere to go but up. Something will happen in the next moment to convince them to turn things around, and they'll face the enemy refreshed or, at the very least, determined. On the flip side, a character who's full of great hope at the onset of the climax has the most to lose. The character will either experience that loss in the final scenes or experience it and then make a recovery at the end.
- » **End when the protagonist resolves their problems.** Resolving the problem doesn't necessarily mean achieving the goal. However, if your character doesn't achieve their goal, their failure to do so should somehow solve the problem. Six-year-old Hushpuppy doesn't save her father in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, but she discovers the strength to save herself. Luke Skywalker doesn't decisively defeat Darth Vader until the third film in the *Star Wars* trilogy, but he finds harrowing and creative ways to fend him off until then.

Your character is waging a dual war in the climax:

- » **A war with the external antagonist/villain.** Keep track of your villain or your chosen antagonist. That character has learned things as a result of the hero, and may have garnered support to combat the hero. They're both ready to win and they should be evenly matched.

» **An internal war.** Something internal has been barring your character from complete success. They need to overcome that weakness here or use it to their distinct advantage. In either case, overcoming this internal conflict becomes an important part of your protagonist's primary journey or arc.



TIP

Ask yourself what event would force protagonist and antagonist together, where would they choose to wage a last war, and who is the strongest of the pair. That scene is your climax.

Your audience should leave your film satisfied. Notice that I don't say thrilled or grief-stricken, but satisfied. In Chapter 7, I discuss reincorporation, the art of weaving key bits of thematic information throughout your story. Those bits culminate here. The climax marks the final reincorporation of images, themes, skills, and traumas. Luke Skywalker loses his aunt and uncle, who act as his parents at the beginning of the *Star Wars* trilogy; he finds his real father in the trilogy's final climax. George Lucas reincorporates the idea of parenting and guidance one last time, and somehow, the story feels complete. *The Sixth Sense* begins with a violent break-in and shooting in the protagonist's home. It's not until the final moments of the resolution that viewers discover the true ramifications of that break-in, and it affects how they look back at the entire plot. Your climax releases the tension that you've constructed between characters, and it completes some pattern, be it behavioral or thematic. The end of that pattern is highly satisfying.



TECHNICAL
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The *resolution* occurs immediately after the climax and comprises the film's last scenes. This is the time characters and audiences alike absorb the impact of the final confrontation. It marks the characters' first steps as changed people in the new world of your story. In most instances, all that remains of a film after the resolution are the closing credits.

Resolution — the final lap

Your film's resolution is the audience's final grace note, the time to linger with the characters just long enough to sense what's new. Here are some final questions that may help you clarify those scenes when you get there:

- » **Where is your villain?** What kind of justice reigns in your finale? A truly formidable villain leaves a mark even after death, be it a physical scar on the hero's cheek or his wiser, more wary sensibility.
- » **What has your protagonist lost and gained?** This loss or gain may be as specific as a love interest and as profound as inner peace, but something is no doubt missing from this new world, and something exists now that wasn't there when you began. What is it?

- » **Was it worth the trip?** Ask this question for the characters and for the audience. What can a human being gain from watching the action? The answer may be “an evening of laughter” or “an unflinching examination of white supremacy.” If the audience leaves with an element of understanding or hope, you have done all right.
- » **What story might begin the way yours now ends?** The ending of most stories suggest the beginning of a new one (and possible sequel!). You’re moving your characters from stability into chaos and back to a new (if untested) stability. One character’s finale might be another’s opening night.

Your resolution will most likely be short. After all, you confronted the problem in the climax. You probably just have a few loose ends to tie up. After the explosive and revealing scene between Will Hunting and Dr. Maguire in *Good Will Hunting*, Hunting must quit his job, pack his belongings, and leave a final message for Maguire. The audience needs to see his friends drive up to the house and discover him gone because it completes a pattern established earlier. Yet these scenes happen quickly. The pervading tension has already been released, and the epiphany has been reached — give us a few final moments to glimpse the results and let the closing credits roll.

Danger Will Robinson: Threats to an Otherwise Healthy Plot

Much of a first draft is written in a feverish pitch and at a feverish pace. If you let your script sit around for too long in between writing marathons, anxiety will creep up on you along with every other task you have to complete before finishing the script. So, it’s often wise to write the whole thing quickly while caught in the story’s grip and hunt for problem spots later. However, you now have a complete draft. You have a beginning, a middle, and — lo and behold — an ending. Now, you can begin to search for those things that make your plot go clunk instead of zing.

Would that really happen? The probable versus the possible

When you write a script, you make a silent pact with an eventual audience; the audience is going to trust you, and you’re going to preserve that trust. Audiences want you to succeed at your craft. They pay good money to see your work; they want your story to astound them, move them, and affect them in some positive way. In other words, they’re on your side. That is, they’re on your side until the first line of dialogue doesn’t ring true, until the first scene with a forced conclusion, until that

long-lost character emerges to sum everything up, or until that senior citizen with the broken ankle manages to sprint up six flights of steps at record speed just in time to force his way into the dead-bolted room and defeat the sumo wrestler. *Plausibility*, and lack thereof, will be the first thing to make or break your film.

Aristotle said that drama lies in that which is probable, rarely in that which is possible. Plausibility refers to holes in your story's logic, and the more probable your actions are, the fewer holes you'll have. You should ask yourself the same two questions that audiences will ask as they watch:

- » Could this really happen?
- » Could it really happen this way in the world I've created?

That last question is the more important of the two. The films *Taken*, *My Son*, and *Raising Arizona* all involve kidnapping, but events that seem plausible in one film would seem impossible in another. *Taken* and *My Son* strive for realism, while *Raising Arizona* strives for comedy. Something that seems ridiculous by ordinary standards is plausible in the world of farce. Similarly, it feels plausible when people survive an epic car chase in a James Bond film, but impossible if it were to happen in a realistic drama.



Some questionable moments might catch an audience's attention more than others depending on your style or genre and the audience's overall expectations. A story becomes improbable when

- » **It has glaring historical or factual errors.** Audiences shouldn't expect movies, historical or otherwise, to be entirely factual. They're built on drama, and drama takes liberties. However, if your script takes place in the 17th century and a car drives by in the distance, that story's going to be a hard sell.
- » **The film's genre shifts or is in question.** The best films combine comedy with drama, romance with adventure, and so on. Yet at its core, a film lives in one genre. If it doesn't, if it jumps evenly between two or more categories, it may feel like two films are vying for space, neither of which has time to fully develop.
- » **Crucial information arrives too easily.** I watch movies to see people struggle, to battle each other for control of something that they want. Your heroes are only strong because an audience witnesses their struggle. If your hero's life is simple and easy, not only will I refuse to believe it, I may resent it as well.
- » **A character's actions contradict each other.** This item refers to consistency. If your characters always move toward one goal, their actions will remain consistent in their purpose. If their goal shifts, or if they abandon one goal for another, or if they behave erratically for seemingly no reason, audiences will be left frustrated and bewildered.

» **A character disappears with hasty explanation or no explanation at all.**

This phenomenon occurs either because you've forgotten a less important character along the way or because you had one too many people to track and didn't know how to write one out of the film.

» **A character bursts onto the action with little or no setup.** This phenomenon occurs either because you knew this person was coming but failed to allow for it in your opening or because you need to solve a problem in the script and are hoping a new character will do it for you.

» **Problems are solved without combat of any kind.** Characters are only interesting when they're making choices, gaining knowledge necessary to make choices, or acting on choices that they've already made. They should make events happen, not let events happen to them.

Your opening may solve some of your plausibility difficulties. Those first 15 to 30 pages establish what can and can't happen in the script. If you want audiences to believe two teenage scientists are going to solve time travel, showcase their prodigious skills right away. (See *You Yesterday*). If you want me to believe that a family with few financial means can infiltrate a wealthy household (*Parasite*), open with examples of less substantial but equally creative scams that family devises to survive. If you intend to introduce a character much later, create a world in which I'm used to surprise visitors. You might also mention the character in earlier dialogue, so that the name precedes its owner.



REMEMBER

A distinct difference exists between *suspension of disbelief* and improbability. *Suspension of disbelief* refers to an audience's willingness to believe fantastical or extraordinary situations out of a desire to enjoy the story. Audiences suspend their disbelief because they're enthralled by the plot, and they want to believe that events could unfold this way. An improbable script presents something as fact that cannot be, but it does little to convince the audience of its worth. It often happens with the best intentions. Writers are on a tight deadline, or they're furious with one stubborn portion of the script and ready to be done with it. In any case, they reach a point where a solution won't present itself, and they quickly formulate some device to solve the problem for them. In Greek drama, it appears as a *deus ex machina*. A god descends from the heavens to settle old scores and sum information up. In modern times, it appears as that lucky tip that happened to solve the case, the one door that happened to be unlocked, or those keys that happened to be left in a getaway car. These solutions are too easy; I feel the writer stepping in. When the writer's hand in the work becomes apparent, the audience's belief in the action diminishes.

To avoid implausible action, try one or several of the following:

» **Research, research, research.** The more familiar you are with the world, the less likely that historical or continuity mistakes will occur. You should know

more about your story than the audience does. Prove it to them so that they can trust the story and relax.

- » **Allow a character to express the audience's disbelief.** *Back to the Future* works, in part, because one of the characters is a skeptic. The character takes on the role of the audience in questioning the time travel. As he becomes convinced that it's possible, so does the audience.
- » **Prepare the audience for improbabilities in advance.** Look toward possible improbabilities and prepare an audience for them in advance. *Star Wars* tells the audience right away that this is a galaxy long ago and far away. Audiences are immediately prepared for a sci-fi adventure where impossible things are now possible.
- » **Make characters work for information.** Any piece of data that arrives quickly and/or easily is suspect. Life doesn't work that way. You may write an element of luck into your script, but too much luck makes for lackluster action.
- » **Let characters solve problems themselves, using skills or knowledge that the audience has witnessed them acquiring.** The audience wants to get to know your protagonists, to learn from them, to root for them, and to be changed by them. It can't do so if the protagonists don't act for themselves or make choices and follow them through.



WARNING

Implausibility maligns your audience's trust and makes the audience wary of you as a writer. You want your audiences to expect good films, not to be surprised when they finally see one. It's your name on the work, and audiences will see the film as an extension of you. Take care with what you present.

Scenes where nothing happens: Two final threats to watch for

Two final threats occur when a writer overwhelms a reader with unrelated action or unimportant dialogue. I call the first threat *cascading*, and the second threat *banter*. Ever been to a movie with scene after scene of exciting action or cutting repartee that has little aim or direction? Many things can happen in a scene without anything really *happening*. Consider this scene breakdown:

A man robs a bank.

Police follow him to the harbor.

A boat chase ensues.

He is picked up by a helicopter.

He flies to an airstrip, but detectives are waiting.

He charts a jet.

A plane chase ensues.

Aside from the obvious improbability, what's really happening here? A lot of movement, some exciting special effects no doubt, and an element of danger — but beyond that? Not much. When one action follows another with no sense of connection or purpose, you're creating a chain of events but not compelling drama. This is cascading. You cascade a script when you forget to reincorporate knowledge or experience from one action into situations that follow it.

Suppose that a boy goes flying with his father in the opening sequence; the audience can see that he idolizes his dad. In a following scene, he plays airplane with his younger brother, explaining how to fly just as he heard his dad explain it to him. So if, at the end of the film, a group of men chase him into the shed where they keep the plane, how do you think he'll escape? Well, if he skateboards out, I'll probably demand a refund. Here, each action builds into the next, and, at some point, previously acquired knowledge is reused.

Cascading makes your action less powerful. Banter has the same effect, but on your dialogue. Remember, I go to the theater to watch characters change and affect each other. Consider the following dialogue between two coworkers:

"Hey, Jackie, how's your work going?"

"Fine, Grace. And yours?"

"Fine. Great shindig last night."

"It was, wasn't it? How much do you think it cost?"

"I don't know, but it wasn't cheap."

"Was Harry there?"

"I think I saw him. I loved his speech the other day, didn't you?"

And so on. Who's in control of that scene, do you think? It's hard to tell. Any tension on the rise? Doubtful. Does either woman have a specific agenda? Unclear. The problem with the conversation, as it pertains to drama, is that no one wants anything and nothing's changing. Neither woman gains or loses status, nor does the conversation seem to be in pursuit of anything specific. If Jackie had just been fired and Grace was purposely hurting her feelings, social tension would exist. If Jackie was speaking as if her work was fine, but really she had just been fired, the scene would have *subtext*, which means a conversation would exist below what's actually being said. I'll watch those scenes. As long as someone in the scene wants something or is being affected, if that person leaves the scene different than when she went in, you've done your job.

Ultimate Success: Tracking Three Movies through Their Triumphant Conclusions

In this section, I explore the conclusions of three films to help exemplify some of the techniques mentioned previously. I thought I'd warn you in case you don't already know how these movies end and would rather see or read the endings for yourself first. (Aren't I considerate?)

The three films I reference here tackle different subjects, characters, and environments, yet they share a tight, efficient structure. Every ten minutes, a routine is broken and an action occurs. The characters gain skills that they use later to further the story. Every main character, villains included, is given a resolution, if not a joyous one. If you begin analyzing the endings of all the films you watch in this manner, you may be amazed at what you will learn.

Jaws

Rising Action: The final battle in this film must take place between Brody and the shark. Brody is the character who's afraid of open water, Brody was responsible for funding the shark-hunting expedition, and Brody is the one propelling the town to prioritize their safety. So the rising action consists of forcing Brody to face the shark alone. Hooper descends into the water in his observation cage, armed with sedatives meant to end the beast when it approaches. This plan, of course, fails. The cage is destroyed, and Hooper barely escapes to hide behind a reef. The next character to eliminate is Captain Quint. After destroying the radio in a fit of passion and destroying the boat in foolish pursuit of the shark, Quint desperately resorts to shooting it with his gun. He fails, and the shark eats him. Brody is left alone on a sinking ship, facing one very angry fish.

Climax: The shark has a tank of compressed oxygen caught in its mouth. It repeatedly batters the ship until it sinks entirely. Brody faces the beast with a shotgun. The shark turns around and begins swimming toward him. Brody shoots once. Nothing. He shoots again. Still nothing. He continues to shoot, as the shark heads right for him. Suddenly, a shot hits its mark, and the shark explodes.

Resolution: Hooper emerges from beneath the water. He greets an exhausted Brody. They fashion a makeshift raft from the leftover ship and swim back to shore.

Lady Bird

In the final act of *Lady Bird*, the pace picks up considerably as the story jumps from event to event. The increased pace imitates Lady Bird's haste to leave town and desperate attempt to establish herself as an adult. The audience, meanwhile, waits for her to appreciate the life she's running from.

Rising Action: Lady Bird celebrates her 18th birthday with her father, as her mother refuses to speak to her. She gets into her New York college and her father finds a way to pay for it. Her parents drive her to the airport. Her father says good-bye, but her mother does not. Her mother immediately regrets this decision and races back to the airport, but Lady Bird is gone. At college, Lady Bird discovers that her father has sent drafts of a letter her mother wrote, trying to make amends. The unfinished paragraphs reveal how much her mother sacrificed on her behalf.

Climax: Emotionally adrift and desperate to fit in, Lady Bird drinks too much at her first college party and is rushed to the emergency room. She leaves the hospital and walks to a church service, where she finds herself moved to tears.

Resolution: The trauma of hospitalization and the comfort she receives at church result in a newfound appreciation of her upbringing. In the film's final scene, Lady Bird calls her mother to thank her for the life she made possible.

Moonlight

Unlike the previous two movies, *Moonlight*'s rising action is emotional, not physical. The rising action is fueled by Black's desire to reconnect with Kevin and find acceptance as a gay man. The rising action, the climax, and the resolution occur within minutes of each other because every part of the film has been driving to the confrontation between these two men. So while the rising action is quiet in this film, the dramatic tension remains palpable.

Rising Action: Black and Kevin face each other in Kevin's kitchen. Kevin asks Black who he's become, and Black replies defensively. It's clear he's taken to heart Juan's advice to define himself before others do it for him. Kevin confesses that he's given up his life pushing drugs, settling for a steady job, a small apartment, and time with his son. It's not flashy, but he's happy, and he wonders if Black is happy too. The silence that follows brings us to the film's climax, as Black struggles with the desire to tell Kevin how he really feels.

Climax: Black finally admits that Kevin is the only man who has ever touched him intimately, and that he hasn't been touched since. Pain and pity fill Kevin's eyes, as he realizes he's to blame for much of Black's loneliness. We linger with Black for a charged moment, wondering how Kevin will respond.

Resolution: The final images resolve the conflict between Kevin and Black and bring the story full circle to where it began. Kevin holds Black tenderly, and Black allows himself to be comforted by the man he loves. The story revisits the image of Little after Juan taught him to swim: a small black boy staring at the ocean, lit by moonlight. He turns to the audience for a moment, as the sound of surf rises and carries the story to a close.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Composing your character's physical world
- » Building your character's psychology and physique
- » Making your character's inner world cinematic
- » Jogging your imagination

Chapter 9

Character Building

If plot is a story's skeleton, characters are its heart. Astounding events generally occur because people make choices. Those choices require action or have consequences that result in action. Your audiences may be enthralled or shocked by a high-octane situations, but they rarely invest in situations alone. Audiences invest in people — people scraping by, people braving the elements, people beating the odds. Without compelling characters your story unfolds, but to what end? Give me someone to care about, and I'll think about your film long after the credits roll.

Creating a character requires the artistry of a painter and the curiosity of an ace reporter. You must illustrate the person physically, crafting their form one brush stroke at a time; and you must interrogate that person, crafting their history one question at a time. Your goal? Create someone true. True characters have questions, and so will yours. True characters have strengths and weaknesses, and so will yours. True characters have distinct ways of moving through their world, and so will yours. This chapter provides tips on crafting such characters, while offering advice on how to allow your characters to propel the story as a whole.

Portrait of a Person: Constructing a Physical World

There are two primary ways to craft a character: from the outside in and from the inside out. No one method is correct, and usually a decision in one approach leads to a discovery in the other. For example, the scar on Harry Potter's forehead is the result of childhood trauma. That trauma propels all seven books and the resulting films. In this way, a physical characteristic can allude to the emotional backstory. (See Chapter 5 for more on backstory.) The character-building approach you take depends on what kind of a writer you are and what part of the character suggests itself first. However, because film is a visual medium, audiences will base their first impressions on what they see physically, which I tackle first. Those visible components are the character's physical being and the character's physical environment.

Your character's physical being

You know the phrase "Never judge a book by its cover"? You should ignore that advice when it comes to character development. Audiences will judge characters by their appearance, and you want them to because it gives you a set of expectations to fulfill or contradict.

Think about it: A young woman stands on a secluded sidewalk at night. She wears revealing clothing, gaudy jewelry, and an excessive amount of makeup. She waves to several cars as they pass by, leaning into a few when they stop to talk. The immediate assumption is that she's either a prostitute or an undercover cop. If you fulfill these expectations — if it turns out that this young lady is on assignment by the FBI or if she goes home with one of the drivers — audiences will appreciate your continuity, secure that their expectations were correct. If, however, she enters the next scene wearing a business suit and tries a winning case before a jury, audiences will watch to see how both these images can portray the same person. Either way, you win. Audiences like surprises as much as they enjoy continuity.

The *Superman* franchise is based on this premise. As Clark Kent, the protagonist is a mundane, bumbling young man. As Superman, he's the opposite. The juxtaposition of the two types makes him dynamic. So although you know and may later prove that looks can be deceiving, you want audiences to go ahead and judge your characters by their covers. Physical appearance is the first piece of the character puzzle.



REMEMBER

Ideally, you make every decision for a reason — from your character’s name to the childhood secret they harbor. In films, an audience follows a character closely for three hours or less. You have to convey years of information in that time. Therefore, every choice has the potential to speak volumes. Choose wisely.

The following sections present a few physical attributes to consider.

Your character’s name

What’s in a name? Possibly everything. A well-chosen name has the capacity to impart pivotal character information quickly, often prior to the main action in a film. Perhaps the character’s name matches their personality exactly. James Bond is a slick name, easy to repeat with a monetary connotation; James Bond is a slick man with an eye toward personal gain. Katniss Everdeen from *Hunger Games* is a child warrior whose name, which means “arrowhead,” suggests those qualities. In other words, you may want to choose names based on the images they elicit. If you want to establish someone with a flamboyant personality quickly, Jane Smith is the wrong choice, but something like Francesca Romani may fit the bill.

One of the most difficult and important things to do in film is to make internal qualities apparent. Some writers choose names that suggest emotional or psychological characteristics for this reason. These names often have a mythical air about them. George Lucas utilizes them throughout *Star Wars*: Luke Skywalker’s destiny is apparent in his title, and Hans Solo’s name encapsulates his aloof persona.

Names can suggest cultural or ethnic backgrounds, just as Vito Corleone does in the *Godfather* series. If your story is historically based, be aware that the names may already carry certain associations. The name Al Capone is linked to wealth and corruption. Amelia Earhart’s name conjures up adventure and mystery. Names of any kind, but especially those rooted in history, often attach images to your story before it’s told. Your job is to use those images to your advantage or oppose them with images of your own.

In determining your character’s name, consider three things:

- » **Length:** The longer the name, the more eccentric, important, or complex the character usually seems. Shorter names tend to imply grounded, simple, or direct personalities.
- » **Sound:** The sounds of the names you choose may suggest images or elicit an emotional response. Isabella Rossellini sounds elegant. Pee-wee Herman sounds immature. Also, try to script characters with different-sounding names. Similar names become confusing for the reader and suggest the characters are similar in ways you probably don’t intend.

» **Meaning:** If you want to suggest a theme or an internal trait with a name, many websites list the history, popularity, and the definition of names. Or you might create a unique name and reveal its meaning or history as the story unfolds.



TIP

Feeling overwhelmed? Here are some questions to help narrow the name search down:

- » What's the story behind your character's name?
- » Is your character named after a friend or relative?
- » If so, did that person have a legacy?
- » How does your character feel about the name?
- » Does the name fit or run in opposition to the character's personality?



REMEMBER

Take some time with your decision. When a child comes into the world, a name is chosen based on personality, on relations, and on your personal feelings or aspirations for the child. A character name is no different. Give it some thought.

Your character's appearance

A character's appearance is made up of a variety of factors, including

- » **Their physique:** What do they look like physically? Are they short or tall, poised or slumped? Do they care about outward appearances? A character's physique may suggest anything from their worldview to their financial situation to their confidence or insecurities.
- » **Visible scars or physical distinctions.** Scars of any sort suggest history, and they affect how that character moves through the world. The bearer has been through trauma and survived, albeit slightly scathed. Scars may also represent an inner turmoil that has yet to be worked through. Inigo Montoya's facial scars in *Princess Bride* launched his life-long quest for revenge. Harry Potter sports one of the most famous fictional scars, and the mystery behind how he received it fuels much of the series.



WARNING

While scars or physical markings like tattoos, burns, or piercings can allude to backstory, personality, or cultural traditions, tread carefully if you include them. You don't want to reinforce any negative assumptions linked to a culture or demographic. Nor do you want to suggest that someone's story hinges on a perceived disability or trauma. Aim to make these distinctions part of a character's journey but not the whole of it.

- » **The wardrobe:** Does your character dress to impress? Would I know what they do by what they wear? Do their clothes suggest an era of history or a type? Films like *Mean Girls*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* thrive on the makeover of one character's wardrobe. The general message here is what you wear affects how you're perceived and, therefore, who you are.

Appearance is most useful when it conveys the inner life of your character and the changes therein. At the start of *Nappily Ever After*, Violet Jones spends most of her time wondering how she looks to other people, and no time considering how she wants to look. Her anxiety manifests in hours spent straightening her hair and worrying her efforts will be undone. Her gradual and often painful acceptance of her natural hair parallels her gradual and tumultuous embrace of her true self. Each physical alteration suggests an emotional shift.

When you consider your character's appearance, start by answering the following questions:

- » How much time does your character take getting ready every day?
- » What does your character do to get ready?
- » What parts of their physique would your character hide and/or flaunt?
- » Your character would be most comfortable wearing what?
- » What physical attribute does your character most admire and condemn in other people?
- » What sort of an impression would your character like to make?
- » How does your character feel about being noticed?



TIP

I spend a lot of time envisioning my characters physically. First impressions are commonly based on appearance alone. I want my audience's first impressions to match my intentions.

Your character's physical environment

Characters spend time in certain places for three primary reasons:

- » By choice
- » Out of habit
- » Out of necessity

Each reason suggests something different about your characters. If they choose to be in a location, that speaks to who they are and what they want. If they're used to being there, that speaks to their sense of security and routine. If they're forced to be there, that speaks to the lengths they'll go to succeed or to please someone else. When you peruse the following three environments, ask yourself not only where your character is but also how they feel about being there.

Your character at work

What does your character do for a living? Their work may be a step toward their career or something they do to put food on the table. They may be a novice or an expert in their field. If it's something they are good at or have done for a number of years, it will affect how they look at the world and the way they speak. It should also result in certain talents or access to information that will eventually come in handy. A seasoned waitress will be adept at handling unruly customers; photographers look at the world with selective eyes; a medical student may be too busy to assess the outside world at all. Indiana Jones's professorship in archaeology not only explains his expertise in historical relics but provides a contrast to his adventurous exploits. *Spotlight* is, in part, about a group of reporters' growing ability to collect information. In building a work environment, keep track of skills the job requires and the benefits it provides. You'll use both later on.

Try to envision the grand scope of each setting and then narrow your focus to specific details. You may imagine rows of gray office cubicles with people in suits talking frantically over the phone, separated from their neighbors by plastic partitions. This is where we discover the main characters in *The Big Short*. A closer look may reveal photographs on the desk, a favorite poster hung haphazardly on the wall, books on the shelves, and so on. Every detail offers another clue to the disposition behind it.

Pay particular attention to the relationships your character fosters at work. Who do they work for, and how long have they known their coworkers? Do they work among friends or rivals? These relationships may aid or thwart your character in their quest for success, so give them some thought.

Do I have some starter questions for this section? Of course I do.

- » Does your character work in an office or at home?
- » How many jobs does your character have?
- » What is the chain of command at work?

- » What are your character's duties and how adept are they?
- » What are your character's immediate and ultimate professional goals?
- » What are the rewards for a job well done and the consequences of failure?

Your character at rest

Your character's home may be the most revealing location. By home, I'm referring to that place your character returns to at the end of the day. This place may be an apartment or house. It may be someone else's house, a shelter, a spaceship, or a hole in the ground. What matters is that it's uniquely theirs, and it harbors what belongings they have.

First, decide how secure the environment is. Is it a refuge or a war zone, some place to escape to or to avoid? If the environment is safe, what about it specifically offers comfort? Envision everything from the photos on the walls to the number of windows and the kind of light they allow. In *About a Boy*, the main character's flat is full of technological gadgets and little else. You get little sense of the man himself or anyone else in his life from the space. Perhaps this is because he has little sense of anyone other than himself at the story's beginning. If your character's home life is traumatic, it may explain behaviors in other areas of their life. It may even suggest what they dream of pursuing.

Next, decide whether your character lives alone or with someone else. If they live alone, was everything in their home chosen and designed by them? If so, this is one of the fastest ways for an audience to assess a character.



REMEMBER

Anything chosen by the character becomes a reflection of them in some way. If someone else has designed the home, I'll want to know which portions and why. If they live with someone else, is that person a lover, a roommate, or family? This decision affects their responsibilities and ability to maintain and juggle personal connections. Also, it provides an opportunity to illustrate a different side of your character — the caretaker or partner side, perhaps.

Finally, what kind of feeling does the place arouse? Is it an uncomfortable space, original, traditional, eerie, or threatening? How should the audience feel when entering it? After you answer this question, determine which details suggest that atmosphere.

Here are a few questions that may clarify your character's home environment:

- » Does your character live in a suburb or in a city or in an unfamiliar society?
- » Does your character live in a house, an apartment, a temporary abode, or something else?

- » Is your character's home a stable or unstable place to be?
- » How much pride does your character take in their home?
- » How much personal effort has gone into the maintenance of the home?
- » Why does your character live where they live?

Your character in play

Play environments refer not only to those locations your character goes to in their free time but to any location other than home and work where they spend a reasonable amount of time. I say “in play” because these environments are generally ones in which important action takes place. Play environments include the various bars in *Star Wars*, the attic in *Little Women*, and the concert venues in *The Sound of Metal*. If your character goes to a library once, you don't need to spend much time detailing that library in your mind. If your character spends many scenes in that library, you may want to explore it with more depth.



TRY IT

FROM A LIST TO A LIFE: BUILDING A PHYSICAL WORLD

Characters are the most personal part of your story. You will undoubtedly spend most of your time envisioning them and creating a world for them to walk through. When the process becomes overwhelming — and believe me, it will — it helps to step away from your story and into another one, for however short a stint.

The following exercise combines several details chosen arbitrarily into a unique physical world. It's fun, it's fast, and best of all, it's just a project, so the pressure's off.

Chose answers for the following categories:

- Two colors
- Two numbers from four to ten
- A song
- A specific terrain (the ocean, the plains, the mountains, a rainforest . . .)
- A weather condition
- A type of dwelling (house, barn, igloo . . .)
- Pick one body part (the head, the torso, the limbs, or the face)

Jotted something down? Here's how the answers fit together. The first three items pertain to your character's physique — the colors match the hair and eyes, the first set of numbers is the height, and the song is both the character's physical rhythm and somehow pertains to their name. The terrain is where your story takes place, the weather condition depicts the climate, the type of dwelling may be home or work, and the body part refers to a distinguishing physical attribute.

After you've pieced this new and often crazy character together, take a second and imagine them in action. How do they interact with others, whom do they live with, and what do they do all day? You'll be surprised at the scenarios that occur to you when you concentrate on one small portion of an imaginary script.

Play environments vary drastically from film to film, so here are four basic questions to help you determine where your character relaxes or lets loose:

- » Does your character have a circle of friends or one close friend?
- » How does your character know those friends, and how did they meet?
- » Where does your character go to relax?
- » Given your plot, where might the character need to return to for information or aid?

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Constructing an Internal World

Audiences base their first impressions of a character on the physical world you construct; the internal world provides a steadily unfolding mystery that proves those impressions true or false. Consider the metaphor of a fancy car. The body of the vehicle may suggest high-class elegance and durability. If the car handles well and lasts 25 years, your impressions of it were correct. If, however, you lift the hood to discover a leaky engine and missing parts, your assumptions were incorrect. The car is a dud in disguise. With characters, you may just as easily discover that the beat-up old Pinto has the engine of a new Corvette. It all depends on how you envision the internal working with the external. In creating a vibrant internal life for your characters, you're "lifting their hoods" in a sense, revealing what lies beneath.

If you've done your job composing a backstory (see Chapter 5), you already know the following things about your character:

- » Their educational background, if applicable to the story
- » Their family background, if applicable to the story
- » Some key memories, including past successes and failures
- » Their childhood dreams and aspirations
- » The key events that led them to the threshold of your story

Now, you can construct the sum of these parts. Simply put: Who is the person those details have become? Your character's inner world is complex and ever-shifting. Portions of it will change dramatically over the course of the film. For now, concentrate on one element at a time, painting each with bold strokes.

I discuss the primary elements of your character's inner world in the next four sections.

Dreams, desires, and passions

In order to generate a dynamic script, you must know three things:

- » What your character wants
- » How badly your character wants it
- » What your character is prepared to do to get it

Compelling characters establish themselves early in the film with a dream or a desire, and that longing fuels the ensuing action. The dream may have originated in the past. Perhaps the character's harbored it for years, and your story is their opportunity to pursue it. Perhaps the character's forgotten all about it, and you're about to jog their memory. The desire may begin as a subtle tug at the character's heart and grow in urgency as the story progresses, or it may be urgent from the start and become more desperate with every scene.

In other words, it moves from a want to a need, as important to your character as life or death. In *Parasite*, one man's desire to work for a wealthy couple steadily becomes an obsession with securing work in that household for his entire family. By contrast, Jake LaMotta (played by Robert De Niro) in *Raging Bull* begins his journey with a passion to become the greatest prizefighter in America, and Emma

Nolan's sole desire in *The Prom* soul desire is to take her girlfriend to prom. Their passion immediately underscores all their action. How you manipulate the desire is up to you, but your character must have one. Without that overriding passion, your character is like a car without any gas for the trip.

Your character's engine: Needs versus wants

Your character's *engine* refers to a goal that drives them forward in life and in your story. And while people may *want* many things out of life, they only really *need* six elements to survive:

- » Food and water
- » Air (preferably clean air)
- » Shelter
- » Financial support
- » Social support
- » A sense of self

The last need on that list is the one most writers forget. A character may have a lucrative job with benefits, a rent-controlled apartment, and a healthy circle of family and friends, but if they don't feel successful, if they suffer from anxiety or crippling self-doubt or depression, it doesn't matter how stable other aspects of their life are. A person can easily sink without a sense of self.

While your story may not directly revolve around one character's pursuit of those needs, you should be able to connect what your character wants to one of them. If you can't do that, then the engine won't be important enough to sustain an entire story.

For example, maybe your character wants a McMansion on the wealthy side of town like the young protagonist in *Lady Bird*. More specifically, she wants a house with unlimited snacks, a backyard big enough for guests, her own bathroom, and a room exclusively meant for watching TV. Does she need any of those things to survive? No. In fact the film's tension stems from her inability to appreciate the less extravagant life she has. However, those goals are directly connected to her sense of self and a life of financial stability. Those *wants* are directly connected to *needs*, and so they feel important enough to fuel a full-length coming-of-age drama.

Even if you're not writing about people, you'll need to identify an equivalent list of survival must-haves in whatever society you dream up. Make sure your characters' goals tether to one of those needs.

Talents and expertise

Your characters are good at something, and if they're not, they will be by the end of your film. Developing talent is one of the fastest ways to show a *character arc*, or how the character evolves through the story. Remember, audiences go to the movies to see people with extraordinary skills braving extraordinary circumstances or to see people utilizing average skills to survive extraordinary circumstances. Did you catch the comparison? Both scenarios require skills of some kind.

A character's skills may be any of the following or a combination of several:

- » Artistic
- » Athletic
- » Technological
- » Academic
- » Mechanical
- » Interpersonal
- » Parental
- » Financial
- » Medical/scientific
- » Strategic
- » Political
- » Magical (including intuition and psychic and supernatural ability)

Your character may be good at many things. In a film, though, time is money, so choose pertinent skills that will advance your story's action. The young girl in *Jurassic Park* may be good at checkers for all I know, but checkers won't save her and the others from a velociraptor. On the other hand, her computer skills do, so that's the ability highlighted in the film.

Your character's talent may be their personality. Main characters need not be likeable. Likeable characters are often dull. They may be power-hungry brokers, unscrupulous lawyers, manipulative seductresses, or deadbeat dads — if they're in some way compelling, I'll watch them.

If your character doesn't excel in any one area, audiences love to see them learn. The training sequences in *Zorro*, *Ocean's 11*, and *Million Dollar Baby* all capitalize on this technique. These films allow the audience to train beside the character, to assess firsthand any changes that they undergo in the process. The *Harry Potter* series is charming, in part, because the characters are studying the art of magic. The audience observes them using a broomstick and practicing spells for the first time and learns along with them.

Internal obstacles

No true character is perfect. Characters who are talented, intelligent, funny, good-looking, and well-off, without personal flaws to balance them out, aren't only impossible to believe, they're also maddening. Every character in your script, no matter how surreal or magical your landscape, has some internal demon to wrestle with before the story is over. This demon may be

- » **A mental or emotional illness:** Does your character suffer from depression, a learning disability, insomnia, amnesia, or some similar problem? These illnesses can serve as metaphors for other problems in your character's life. They also clearly set restrictions on their behavior and outlook on life. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *Still Alice*, and *The Father* are all films that work this way.
- » **A past trauma:** Perhaps something from your character's backstory (see Chapter 5) still haunts them. This may be a memory or trait they have struggled to overcome, or past trauma revived by events in the story. *Midsommar* channels this conceit via horror, *Without a Trace*, through drama.
- » **An addiction or obsession:** Any urge your character can't control has the power to be destructive. Addictions and obsessions can determine what and whom your character notices, and they can manipulate what the character says and does. *A Star Is Born*, *Uncut Gems*, and *Krishna* are three examples (among many) of entire films spun around addiction.

» **An overriding passion:** Like the previous item, passions here refer to emotions so strong that they control your character's ability to think and act rationally. These passions can include anger, fear, lust, vengeance, greed, ignorance, and envy, among others. Anger and fear are the two most common overriding passions in films today. The action in *Kill Bill* and *A Promising Young Woman* is fueled by vengeance; *Amadeus* and *Mean Girls* are fueled by jealousy; *Soul* and *Happy-Go-Lucky* are fueled by joy.



REMEMBER

Often, these obstacles provide your character with their main objective. Coupled with external conflicts that the antagonists provide, these inner flaws create the tension that holds your action together. Main characters generally confront and often conquer the primary obstacles in the film's climax.

Your character's argument

When constructing your characters, bear this in mind: It's not your job to judge them on the page. It's your job to show them in action and to let the audience be the judge. Perhaps your character is a hit man who has trained themselves to murder without forethought or emotion. You may loathe this character, but your job is to find a way to jump inside their mind for a little while and to discover what allows them to act as they do.

How would an assassin justify their profession — to themselves or to someone else, someone like you perhaps, who loathes what they do? If you can answer that question, you'll be able to craft a complex character. If you can let them answer it, in their own words, even better.

Want an example? Look at the character Magneto of *X-Men* fame, who uses his power to manipulate magnetic fields almost exclusively to kill human beings. He's written to be abhorrent; an audience is meant to fear him. That said, his family was slaughtered by Nazis; his wife and daughter were killed by an angry mob; and he exists in a world where humans continue to imprison and terrorize anyone they perceive as "other." In many ways, human beings created the monster that he's become. As a result, I can't dismiss his rage because I understand how it began. Once you understand a character's motivation, you may still dislike them, but it's harder to dismiss them.



REMEMBER

Your villains don't necessarily know they're villains. Everybody has reasons for the way they behave. You may not agree with those reasons, but you should know what they are. It's not your job to judge them on the page.



TRY IT

MORE QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED

By the time you're finished constructing your character, you may feel like you've put them through the Spanish Inquisition. That's all right. In this case, your character will be stronger for it. Here are a few starter questions concerning the inner life of your character.

Dreams, wants, and passions:

- What does your character want to achieve financially, ethically, and spiritually?
- Would your character pursue these goals on their own, or would it take some effort to convince or force them to do so?
- Is your character pursuing these goals for personal reasons, for friends or family, or for a cause?
- Which need do those goals connect to: food and water, air, shelter, financial support, social support, or sense of self?

Talents and expertise:

- What talents was your character born with?
- What skills has your character acquired at work or over time?
- What skills will your character need to attain in order to survive your plot?
- Who, if anyone, can provide training or expertise for your character?

Internal obstacles:

- Does your character drink, smoke, or use narcotics? Why?
- Who or what does your character adore and why?
- Who or what does your character loathe and why?
- What is the most trivial thing that your character is afraid of?
- What is the most significant thing that your character is afraid of?
- How would you describe your character's self-esteem?
- What specifically brings your character great joy or great sorrow?

From the Inside Out: Making the Inner World Visible

One of the screenwriter's greatest challenges lies in finding ways to suggest a character's inner world visually. In stage plays, characters generally reveal their fears, feelings, and regrets through dialogue. Novelists fill pages with descriptions of their characters' emotional states. Screenplays, however, unfold pictorially, and a person's inner world is often physically imperceptible. Your character may expend remarkable amounts of energy maintaining a serene front when, in fact, they are dying inside. They may manage anger by donning a stoic facade or use humor to ward off fear. So how does a writer visually reveal what lies beneath the physique? The following techniques may help you answer that question.

Balancing character dialogue with character action

Sometimes, characters reveal themselves, and sometimes, they're revealed by others. Generally, audiences grow to understand them in three ways:

- » Through what they say about themselves
- » Through what other people say about them
- » Through what they do

The first two options rely on dialogue, so bear in mind that characters need a motivation to speak. In screen life, as in real life, people rarely offer information, especially personal information, without some incentive. They're cajoled, threatened, or seduced into doing so. They gain something by revealing themselves.

In *Jaws*, Captain Quint seems like a drunken and slightly mad fisherman with a knack for catching sharks. His primary motivation seems to be money until his growing obsession suggests otherwise. Finally, Quint confesses that the crew of his naval ship was consumed by sharks before his eyes. This crucial piece of information explains his erratic behavior and his drinking throughout. Yet the writers wait until moments before the climax to reveal it. Why? It's stronger storytelling. Quint doesn't trust easily; he wouldn't have revealed that information earlier. The other characters must joke him into confession. He tells the story almost without meaning to. The result is a powerful, realistic scene. So before your characters talk about themselves or about others, ask yourself this question: What's in it for them?



REMEMBER

Audiences like to earn the story as well. Easy information is generally disappointing. Never provide a piece of the puzzle until you're sure that someone's after it. The information is worth more if a character and therefore the audience has to work to acquire it.

Of the three methods you can choose from to reveal character information, the third — by what they do — is the strongest. The phrase “actions speak louder than words” is a writer's mantra. A character's actions are always based on some inner need. Therefore, they offer the most honest glimpse of their personality. Here's an example: You meet a young woman. She seems kindhearted. She speaks at great length about the good deeds she's done. Her friends and neighbors swear she's a pillar of society. Yet an hour later, she kills an elderly couple and steals their money. What have you discovered? She's a murderer and an excellent liar. Other characters may not know that, but you do. You've seen her in action.



TIP

After you determine what character detail you want to divulge, consider who might reveal it and how an audience will know that it's true. When in doubt, rely on action.

Crafting concrete character goals

If your characters seek happiness, revenge, true love, justice, power, or retribution, they're in the market for an *abstract goal*. Abstract goals are theoretical or ethical in nature and lack a specific form. Is there something wrong with that? Yes and no. When a character is after something that's solely abstract, tracking their success can be difficult. They want to be happy; that's fine, but how will the viewer know when they get there? Happy means many things to many people. So, for that matter, do power, love, and revenge. They're grand, undefined desires.

For this reason, I encourage you to make your goals concrete. By *concrete*, I mean give them a form. In *A Promising Young Woman*, the protagonist seeks revenge for the rape of her childhood best friend. Revenge is her abstract goal. She'll achieve it when the people responsible feel as much pain and fear as her friend felt, and when she's scared an entire city's worth of men into treating women with respect. Those are her concrete goals, that's what success looks like to her. Concrete goals allow audiences to track how close or far away the hero is from success.

Providing character opportunities

You've already determined your characters' talents. Now, craft opportunities in which they can utilize them. In *Minari*, a grandmother teaches her grandson how to plant minari seeds because they are resilient. This skill pays off later when

tragedy strikes the farm and the family needs to replant their crop. Ferris Bueller, from the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, is an expert liar. He feigns a temperature; he impersonates his girlfriend's father; he lies to friends, family, and authority figures alike in order to avoid going to school. Whether your character begins the journey with an expertise or develops one over time, find a way to use that ability later on — preferably while fighting the antagonist. These scenes become checkpoints for the audience as they track how your characters are evolving.



TIP

Be aware that a growing talent also suggests a growth in maturity and spirit. Luke Skywalker becomes a Jedi Knight over time, and as his expertise grows, so does his confidence and determination. So equip your characters with some original talent, prepare them to acquire more, and then decide what opportunities might reveal and eventually test those skills.

Establishing routines that change

In *Madeline's Madeline*, a mentally ill, biracial teen spends her days doing what many teenagers do, enduring high school and fighting with authority figures. The only solace she finds is in her acting troupe rehearsals. Her somewhat dismal routine shifts when her acting troupe leader begins using Madeline's life as fodder for their devised performance. As her daily routines are dramatized by her peers, she begins to long for the ordinary life she once scorned.

Habits and routines provide instant access to a character's true nature. People engage in them because they always have, and because doing so is comforting. These routines are glimpses into a character's past or current emotional state. As your characters change, their habits change; they may eventually abandon those habits altogether. After you know your character fairly well, crafting routines is a simple and satisfying way to make the inner world visible.

Forcing your characters to choose

Characters aren't just what they do; they're what they choose to do. In other words, don't let life happen to your characters; let your characters happen to life. A character's inner strengths and weaknesses are instantly apparent when they're confronted with a difficult choice. Audiences assess characters by the choices they make. Here's a look at how the process works:

» The film: *Okja*

» The character: A South Korean girl named Mija entrusted to look after a "super pig" named Okja

- » **The choices:** To return Okja to the scientist who created her for human consumption
- » **The decision:** Mija refuses to let Okja be slaughtered and fights the government in an attempt to save her animal friend
- » **The audience's verdict:** Mija values the life of her friend over comfort, and in her fight to save the pig, she reveals the cruel truth about how humans treat animals

Your goal with this technique is twofold. First, make the choice a difficult one. If Mija accepts Okja's fate, her family will live comfortably, and she might be entrusted with a new pig to care for. She and her grandfather depend on the income from the government. Second, put something personal at risk. If Mija lets Okja go, Okja will die. If Mija confronts the government, she might die. Tough decisions beg the question, "What would you do?" and involve an audience in rooting for an outcome. One choice has the power to clearly define a character. Craft options that test the character's strength, ethics, and spirit throughout your script.

Using a mentor

A mentor or confidant provides interesting ways to reveal the main character. A mentor has an inherently higher status; they know something that the protagonist needs to know. This places the hero in a state of vulnerability, in which all sorts of inner conflicts might arise. In *Good Will Hunting*, Matt Damon plays Will Hunting, a genius consumed by quiet anger rooted in his childhood. With everyone else, he is aloof, funny, or indifferent. He's vulnerable only with his psychiatrist Dr. Maguire, played by Robin Williams, and only after many angry sessions. Through Maguire, audiences glimpse a younger, more hopeful side of Will that they may otherwise not have seen.

A mentor is in a position to teach the hero a new ability or way of life. The audience learns along with the hero, becoming an active part of the adventure. Through Juan in *Moonlight*, you learn self-respect; through Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings*, you learn the bravery of a selfless act; and through Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, you learn to fight for decency and honor. In tutoring the hero, mentors educate the audience as well.

Finally, a mentor forces the hero to answer for themselves and to make difficult choices. A strong mentor expects the protagonist's weaknesses to become strengths. In training the protagonist, those weaknesses emerge. A mentor removes facades that a protagonist might don in other settings and forces them to rethink past behaviors and habits. The resulting interrogation may tax the hero beyond endurance, but it's a dynamic way for the audience to get to know them.

Using a narrator

Narration is challenging to maneuver gracefully, and it's a device that's often abused. Narrators are commonly the protagonists, though on occasion someone else chimes in. For example, the narrator in *Election* alternates between Reese Witherspoon's teenage character and her teacher, played by Matthew Broderick. If you can relay the story any other way, avoid narration. The strongest narrators, such as Jared Vennett in *The Big Short*, have a desperate need to speak directly to the audience. Vennett tells the story of the 2007 housing market crash as it transpires, to justify and absolve himself of his part in the tragedy. His message is both a warning and a plea, and it certainly warrants direct address. He's an exception.

Many writers utilize narrators because they don't know how to convey plot information. Narrators become an easy way to introduce characters, to relay backstory, to explain events. In most instances, this information would be better told in action. Film is, after all, a visual medium. Why *tell* me something when you can *show* me something equally compelling? For example, *Radio Flyer* begins and ends with narration, but the meat of the film stands without it. It seems a weaker choice in this film because you so readily forget the narrator's presence. If you're interested in a clear example of how a film changes as a result of narration, compare the original *Blade Runner*, which uses narration, with the director's cut where it's been removed.



REMEMBER

If you're thinking about using a narrator, give them a reason to speak, a unique voice, and a vibrant perspective. If these details don't readily present themselves, consider a different technique.

Crafting secondary characters

Just as villains don't necessarily know they're villains, your secondary characters don't know they're secondary. In fact, they probably assume they're the main characters, so it will help you to craft them that way.

Secondary characters, also known as supporting roles, should be created with the same attention to physical and psychological attributes that you use in crafting the main characters. They should have their own goals, their own routines, their own talents, and their own obstacles. The only difference is that the decisions you make for them will somehow support or thwart the main character's journey throughout the script.

In *When Harry Met Sally*, the best friends of each main character meet, fall in love, and get married. Their storyline is complete in its own right, but it primarily serves to encourage Harry and Sally to fall in love with each other. Consider the best friends as the support staff. You'll construct lives for each of them, but you'll only dramatize the parts of their lives that support your main character's story.

- » Choosing your character's vocabulary
- » Defining your character's rhythm
- » Considering how listening affects a scene
- » Creating compelling conversation

Chapter **10**

Delivering Dynamic Dialogue

Dialogue is words, sounds, rhythm — simply put, it's music. Great dialogue, like great music, soars off the page, and awkward dialogue clunks about or flatlines halfway through a scene. Your script is a symphony. When classical composers want a section of the music to swell, they call upon the strings. Should they require a wail, a squeak, or a piercing melodic line, the reeds are close at hand. And if the piece demands a backbeat or punctuation, they look to the percussionist.

Much of a writer's orchestra is made up of characters. Their words, silences, the pace and quality with which they speak — these are their instruments. A skilled screenwriter knows which voices together or in succession produce the most compelling moments. They know which words escalate a conflict and which diffuse it. They know that words spoken by one character may cause friction, but when spoken by another, those same words offer solace. All in all, they know who to point the baton at to create the desired effect. Powerful dialogue springs from character. If you're comfortable with your musicians, you'll eventually conduct them with clarity, depth, and precision.

This chapter breaks dialogue into two components — diction and music — and then suggests effective ways to pull them together in conversation.

Diction: What's in a Word?

If scores consisted of similar instruments playing similar notes, the resulting music would be rather dull. Rather dull? It would be downright monotonous. The same principle holds true for films. The quality of your dialogue depends on a combination of unique voices singing different tunes. The key word here is *unique*, and a unique voice begins with a unique vocabulary. If you can envision your character in detail, if you've jotted down their background, their social life, and their psychology, the time has come to let them speak. What they finally say is known as *diction*.



Diction, as it pertains to films, refers to a character's distinct choice and use of words. Factors determining this vocabulary include the character's education, profession, geographic location, and overriding emotional state.

Find a comfortable seat in any public place and eavesdrop for a while. You'll notice the same conversations being held in a variety of ways. Consider this selection based on a woman speaking to her young child in a fast-food restaurant:

"Quit it, Sammy. I said put that thing down. I ain't sayin' it again, you heard me the last four times, I know you did. Now, I can take it, or I can break it — what's it gonna be?"

It may not be verbal fireworks, but it's a distinct voice fueled by a clear frustration. Now, I'll rewrite the clip in an alternate diction. See whether you can pinpoint the distinction.

"Now Samuel, stop that this instant. I would appreciate it if you would put that thing away. I've asked you nicely several times, and I'm certain you've heard each request. Now, you have a choice. You can either give me the toy, or I can toss it in the garbage."

Hear the difference? The first woman says exactly what she feels without ornamentation. Her words are short and clipped. As a result, her anger comes across loud and clear. The second woman speaks with larger words and complete sentences, which contain her irritation. Her speech is orderly and precise, as if chosen in advance or pulled from a book on parent-child confrontation. Yet the two women are saying essentially the same thing.

Listening for the variations in language is the first step. The second step involves understanding what those variations convey to a listener. In other words, you want to understand what a character's diction suggests about them as a person.

Isn't versus ain't: Diction's determining factors

How do you craft a character's diction? If you've spent time researching their background and illustrating their present circumstances, you have all the information you need. Diction is the natural next step and is primarily determined by these four factors:

- » Education
- » Profession
- » Geographic location (past and present)
- » Overriding emotion

Every character discovery you've made can be suggested with a variety of words and phrases. The remaining process involves selecting which of those words communicate these discoveries to an audience. As I detail each factor individually, envision one of your characters and listen. Character voices either behave as shy children or as eager participants. In any case, consider yourself a reporter searching for the perfect quote. Have a pencil handy.

Your character's education

Intelligence comes in many forms. Hermione Granger of *Harry Potter* fame is a young scholar who memorizes spells and recollects magical facts with shocking speed and accuracy. No one would accuse Samwise Gamgee of being a scholar, but he intuitively shepherds his best friend to safety through all three *Lord of the Rings* films. The character Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is neither scholar nor friend — she's a road warrior rescuing women from the villain's authoritarian grasp. Are these characters equally intelligent? Yes, in different ways.

In establishing your character's education, contemplate which of the following forms of intelligence best matches their own:

- » **Academic:** How much formal schooling does your character have? Someone with a grade-school education may speak differently from someone with a doctoral degree. What subjects in particular catch their fancy? The literature buff, the math whiz, and the aeronautical engineer — these people express themselves in diverse ways. Degrees of academic intelligence are often delineated by verbal complexity or lack thereof. For example, if a character speaks primarily with one or two syllable words, limited vocabulary, and incorrect grammar, such as Karl Childers (Billy Bob Thornton) in *Sling Blade*, an audience will assume that his schooling has been minimal.

- » **Intuitive:** Some characters possess an instinctual intelligence, a sort of sixth sense they're born with or gain through experience. From Sherlock Holmes to Yoda, these characters act on spontaneous impulse, rarely on lessons learned in school. Reporters, detectives, friends, and responsible parents often demonstrate this strength; characters in horror films, tragically, do not. For this reason, reporters and detectives in other film genres generally uncover the crime, while characters in horror films become the victims of one.
- » **Acquired:** This type of intelligence is also called "survival sense." Characters who possess it choose their words carefully, knowing what they say could result in trouble or heartache. Any child who thrives in a mafia movie does so because they've acquired their intelligence on the city streets.



REMEMBER

Obviously, these types of intelligences often overlap. A duality of language makes characters mysterious and compelling. Will Hunting (Matt Damon) in *Good Will Hunting* has a blue-collar, poverty-stricken background, a grade-school education, and the intelligence of a Rhodes Scholar. He can maintain a conversation with his working-class Boston friends and college physicists alike. The switch from one diction to another keeps the audience and other characters on their toes.

Your character's profession

Your character's job often defines how they view the world and, therefore, what they have to say. A writer, for example, may speak in metaphors or have a highly developed vocabulary. Politicians speak in triumphant yet noncommittal phrases to avoid offending voters. A rhyme that I've adopted over the years goes, "If a job affects your point of view, it probably affects your diction, too." In other words, let what your characters do for a living color how they express opinions and beliefs.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Specific professions also require specialized or technical language, known as *jargon*. If I can determine your character's profession by their vocabulary, you have probably correctly identified that jargon. Paragraphs marked with Technical Stuff icons in the margins throughout this book, for example, define screenwriting terminology; a character's jargon reveals their line of work.

Every occupation comes with a list of terms and phrases learned on the job or required to do the job. Here are a few examples of phrases commonly heard in certain work professions:

- » **Wait staff:** "The usual," "He's a regular," "cup of joe," "table four," "order up," "stuffed the tip," "over easy or sunny side up," "soup du jour," "straight up," "on the rocks"

- » **Actor:** “upstaged,” “on cue,” “heads up,” “hit your mark,” “from the top,” “ingénue,” “blocking,” to “go up” on your lines, “curtain,” “flies,” “wing space,” “apron,” “understudy,” “dark night,” “talent on the set,” “slate”
- » **Lawyer:** “verdict,” “approach the bench,” “plea bargain,” “manslaughter,” “assault and battery,” “hung jury,” “beat the rap,” “stricken from the record,” “take the stand,” “pro bono,” “objection,” “objection overruled or sustained”

Do you know what these terms mean? If you’re writing about wait staff, actors, or lawyers you should. What would TV shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* be without medical lingo, or *The Wire* be without police, investment, or corporate terminology? Sci-fi adventures like *Star Wars*, *Ex Machina*, and *Arrival* are believable, in part, because of that jargon and the confidence with which it’s delivered. Audiences believe the story because the writers took their research seriously.

Some writers believe that jargon suggests a stereotype rather than a three-dimensional person. They contend that lawyers, doctors, teachers, and so on speak in ways that generally have nothing to do with their jobs. This argument is valid, and overreliance on jargon may rob characters of their distinct voices. However, screenwriting is not life; it’s art. Writers choose professions for their characters for a reason — to help define behavior and personality. If you’re not familiar with the necessary terms, if you don’t employ them when required, audiences may dismiss your characters as phony or underdeveloped.



REMEMBER

Jargon is meant to augment your character’s dialogue, but a little goes a long way. Overreliance on jargon may make it difficult for audiences to understand your characters, which is not usually the effect you’re going for. Also, everything your characters say, jargon or otherwise, should move the action forward.

Your character’s geographic location

Where your characters grew up and where they’re from now may affect the way they speak. As a general rule, I don’t advise spelling out a dialect — you’re liable to wind up with dialogue like this:

“I’m gon ta hafta take that thur knife away from ya’ll, do ya hear? Ifn ya don’t put it away raht quick.”

I’m exaggerating a bit, but I have encountered dialogue that I’m sure would have resembled hieroglyphics to anyone other than the writer. Sounding out dialects and transcribing them to the page slows readers down and irritates actors. Certain regions yield colorful phrases, however. Phrases like “not the brightest porch light on the block” and “a shuffle short of a winning card,” are insults I collected during my small-town upbringing, and every region has its own gold mine of

slang. If you simply want the character to speak with an accent, consider including that direction in a parenthetical such as (speaks with a Southern drawl) below the character's name.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Slang refers to nontraditional language that's specific to a certain culture, society, and/or geographical region.

The only way to really absorb the language of a group of people is to immerse yourself in it for a length of time. If you can't visit the region, try to track down interviews, video clips, or recordings made by people from the area. Read literature from the region or call a local. If you are creating slang for a fictional group of people, listen to conversations in your own neighborhood and record any slang you hear. Those phrases might inspire you to craft fictitious expressions of your own.

Certain regions or peer groups add, abbreviate, or drop words from sentences entirely. Canadians, for example, often end sentences with "eh?" Pittsburgh natives say, "don and arond" instead of "down and around" and "yins" instead of "you guys." In some places the words "like" or "all" may replace the verb "to say," and "totally" or "literally" may become an adverb for all seasons, as in the sentence:

She was like, "you should totally do this," and I was all, "you literally know I can't."

Again, I'm exaggerating for effect here, but movies like *Legally Blond* and *Clueless* capitalized on expressions like these and were unexpected hits. They took an unusual vocabulary and stretched it to ridiculous proportions. Utilizing slang when necessary lends credibility or a heightened style to your characters and their environments.

Your character's overriding emotion

Characters exhibit a wide range of emotions over the course of a film. However, most human beings have one emotional state that they return to between dramatic events. This emotion is their default state of mind, and it certainly affects how they communicate.

Consider whether your character adopts any of the following dominant emotional states:

- » Anger
- » Fear
- » Hope

- » Wonder
- » Joy
- » Greed

Cautious personalities generally say little, and when they do speak, they use carefully chosen neutral words. Many angry people curse their way through life. Artistic or particularly vibrant personalities may use words that call up images of grandeur. Norma Desmond of *Sunset Boulevard* fame was one such character; Orson Welles himself was another. Revolutionaries and politicians share this tendency, which is why many speeches include image-based metaphors like “a bridge to the future,” “soar like the eagle,” or “smoke the enemy out of his hole.” Audiences can see these phrases, which makes them particularly effective, especially in film.

In many situations, your characters will assume a vocabulary that they don’t usually employ. Perhaps, as Rachel Chu does in *Crazy Rich Asians*, they want to impress their boyfriend’s mother. Maybe they do so out of a desire to fit in, as Cady Heron does in *Mean Girls*. Or maybe they’re trying to conceal personal information from a serial killer, as Clarice does when she hides her accent from Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*. Whatever your character’s reasons for altering their vocabulary, knowing what diction they’ll return to when the façade deteriorates is helpful to you as writer.



TIP

The way your character speaks is determined by their relationship to the sound of their own voice. In other words, are they introverts or extroverts? Do they enjoy hearing themselves talk, or are they deathly afraid of exposing themselves that way? Who are they comfortable speaking to, and who makes them nervous? After you decide on a character’s education, profession, location, and overriding emotion, the next step is to consider how often they speak up.

The highs and the lows of language

Human beings can be classified by a variety of conditions — finances, social status, political power, physical appearance, and so on. Each one of these classifications exists on a scale. Those people with the “most” and “least” of that condition make up the respective ends of the scale, and most everyone else falls somewhere in the middle. Language is no exception to this rule. Words, like people, can be classified into groups: High diction and low diction mark the ends of the verbal spectrum. These groups are based on education, profession, and upbringing.

Most people speak with a combination of dictions, called *middle diction*. Middle diction is a more common way of speaking, but it doesn’t jump off the page as readily as high and low diction. If you want an immediately distinct character voice, a

character the audience can identify with their eyes closed, you may want to look at other options. You're a writer, and words are your tools. If you have a clear understanding of the weight and scope of each word, you'll craft unique voices.

High diction: The prince

In politics or business, the level of status is determined by the degree of power or the amount of money that a person controls. With appearance, the person deemed most attractive holds court, and so on. With language, the classification of “high” vocabulary doesn't necessarily determine a character's power or prestige. It can, however, suggest a degree of education, professional training, a historical setting, and, perhaps, a privileged lifestyle.

Consider the following example. In speaking to a friend, I might say:

“You know, I just finished a book that you have to read. It was great.”

This is not an example of particularly high diction; it's rather neutral, in fact. It is hard to distinguish my education, profession, or socioeconomic standing from that sentence. Now I'll rewrite it, using high diction:

“I have just completed the most tremendous novella. You simply must peruse it when you have a moment of leisure; it is undeniably compelling and persuasive.”

Although I may not imagine this person in detail, the words “novella,” “peruse,” “leisure,” and “persuasive” suggest character. Most people don't speak this way today, so if your story takes place now, this character will most definitely stand out. And what if you're writing a period piece? Might a Victorian lady use these words? Perhaps your character spent their childhood obsessed with language; perhaps they enjoy showing off their verbal prowess. There are many reasons for choosing high diction, and it's worth picking up a dictionary just to have these words at your disposal.

A quick way to differentiate between high and low diction is to note the words' complexity. High-diction words are generally multisyllabic, technically verbose, or ornate in style. They generally comprise the carefully chosen phrases of the elite, the academic flourishes of a professor, and the technical jargon of a lawyer or renowned physicist. They expectedly fuel the literary Perlman Family of *Call Me By Your Name*, but they may also come from an unlikely source. In *Gifted*, the most academic character is a 7-year-old math whiz, which surprises her teachers, her family, and herself.



TIP

Allowing characters to speak against expectation is a quick way to grab an audience's attention.

Low diction: The pauper

Low diction, by contrast, is strictly functional; it gets the job done with little or no flourish. Characters who speak with low diction may have little schooling or may not care to draw attention to what schooling they have had. They often hold down unpretentious jobs. They speak directly and without artifice.

Low diction is rarely concerned with grammatical precision and tends to rely heavily on slang. It's not a language picked up in school; it's picked up by necessity and experience. It may be passed down by friends and family. Low diction is the language of Karl Childers in *Sling Blade*, of Tiffany Doggett in *Orange Is the New Black*, and of many characters in the working class drama, *The Florida Project*. An example of low diction may be

“Hey. Quit stuntin’, man, I ain’t got all day. You best say what you gotta say, cuz I’ve got places to be, you dig?”

Notice that I’m spelling certain words to read the way I hear them? That’s another way to distinguish between high and low diction. High diction is concerned with precision of speech; low diction is not. Don’t worry if it’s not clear right now. The distinction between high and low diction often comes after a great deal of comparison. Here are a few examples of words from both categories to get you started.

Low Diction	High Diction
Nice	Astounding, divine, splendid
Hate	Loathe, detest, despise
Glad	Delighted, elated, jubilant
Bad	Unfavorable, detrimental, atrocious
Mean	Nasty, spiteful, vicious

Bear in mind that a character’s level of diction isn’t always an indication of true intelligence, prestige, or profession. The wisest person in the room may be the young mother with no formal education who keeps her family afloat. Your character may choose a lower diction than they’re capable of to blend in, nab information, or avoid pretension. Yet at some point, their true verbal palette will emerge.



TRY IT

PUTTING WORDS IN YOUR CHARACTER'S MOUTH

Here's a fun and simple way to generate dynamic diction. Take a look at this list of a few neutral phrases. (By neutral, I mean that they don't suggest any type or level of diction.) Now, giving yourself two to three minutes each, jot down as many different ways to express the sentiment as you can think of. Feel free to make up expressions if they occur to you.

- Hello
- Goodbye
- I love you
- I hate you
- Get out of here
- That's great
- Have a nice day

After you complete the lists, think about your character. Circle any of the phrases that you came up with that your character might use. If you can't find one that fits, make one up now. Try this project with other neutral phrases. Eventually, your character's voice should emerge.

Name That Tune: Crafting Your Character's Music

A well-crafted verbal exchange is like a catchy song. Diction provides the lyrics; music provides the tune. Dialogue relies on the sounds of words as well as their definitions, on the rhythm of a conversation as well as its meaning. If you block the meaning of words and isolate the sounds they're made up of, you discover a rhythm holding the entire exchange together. Shakespeare wrote in the unstressed-stressed pattern of iambic pentameter. Why? Because it mimics the cadence of natural speech. The dialogue of Diablo Cody, Quentin Tarantino, and Aaron Sorkin fly off the page. Why? They use explosive words in an explosive way. The result is verbal fireworks.

Compare these two examples. The first is from *Under Milkwood*, a radio play by Dylan Thomas. The second is from Sam Shepard's *Cowboy Mouth*.

"It is Spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched courtiers-and-rabbits wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishing-boat bobbing sea."

"I don't need no black baby lamb with a bell in its tail and I ain't gettin' no cradle for no dead crow. I have a baby! My own baby! With its own cradle! You've stolen me away from my baby's cradle!"

Out of context, these passages may make no sense, yet each one has a distinct sound and rhythm. The first one is not unlike a lullaby, lilting and slow. The second passage uses hard consonants and repetition to drive its meaning home. Both selections are held together by the melody those sounds create together. They're held together, in part, by music.

The music component of dialogue is responsible for any mounting tension or emotional undercurrent in a scene. After you know what types of phrases your character utters, rework them with an ear toward melody and percussion. Which voices enhance each other? Which are combative? What is the character's state of mind as he speaks? Joy, fear, anger, grief, awe — these emotions have unmistakable rhythms; listen for them around you, examine their form, and then try to re-create them on the page. Like a catchy song, eventually, they'll stick with you.

Sound 101: Using poetry as a guide



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The terms *alliteration* and *assonance* are often used in poetry, where an ill-chosen sound can make or break the piece. Alliteration refers to the repetition of consonants and the effect of that repetition on the listener's ear. Imagine a tiny percussionist sitting inside each word. Perhaps he pounds the hard "d's" out on a kettledrum and taps the "t's" out on a snare. In any case, he repeats the sounds of each word in such a way that they produce an audible rhythm. That rhythm is alliteration.

Consider these examples:

"Hollywood is jam-packed with professional people pounding on doors."
The repeated "p" here creates the sound of those people in action.

"The wind whistles through the willow tree." The "wh" sound here becomes the wind.

"Terrific, I say. Terrific. It's utterly and totally and terribly terrific." This sentence is explosive in part because of the resounding "t's."

Alliteration is helpful when you want to punch a line or emphasize it for your audience. It also tends to speed a line up. If it's percussion that you're after, alliteration's your approach. If you're trying to produce a specific tone, it's assonance you're after.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Assonance is the repetition of a vowel sound within a phrase. Assonance creates the pitch or timbre of a conversation.

When repeated in direct succession, vowels can mimic human emotion. A sentence full of vowels may produce a subtle moan, wail, squeal, or cry. In this way, assonance helps to create an emotional soundscape for a phrase, a speech, and possibly an entire conversation.

Consider these examples:

"Don't go. I won't know what to do with myself all alone." The long "o's" in this sentence underscore its mournful request. They prolong the phrase so that the other character, and, therefore, an audience, can hear it.

"It rained on my birthday. A cold rain that refused to abate until the guests had gone away." The long "a" sounds here emphasize the sadness of the speaker.

"I will fly higher than ever before. I will fly until your eyes cannot detect me and I become the sky itself." The repeated long "i's" here accentuate the speaker's determination. The phrase has the sound of a victory cry.

If alliteration speeds a sentence up, assonance slows it down. If alliteration provides a backbeat for the conversation, assonance heightens the mood. Together, they help a writer generate a distinct quality and rhythm for a character's voice. Your audience may not always be aware of how you're using these tools, but they'll feel their effects.

Fascinating rhythm: Crafting your script's pulse

Clichés abound depicting the body's physical response to a grand emotion. When struck by love, hearts beat wildly against the chest, and knees grow weak. When scared, a person's pulse begins to race; angry people stomp and growl or stare coldly ahead with no expression. All these responses are easy to see, but what if you close your eyes? Would you hear them as well? Chances are that you would because every emotion has an accompanying verbal pulse — a rhythm that gives it away.

Of course, every sentiment sounds different in different mouths, but something about the way a character speaks should suggest the way that they feel. As you eavesdrop on conversations around you, listen for a few key rhythmic elements:

- » Punctuation
- » Repetition
- » The use of silence

Punctuation

Punctuation, or lack thereof, is often considered the key to realistic-sounding dialogue. First consider interruption, which appears in your script as a dash. People often interrupt themselves mid-sentence. Why? Perhaps they're excited over something and get ahead of themselves as they speak.

"I can't begin to tell you how wonderful it all was — did I mention the food, oh the food was just — and the wine? Out of this world — and the service?"

You get the picture. The speaker can't relay the information as fast as her brain recalls it.

Another form of interruption occurs when people think ideas through as they talk:

"It's best if the reception starts at noon, yes noon — or maybe one. That might be better. And the cake should be chocolate — oh, but Sal can't eat chocolate, better make it vanilla. I called the musicians — wait, did I call the musicians?"

See how this one works? The more thoughts that occur to this character, the more interruptions required.

A trail off, represented in a script by an ellipses (. . .) also punctuates everyday conversation. The trail off is generally used when a person forgets what they are trying to say or is searching for just the right phrase. If your character frequently trails off mid-thought, they may also be a dreamer.



REMEMBER

The punctuation and grammar of your dialogue need not be technically correct. Phrases that look like questions may end forcefully with an exclamation point. Nouns may replace verbs in sentence structure and vice versa. People speak in fragments, so will your characters. So don't dot all your i's or cross all your t's. Unless your character's a language buff, an aristocrat, or a robot, doing so will sound unnatural. Again, I emphasize that this rule holds true for dialogue. You'll probably want other portions of your screenplay — your scene descriptions, for example — to remain grammatically correct.

Repetition: You can say that again

Repetition is a valuable and multifaceted tool. It may be used to emphasize a point:

“We get the job done, do you hear me? We get. The job. Done.”

It may be used to create the stutter of confusion, love, or fear:

“What I meant was, what I meant to say just then, was to ask, that is, I would like to know, I would like very much to know if you might consider, just consider mind you, going out sometime.”

It may also be used to portray eagerness or demand:

“Did you get it? Well? Did you? Did you get the job?”



REMEMBER

As a writer, you must find a way to create heightened and carefully selected dialogue under the guise of naturalistic conversation. Punctuation and repetition make that task considerably easier.

The sound of silence

Dialogue isn't made up of words alone. Silences are as important and, sometimes, more important for conveying intent on-screen. If words are implied, a silence may take the place of an entire conversation. However, bear in mind that silences in film are usually conveyed through action or gesture. Characters do something instead of saying something.

I should distinguish between a natural pause in conversation and the pauses that you'll use in place of words. If I wrote in every natural pause, I'd add at least ten unnecessary pages to my screenplay. Leave natural pauses to the actors. If your scenario is strong enough and your character voices clear, a good actor will know how to say the line.

Pauses are scripted when a writer wants to do one of two things:

- » Highlight the last line spoken.
- » Suggest to readers and audience alike that some nonverbal exchange is taking place.

If your line is a humdinger, if you want your audience to remember it, script a pause after it. This pause allows the line to linger before the next action directs attention elsewhere. Practice rewriting generic or otherwise neutral dialogue by varying the punctuation, repetition, and silence. You should be able to say essentially the same thing with different emotions in mind and, therefore, with varying rhythms.

Letting the Listener Lead

With all this talk about talk, it's easy to forget that conversations also involve listening, and the way your character listens will affect the rhythm and quality of their speech. In life, people generally listen in one of five ways:

» **Noncommittal listening:** Noncommittal listeners are either not interested in what's being said, or they're too distracted to hear it. This type of listening often results in vague responses or abrupt switches in conversation. For example:

"So, I had lunch with Daphne the other day."

"Uh-huh."

"She mentioned you hadn't talked to her in a while."

"Oh?"

"She seemed upset about it actually."

"That's nice."

Noncommittal listeners are only pretending to listen; in reality, they're just waiting for the other person to stop talking.

» **Selective listening:** Selective listeners have their own agenda. They hear the parts of conversation that relate that agenda and nothing more. Selective listeners commonly interrupt each other, especially when in the throes of some grand emotion. One person's thought is triggered by a word or phrase directly before it. For example:

"So, I had lunch with Daphne the other day, and —"

"Daphne. I haven't seen her in, well I can't think of the last time we —"

"She mentioned you hadn't called. I told her you were busy and —"

"Of course she did. She always was one to keep track of —"

"Now, now. There's no need to start in on —"

"Really though. What right does she have to talk about our friendship with —"

"The same right as you, I suppose."

Can you sense the trigger words? The urge to speak generally occurs well before the current speaker is finished talking. This is because selective listeners only hear half, if not less, of what's said to them.

» **Selfish listening:** Selfish listeners find a way to relate the conversation to their own experience. They believe they're being helpful, when in reality they're using one person's concerns as an invitation to talk about themselves. For example:

"So, I had lunch with Daphne the other day. It sounds like she may be getting a divorce."

"I don't envy her. My divorce was awful. Did I ever tell you how I finally made the decision to leave?"

"No. I don't think you did. But Daphne seems okay with it."

"She may feel that way now. But give it time. When I first got divorced, I thought things would get easier. . . ."

You get the picture. While selfish listeners may have good intentions, they only really have one person in mind.

» **Attentive listening:** Attentive listeners actually care about the person speaking, and they don't have an agenda of their own. They usually don't offer advice or anecdotes; they're content to simply be present for the other person. Psychiatrists and counselors of any kind often fall into this category. For example:

"So I had lunch with Daphne the other day."

"You haven't mentioned Daphne in a while. How did it feel to see her again?"

"I felt bad for her, actually. She may be getting a divorce."

"Was that conversation triggering for you in any way?"

» **Active listening:** Active listeners take part in the conversation while keeping the focus on the speaker. They might repeat or paraphrase what the speaker is saying. They often ask questions that clarify or encourage the speaker to elaborate. For example:

"So I had lunch with Daphne the other day."

"You had lunch with Daphne? How does she look?"

"Not well. She may be getting a divorce."

"No! That's horrible. Did she say why?"

Active listeners are so called because they take an active part in drawing conversation out of someone else. For this reason, you might see active listening between lifelong friends, reporters, or police officers trying to obtain information for a case.



How your character listens will vary according to who they're listening to and what the subject matter is. However, this attribute is as important as how your character talks. It contributes as much to dialogue as the words do.

Putting It Together: Characters in Conversation

Okay, you've chosen a vocabulary, a sound, and a rhythm for your characters. You're ready to write an entire scene. Where do you begin? You might simply start writing and see where the discourse takes you. However, if you're pressed for time or want to approach the task in a more organized fashion, you may find it helpful to make some decisions in advance.

Setting the scene

Here are a few elements to consider before you write a scene:

- » **Which roles are your characters playing now?** Each character plays a variety of different roles throughout their day. Your protagonist may be a mother, a friend, and a boss. As the mother, she may be nurturing and kind; as a boss, demanding and curt. Before crafting your scene, determine what relationship the characters have and how that relationship affects their dialogue.
- » **What is the status or perceived status between the characters?** When a veteran employee addresses the new hire, they may instantly assume higher status. After all, they know the company well, so they have knowledge to impart. Their dialogue may be pompous, authoritative, or stern. If they later discover that the new hire will soon be their boss, that diction may change. Determine the perceived level of status between the characters in advance.
- » **What does each character want?** What your characters say in a scene is determined by what they hope to gain from each other. People who don't want anything don't need to speak at all. Your characters may flat-out demand what they want, or the dialogue may be code for what's really being discussed. Before you start writing, try to determine what each character wants and who, if anyone, will get it.

- » **How do circumstances affect what they'll say?** It's helpful to know in what circumstances your character will be more or less hesitant to speak freely. If your character is scared of the dark, then a blackout might shut them down. If your character hasn't seen a friend in years, their conversation might never end. If your character is verbose except when their father is nearby, their demeanor might shift partway through the scene.
- » **What will change during, or as a result of, the exchange?** Every strong scene results in a change of some sort. Scenes in which colleagues discuss the weather are dull because no one is being changed by the experience. If they're talking about the weather as code for an impending escape, they will leave the interaction changed, and the scene becomes more interesting. This technique is known as *subtext*.



People rarely say exactly what they mean. Instead they employ a variety of tactics to glean the information they're after. When one character talks about one subject in order to avoid talking about another or to ascertain information about another, *subtext* is present. When people use one subject as "code" to talk about another, *subtext* is present. When someone hints at what they want without saying it directly, *subtext* is present. *Subtext* is everything that's not being stated explicitly between characters, and which therefore underscores the entire scene.

For example, there's a scene in *Parasite* in which the working-class Kim family is hiding under the couch of their wealthy employers. They overhear their boss and his wife talking about the way Mr. Kim smells. Here is what they hear:

Boss: "It's hard to describe, but you sometimes smell it on the subway."

Boss's wife: "It's been ages since I rode the subway."

Boss: "People who ride the subway have a special smell."

The subtext is clear: "Poor people ride the subway, not people like us. We will never smell the way Mr. Kim smells." The fact that they don't say what they mean outright is more insulting, as it allows them to hide their prejudice behind hypothetical language.

After you outline these five things, you're ready to write. By this time, the characters should have plenty to say. However, if you get stuck, you can always return to their diction, music, or rhythm to see what's lacking. You also have an outline of the scene's objective to keep you afloat.

Dialogue do's and don'ts

The challenge of great dialogue is that it has to accomplish specific tasks while drawing little attention to itself. Remember that even if you're creating the illusion of an average conversation, there's really nothing average about it.

Developing dynamic dialogue

Strong dialogue does the following:

- » Combines distinct voices
- » Reveals character and character relationships
- » Propels the action forward
- » Conveys pertinent information or exposition
- » Prepares an audience for events to come
- » Grows out of events in the past
- » Is need-based (people speak for a reason)

If your dialogue seems flat or uninteresting, check to see whether it's accomplishing at least two of these goals. If it's not, revise it with another one in mind.

If your dialogue is accomplishing two things on this list but still feels flat, look at the character relationships more closely. Most dialogue feels flat because, in a sense, it's not moving forward. In other words, the lines don't know what they want to accomplish, so they're not accomplishing anything. In the most interesting dialogue, characters want something from each other, and they switch tactics according to how close or far they are from obtaining it. Can your characters more actively try to acquire, convince, elicit, or demand some response from the others? If you know what your language is doing in each scene, it won't remain flat for long.

Crafting a scene with goals in mind is helpful. However, it helps to test the exchange after your first pass. Here are a few ways to discover what succeeds and what still needs work:

- » **Speak it out loud.** Always test your dialogue by speaking it out loud yourself. If you stumble over the words, an actor will, too.
- » **Let other people read it out loud.** Sometimes, you can't tell what's wrong with an exchange until you've heard it. The dialogue may sound great in your head and lousy out loud. See what an objective reader has to say.



TRY IT

THE DIALOGUE TEST

Here's a quick exercise to practice crafting dialogue that does more than one thing at a time. Choose a children's story you know well and pick one moment of that story to focus on. For the purposes of this example, I use "Little Red Riding Hood," and I focus on the first moment in which a mother tells her daughter that her grandmother is sick and she needs to brave the woods to deliver a care package to her. If I simply want to convey plot, her mother might say:

"Your grandmother is ill, and I'm terribly busy. Please deliver this care package for her on the other side of the woods."

That bit of dialogue is stilted because it's doing only *one* thing. If I want to convey plot *and* relationship, I might decide that the mother and grandmother don't get along. I'd revise the line to read:

"Your grandmother is sick *yet again*. So I need you to trek through those woods *yet again* with *yet another* care package. She'd rather you deliver it than me."

That line is more active, because it conveys two things at once. If I want to try conveying plot, relationship, and mystery, I could revise the line to read:

"Your grandmother is sick *yet again*. So I need you to trek through those woods *yet again* with *yet another* care package for that old harpy, but remember — stay on the path. Do you hear me? Nothing good is waiting for you in those woods."

Now I know three things: The grandmother is sick. The mother and the grandmother don't get along, and danger lurks in the woods. The audience will lean forward to see what that danger could be *and* expect the girl to encounter it. Otherwise why bring it up?

If you can do this exercise with a story you already know, you can do it with your own.

» **Build your scene toward some point.** Every line, every speech, and every scene culminates in some resounding moment. Know what moment your scene is building toward and eliminate any detail that distracts an audience from it.

» **Identify the change.** As I mention, dynamic dialogue results in a shift of some sort. So compare the beginning of your scene to the end. Has there been a change in emotion, power, awareness, relationship, or motivation? As long as one of those categories is different by the end, the scene is active.

» **When in doubt, cut it out.** Too many images, silences, or words clutter up the action. You have minutes of screen time for every scene. One image can speak volumes; one well-phrased line may resonate for pages. Try not to repeat yourself. Keep your story moving aggressively forward.

Avoiding clunky dialogue

If you know what kind of dialogue to avoid in advance, you may be better equipped to write a convincing scene. Take a look at these top five dialogue offenders, so you can avoid them.

1) TOO “ON THE MONEY”

This type of dialogue tells rather than suggests. In these scenes, characters divulge information with seemingly no reason to do so. As a result, the dialogue sounds manufactured instead of organic.

“Dad, I can’t tell you how glad I am that you called. I’ve been waiting all these years for some sign that you missed me.”

“Of course I missed you, honey. I’ve been so miserable here alone. Just hearing your voice makes me want to cry.”

The conversation would sound more natural with silences, hesitancy to speak, or awkward stops and starts. They’re speaking for the first time after an extended absence — how comfortable can they be? Here’s how I might rework it:

“Dad, I can’t tell you how . . . I mean, it’s been so long, you know? I guess I’m just really glad you called.”

“I know. I’ve missed you, too.”

Note that what’s left unsaid is often inherent in what’s said. The daughter doesn’t need to tell her dad that she has waited all these years for a sign from him, because it’s inherent in how difficult it is for her to speak with him. The subtext of the scene makes it all worthwhile.

2) TOO REPETITIOUS

Repetition is a great tool for crafting rhythms. However, like any technique, it can become overbearing. Repetition of first names, phrases, or ideas has a tendency to slip into first-draft dialogue uninvited and overlooked.

“Larry, can you hand me that wrench?”

“This wrench? Sure thing, Phil, I’d be happy to.”

"Thanks, Lar, this wrench works on everything."

"No problem, Phil. I've got a wrench like that at home."

We rarely use first names more than once or twice in everyday conversations. They slow down your line, so strike them whenever you can. Also, make sure that every line of the dialogue takes you somewhere else. This exchange sounds better if you keep the first line and a few words more and then alter the rest. For example:

"Hey, Larry. Can you hand me that wrench?"

"Sure thing. Careful though, it's Dad's."

"Right. He used this to fix just about everything when we were young, didn't he?"

"Pretty much. Everything except his marriage, that is."

Now the speech patterns resemble those of a real conversation, and the conversation becomes about something more important than a wrench.

3) TOO SIMILAR

When characters begin to sound alike, scenes become about information and not about people. If I can close my eyes and identify a speaker by the sound of their voice, you've done a good job crafting the dialogue. If all the characters sound alike, you've got work to do.

"Did you go to the party last night?"

"Yeah. Were you there?"

"Yeah. It was great, huh?"

"Pretty great, yeah."

First of all, nothing's happening in the scene. Also, both characters have the same voice. Here's a tip: If you glance at your page and notice that every character has roughly the same number of lines in each section, your characters probably need some help.

Here's a potential rewrite:

"Did you go to the party last night?"

"Hell yes. Never miss a party, man. Never, never miss a party. Were you there?"

"Yeah. It was okay."

"Okay? Man, what's wrong with you, that party was stellar from jump."

Again, the dramatic potential is iffy, but at least there are two distinct voices in this conversation.

4) TOO LONG OR WORDY

Lengthy dialogue often suggests a novice writer. You don't need many words in film because pictures do most of the work. Opinionated discourse and philosophical discussions have no place in drama unless the fate of the world rests on the outcome of that debate. Characters raving about a cause or standing on a soapbox should be sent home.

"The campus didn't act on this one because the administration doesn't care. Most large organizations are so adept at sending messengers to do their work for them, or putting someone on hold while they grab lunch, or nodding and looking the other direction that they've forgotten how to act. Nothing happens anymore without red tape. If a question doesn't come with red tape, they'll put some on it and hire someone to take it off. This wasn't always the case, but it is now. Good luck trying to get the campus to act; I'll be surprised if you even get a foot in the door."

This entire speech is one opinion. Nothing new is said after the second line. If you cut it by a third and give the person a clear reason for ranting, the speech may get interesting. Here's a potential reworking:

"The campus didn't act, because the administration doesn't care. You think they'll listen to you now? No way. They'll get some secretary to intercept you, they'll put you on hold, by the time they're done with you, you'll be nothing but a mound of red tape. No, it's a lost cause tryin' to get this administration to act. Won't even get your foot in the door."

If you find yourself getting overly wordy, break the language up with lines of action or description to remind the audiences what's happening visually. You don't ever want them to forget what's happening on the screen.

5) TOO FLAT

By flat I mean that no one's in control of the scene. When characters have the same amount of power, their conversations tend to be dull.

"He shouldn't have gone behind my back."

"That's true. He shouldn't have done that. And we'll tell him."

"Yeah. We'll show him who's boss."

Active dialogue often depends on two people vying for control of the scene. If you pit these two characters against each other, the scene is more exciting. Notice how conflict enhances dialogue as vividly as it enhances action.

"You had no right to go behind my back."

"You're right. I'm sorry. It was stupid to even try."

"Damn straight. And you'll pay for it, too."

"Or you could just let it go. After all, you owe me. Remember?"



TRY IT

WHO'S IN CONTROL? ENHANCE YOUR SCENE WITH STATUS

Power dynamics and the changes therein are the most important elements of any cinematic exchange. The moment status shifts between two people is the moment a scene becomes active. Audiences don't watch movies just to hear people talk; we want to see them win or lose or both in rapid succession. And while you can always go back and revise scenes with status in mind, it helps to craft a scene around it from the start. The following exercise is meant to help you do just that. To start, you'll want to imagine

- **Two characters in a relationship that comes with implied status.** For example, if you choose an employer and an employee, I assume the employer is in charge until you suggest otherwise. If you choose a professor and a student, I assume the professor holds more power. If you imagine two cousins, who holds power is unclear, so the relationship is less useful for this endeavor.
- **A potentially uncomfortable location.** By *potentially uncomfortable*, I mean a place where the characters would feel awkward should the scene become public, volatile, or vulnerable. A teenager's bedroom might be a comfortable location unless they're studying with their school crush and their eccentric parents are in the house. A restaurant might feel like a neutral locale until your waitress suddenly bursts into tears. Choose a location that has the potential to add tension to the scene.

After those details are decided, choose one of the following formulas to practice shifting the power between them.

- **Ping-Pong:** In this formula, one character begins in a place of high status, and their status shifts each time the next character speaks. So if a parent begins a conversation with their teenager by scolding, "You've been home late every night this week. I have no choice but to ground you," their child could respond by sobbing, "You're right! I'm the absolute worst and I regret most of my life choices!" In this case the child has further lowered their status, which should placate or concern their parent.

However, the child might respond by saying, “That’s because I can’t stand watching you drown your stress in bourbon. It’s not safe for me here at night.” In this case the child’s status lifts and their parent’s status lowers. If this conversation happens in the privacy of their home, that’s fine, but the scene will become more tense if a neighbor, a peer, or a family member witnesses the exchange.

- **Reversal:** In this formula, one character begins in a place of high status and their status rises until it becomes uncomfortable for the other character and for us. At the moment your first speaker can’t become more powerful and your second speaker can’t become less powerful, switch that dynamic in one fluid gesture, line of dialogue, or both. For example, if the head servant of a royal household spends a page critiquing the new gardener’s looks, demeanor, and references, it might seem impossible for the new hire to succeed. If moments after the tirade concludes, the gardener looks directly into the head servant’s eyes and says, “Well, the duchess requested my help directly, but I’ll inform her you question her judgment,” then the “roles have been reversed” so to speak. At this point in a reversal scene, the second speaker becomes more powerful, and you may choose to end the scene there or build their power up until you feel it can go no further.

Continue writing the exercise until you’ve exhausted your methods of shifting status or until you’re satisfied with how each character has changed. After you attempt the exercise with two characters, you might add a third or a fourth or a tenth. The more characters you juggle, the tougher it becomes to track status, though, so I’d limit yourself at first. Also, don’t forget that power need not be expressed via extreme emotion. If politics have taught us anything, it’s that the person yelling is often *not* the person in charge. The person yelling has often lost or is losing power (thus the yelling).

- » Considering nontraditional plot structures
- » Manipulating time in your screenplay
- » Making a movie musical
- » Writing a web series
- » Scripting a short film

Chapter **11**

The Nontraditional Film

Most screenwriting books will tell you there's only one surefire way to structure a film — in three acts, which follow one main character chronologically toward a grand battle and satisfying conclusion. It's true that this is the most common formula in the industry, and many successful films have been forged upon it. It's such a popular structure, in fact, that I dedicate Chapter 16 to the subject.

However, just as life doesn't follow any one pattern, neither does art. Your film will always have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but just because a film about an archaeologist shielding an ancient relic from the Nazis moves steadily forward in time doesn't mean a film in which a character relives the same day over and over again will follow suit. Your characters and your content dictate how your story gets told. So while it helps to familiarize yourself with the industry standards — and I'd certainly suggest a novice screenwriter begin with them — I'd be the last person to tell you there's only one way to spin a yarn.

This chapter gives you an overview of some alternative story structures and provides several examples from popular cinema. I concentrate on films that branch away from traditional realism into the world of high style. Movie musicals and films in which time runs some way other than forward all fall into this category. Finally, I introduce you to a hybrid model — the *web series*, which is an increasingly popular way to break into the film industry.

Breaking with Tradition: Other Ways to Get the Job Done

In traditional story structure, writers spend the first act introducing the characters and the central conflict, the second act getting to know those characters and enhancing that conflict, and the third act forcing the characters to face the conflict resulting in great failure or great success.

If I were to draw this structure on a chalkboard, it would look like the big hill on a roller coaster. The audience starts on the ground, working their way up to a great height, gaining momentum as they ride, and once they've been pushed as far as they can go, they plunge laughing or screaming back to earth again. The entirety of a three-act structure drives toward the moment before the fall; everything that comes after the fall is wrap-up. (See Chapter 16 for more on this structure and its proven success rate.) But before you run off and pen your screenplay, consider the Titanic.

Everyone knows the Titanic sank. There's no great mystery to the conclusion of a film about the Titanic. You can begin that film as if the audience doesn't know what happens and work your way toward the tragedy, or you can begin your film with the tragedy and spend the rest of the film showing viewers how it happened. The former version follows traditional structure; the latter version follows cyclical structure — which is one of three nontraditional ways to construct a screenplay:

» **Cyclical structure:** The movie ends where it begins. The Titanic sinks in the first scene, we flash back to see how we get there, and we watch it sink again at the conclusion. Cyclical films suggest the what of the story at the onset so that audiences can concentrate on the how.

Why use this structure? You want your story to feel inevitable. Or you want your audience to witness a moment at the beginning and understand it by the end. Or, you believe people don't actually learn from their mistakes, but rather keep repeating them throughout their lives.

» **Parallel structure:** The movie follows several equally complex plotlines simultaneously. *The Hours* is crafted this way, following three generations of women affected by suicide. Each woman's story is fully realized, each has its own conflicts, secondary characters, and conclusion. However, audiences learn more about these women by comparing their lives than they would by following a solo journey. The movie *Hoop Dreams* is similar in this regard. It tracks the lives of two Black teenagers who are recruited by a predominantly white school with a great basketball program. Showcasing their journeys side-by-side more thoroughly highlights racial, educational, and economic disparity in America. *Pulp Fiction* is a famous example of parallel structure, tracking three interrelated stories with different protagonists.

Virtually all Robert Altman films employ parallel structure, but *Short Cuts* is the clearest example. This film follows at least five plotlines. Occasionally, the characters weave in and out of each other's lives, but they're primarily connected by location. As a result, audiences feel they've experienced a day in the life of an entire neighborhood by the end of the film.

» **Pattern structure:** The movie is comprised of stories that exist independently of each other, connected by one element. Romance is a common connector. Each scene in *500 Days of Summer*, for example, takes place on one day of a love affair. The arc of the relationship holds the story together, even though the film jumps around in time. All 18 stories in *Paris, Je T'aime* take place in Paris and showcase romantic love while *Love Actually* highlights the lives of eight very different couples during Christmas. By contrast, the Hal Hartley movie *Flirt* is a structural pattern script. The same events occur three times in that film — though the locations, the time frames, and even the genders of the characters change. The plot points are the pattern. How they occur and who they occur to differ throughout.



REMEMBER

Sometimes pattern films feel like parallel films, but here's the difference: Parallel films follow a few storylines from start to finish, and occasionally those storylines interact. Pattern films offer glimpses of stories, all connected by one element. The characters in those glimpses rarely (if ever) interact, and an audience rarely (if ever) gets more than the glimpse.

Screenwriters aren't always strict in their adherence to any one of these structures. Many films have moments of cyclical structure, moments where stories run parallel to each other, and moments where patterns emerge. *Groundhog Day* is a film where the main character, played by Bill Murray, seems trapped in a never-ending cycle of events. He relives the same day at least five times in that film. However, he's aware of the cycle, and the film demonstrates what it takes to break it. The first scene is therefore not the same as the last, but audiences wonder throughout if it will be. *The Titanic* is essentially a flashback. It therefore has the feeling of a cycle script, but it's traditional in design. So please take note: I offer these formulas not to suggest that you structure an entire screenplay around them (though you could), but because they're other ways to envision your story.

Tinkering with Time

Most films are *linear*, meaning that they move chronologically forward in time. Even movies that employ flashbacks are essentially linear. I may pause in the course of my day to recall the moment my child was born, but my day will pick up again when the reverie passes.

If you've ever wanted to retract something you've said or see how life might have panned out if only you'd stayed with that certain someone, you're in luck. You can do that in film. However, before you stray from the linear path, ask yourself why your story is better told a different way.

Here are some reasons to tangle with time:

- » **You want to highlight a pivotal decision in your character's life by dramatizing the road taken as well as the road, well, not.** These films either reveal both possible storylines simultaneously, or audiences experience one journey and then the other. *Sliding Doors* is an example of such a film. Audiences follow Helen, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, through her day twice — once in which she catches the evening train and catches her boyfriend cheating on her, and one in which she misses the train entirely.
- » **You want to trace an outcome back to its inciting event.** These films present a conclusion in the first act and work backward to reveal what led to that conclusion. *Memento* is a clear example of this technique. The film's protagonist wants to solve his wife's murder. Unfortunately, he suffers from short-term memory loss and must write himself memos to keep track of the facts. The film moves backward, note by note, until he is forced to confront the reason his wife died. Notice that the decision to move backward is far from arbitrary. It stems from the protagonist's infliction, and it methodically drives an audience toward his final, personal revelation.
- » **You want to analyze an event in the way an academic analyzes history.** Films structured this way feel like a slide presentation or a documentary. Audiences are given all the information surrounding an event, but they don't necessarily receive it in order. These stories are often narrated; they pause and rewind as desired, speed through events or skip them entirely, and provide expert testimony as needed to prove a point. Christopher Guest's mockumentaries, *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*, and *A Mighty Wind*, work this way. Each is a faux-documentary and jumps in time and between narrators. *Election* is also structured in this way: One high school teacher pits himself against a student in the upcoming school election. They take turns trying to justify their actions to the audience, citing some hilarious reasoning as they go.
- » **You want your character to be able to retract their actions and try again.** You know the expression, "Hindsight is 20-20"? Here's your opportunity to allow characters to relive a moment once, twice, even three times with renewed vision. *Run Lola Run* works this way. Lola has 20 minutes to find a sum of money for her boyfriend, before he robs a store for the cash. Audiences see three alternative endings to this plotline, every variation of which is based on a tiny change in her race against time.

So how common is cinematic time twisting? As you may have guessed from the examples, it's fairly common, and films that succeed here keep audiences guessing what'll happen next.



WARNING

Bear in mind that you can confuse an audience or lose them entirely by messing with time as well. The sci-fi thriller *Inception* is a useful cautionary tale in this regard. Though many audiences found it exciting to follow thief Dom Cobb as he enters people's dreams and steals their secrets, viewers were also confused by which reality they were in at any given moment. It's easy to forget and/or repeat information when you're manipulating time. So, if you're unclear about sections of your plot or fuzzy on your characters' motivations, don't try it just yet. Wait until you're confident in those arenas before manipulating time at all.



TIP

Map your screenplay out as if it's linear in design. Doing so reveals the pivotal events in your plot and any holes therein. Again, your story will always essentially have three acts — a beginning, middle, and end — so it can't hurt to see what those acts would look like if you gave them to us chronologically. You can always reverse the events or rearrange them after that clarification. This tip is also useful if you plan to layer another artistic medium on top of your story — a medium such as a song perhaps.

Song and Dance: The Movie Musical

Crafting a movie musical is similar to crafting any story, with one exception: Parts of these stories are better told in song. Let me emphasize that last point. Song is not simply a fun way to enhance your story; in musicals, it's the best way that certain kinds of information can be communicated. For this reason, it's extra important that you know what your musical is about, and I don't mean the synopsis. I mean, what is your musical exploring? What themes ground the action?

For example, *Frozen* centers around two sisters: Elsa, born with magical ice powers, and Anna, born with non-magical powers of empathy and persuasion. When Elsa's anger unwittingly sparks an endless winter, Anna must brave the elements to find and assuage her. That's *Frozen*'s synopsis. But what is it really *about*? It's about celebrating who you are without fear or shame. It's also about women saving themselves instead of waiting for men to do it. Once you know what your musical is exploring thematically, you'll have a more clear sense of what information your songs are meant to convey.

The most successful musicals are ones in which songs are a necessity, and characters break into them for one of the following reasons:

- » They're consumed by emotion, and words alone no longer suffice.
- » They're saying one thing, but feeling another.
- » They're thinking out loud, and music suggests their internal landscape.

Sense a pattern here? In each instance, music provides the emotional impact of the scene. Writers rely on song to burst forth where dialogue falls short, or to reveal the subtext of a scene, or to lead us into the character's mind. It's wise to consider what role music serves in your story in advance, because it will make conversations with your collaborators easier later on.

How much music is too much music?

An important conversation to have with your collaborators early on is how much of your story music should tell. In general, movie musicals fall into two categories:

- » **All-sung (or sung-through):** In these musicals, everything is conveyed through song. You still craft musical numbers, but the scenes between them are also sung. *Evita*, *Cats* (both the 1998 and the 2019 versions), and *Les Misérables* are examples of all sung movie musicals. The opera-stand-up comedy mash-up *Annette* is a newer example of this form. Every part of the story is turned into a song, from motorcycle rides to strolls in a field to each sex scene.
- » **Integrated:** In these musicals, songs and straight dialogue work together, and writers decide when and why to employ one or the other. Integrated musicals are far more common. *The Wizard of Oz*, *Dreamgirls*, *The Greatest Showman*, *A Star Is Born*, and *La La Land* as well as most animated musical films are examples of integrated musicals.

When analyzing all-sung musicals, you should pay close attention to how the musical numbers function in the story. Though everything will be sung, the musical numbers should still be reserved for a unique purpose. They may signify moments when emotions run high or community forms, a break in reality, or a problem that must be solved. In an integrated musical, it's important to consider what role music is playing in general, so you know when to employ a scene or a song.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

When imagining what role music will play in your story, it's helpful to know the difference between *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music*. Diegetic music refers to any song that emanates from an identifiable source on-screen. It's music the character would or could realistically hear or perform. A record spinning in a record player, a pop song on a car radio, a musician on a street corner are examples of diegetic music. Non-diegetic music does not have an on-screen source. It's been layered in or exists in the character(s) imagination. Diegetic music occurs in most films. Films like *Baby Driver* are built around it, as the protagonist choreographs his getaway driving to specific songs. *Baby Driver* is not a musical though; it's just a film in which music plays a vital role. Films like *La Vie En Rose* and *A Star Is Born* are diegetic musicals. Those are films about musicians so musical performances are a realistic part of the story. Most movie musicals, however, are non-diegetic from *La La Land* and *Annette* to the *Frozen* franchise. Songs take the place of dialogue or characters imagine parts of their lives as musical numbers. Music breaks the bonds of realism in these instances.

So who are these collaborators you should have these conversations with? Here's the other part of this process that differs from the norm: you'll most likely be working with a lyricist and a librettist.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

In film, as onstage, musical scripts generally employ three collaborators: the *composer*, the *lyricist*, and the *librettist*. The composer is in charge of the music; the lyricist is in charge of the words to the songs; and the librettist is in charge of the story, otherwise known as the *book*.

Often, these roles overlap. Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and the lyrics for *Sweeney Todd*, for which Hugh Wheeler wrote the original book and John Logan wrote the screenplay. Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce share credit for the screenplay of *Moulin Rouge!*, but the music was pulled from a variety of different artists. *La La Land* was written by Damien Chazelle (who also directed the film) while music and lyrics were written by Justin Hurwitz. *Sweeney Todd* is also an adaptation, while *Moulin Rouge!* and *La La Land* are original works.



REMEMBER

A musical is simply a story with song. You're still crafting active events, motivated characters, formidable conflicts, and protagonists who fail or succeed. Music is one more element to consider, and it should be a necessary addition, but the story-crafting process is similar to that of a non-musical screenplay.

Original musicals

Some of the most innovative original musicals include *La La Land*, *Moulin Rouge!*, *Across the Universe*, *Once*, *Enchanted*, *The Greatest Showman*, *Rocketman*, and *High School Musical*, as well as classics like *Singin' in the Rain*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. And don't forget virtually every animated Disney film to date.

A quick glance through these examples suggests three distinct formulas for original pieces:

- » An original book with acquired music
- » An adapted book with original music and lyrics
- » An original book with original music and lyrics

Let's look at examples of each of these.

An original book with acquired music

Films that construct stories around preexisting pop songs are referred to as *juke-box musicals*. *Rocketman*, *Moulin Rouge!*, and *Across the Universe* are clear examples of the form. *Rocketman* is based on Elton John's lifework. *Moulin Rouge!*, the story of a famous showgirl and her forbidden love affair with a young composer, includes songs by Elton John, David Bowie, and Madonna. The entire plot of *Across the Universe* was constructed around music from The Beatles. Julie Taymor uses their songs to trek through history, specifically the drafting of unwilling youth into the Vietnam War. If you're interested in writing a musical, but aren't a composer yourself, consider which songwriters excite you and why. You may be able to construct an idea for a film around those artists. Because rights are involved here, you'll want to approach someone with the idea before writing the screenplay, but you can sell a story this way.

An adapted book with original music and lyrics

The Greatest Showman, *The Wizard of Oz*, and most of Disney's animated films follow this formula. The writers chose fictional material, adapted it into a screenplay, and collaborated with composers and lyricists for the music. This route is perhaps easier to follow for the novice screenwriter. First, the story's already there for the taking. You have to figure out how to transfer it to film, but you're not responsible for devising all the plot points yourself. Second, it's often easier to see where to place songs when looking at someone else's story. Finally, it's easier to market these musicals because the primary material is usually pulled from popular literature or historical biography. And anything that's easier to market is easier to sell.

An original book with original music and lyrics

This formula is the rarest of the three, in large part because it requires the most intense collaborations. It's also the one most likely to fail in process or at the box office, because all the material is untested. *La La Land*, *Once*, *High School Musical*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and *Meet Me in St. Louis* are examples of this form. All four films

were hits, but they were created by artists who had worked together before and had past experience with the form. In other words, they had a lot of help, and they spoke the same creative language. If you decide to go this route, more power to you. Make sure that you and your collaborators have agreed on why the story must be a musical and that you have a similar aesthetic in mind.

Musical adaptations

Adapting a musical is by far the more common way to write one. *In the Heights*, *The Prom*, *A Star Is Born*, *Dreamgirls*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Chicago*, *The Producers*, *Hairspray*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Grease*, *Annie* — the list of successful musical film adaptations is endless. I talk in detail about adapting one medium into another in Chapter 18, but here are a few things to consider if you're interested specifically in this type of musical:

- » **Know the pros and cons of the original medium.** If your primary source was a Broadway show, you may encounter one set serving several locations, or a chorus of people playing multiple roles, or grand song and dance numbers that need to be altered to make sense on-screen. Consider which parts of the original medium will help you in this endeavor, and which will be a hindrance.
- » **Know which characters you want to keep and which you can lose.** You may convert an entire chorus into one on-screen role. The original piece may have two villains while your film may only need one. You may eliminate entire supporting characters from a novel so that audiences can concentrate on the main story. So take some time to discover which characters most compel you and why.
- » **Be familiar enough with the original plot to know which three to five events will become the skeleton of your film.** You don't need to use more than that, though many writers do. If you can narrow your focus down to five pivotal events, you can rearrange their order until the screenplay reveals itself to you. This technique also frees you up to create new or updated material between those moments.
- » **Let the music be your guide.** You don't need to script every scene in the original if you've accurately captured the quality of the piece. The Broadway version of *Sweeney Todd*, for example, begins with a chorus of ghosts detailing the life of the protagonist. It then deposits us on the boat, which carries Sweeney himself back to London. The film version skips that introductory song and opens with the boat. This alteration works because the film becomes the tale of Sweeney Todd; we don't need a choral rendition of the plot in advance.

» **Allow music to inform the texture of your film.** The dark corruption of *Chicago* stands in stark contrast to the technicolor mania of *Grease*, not simply because the subject matter demands it. The music conveys that difference before any words are spoken.



MUSICAL TECHNIQUES FOR NONMUSICAL PROJECTS

Whether you're writing a musical or not, considering its structure may help craft the project you are working on. Here are three techniques I borrow from musicals on a regular basis when writing screenplays with songs or without:

- **Write to a soundtrack.** Find songs that reflect the pace and feel of your larger scenes and write them with that song playing in the background. You won't include these songs in those scenes, necessarily, but often the quality of each one finds its way into your work as you write.
- **Choose musical themes for your characters.** In musicals, each character is often underscored with their own riff. This choice is meant to immediately convey personality and intention. You should know what your characters' themes would be, whether you use them in the script or not.
- **Consider crafting any grand activity, long speech, or extended silence in the same way you'd write a song.** Each moment is its own story, and each moment can't be conveyed any other way. The best songs are the ones characters have no choice but to sing. Your nonsung moments should feel the same way.
- **Borrow the traditions.** Musicals are traditionally broken down into different song types: The "I want" song, for example, conveys what a character most desires. Charm songs seduce or beguile an audience. Fantasy numbers involve a group of people imagining how their lives might change. The "11 o'clock number" refers to a penultimate showstopping song in which the protagonist confronts the conflict. In addition, musicals employ dance breaks, choral numbers, and reprises. Does your script have this variety? Do you include private moments for the lead roles? Are they balanced out with crowd scenes? Do you have sequences of pure activity and story-stopping speeches?

Just because most musicals structure themselves a certain way, doesn't mean you can't use the techniques to inspire your high-octane political thriller or your off-beat romantic comedy. Every form teaches you something about the others.



REMEMBER

In order to adapt material into a musical, you must first own the rights. I go over the process of acquiring rights in Chapter 18, but you should consider it in advance. If you're adapting a stage musical for the screen (as in *The Prom*, *Chicago*, or *Grease*), you'll need control of the primary source. If you have an original story but would like to enhance it with songs by contemporary artists (as in *Moulin Rouge!*), you'll need to acquire rights for each song. While the process can be a complicated one, consider it now. You don't want to script a musical you won't be legally allowed to market.

One Click Away: Writing a Web Series

The web series has far more in common with television than it does with film. So why include it in a book about writing screenplays? Because the web series is one of the fastest and most economical ways to market your work in our social-media saturated age, and it's a fluid enough hybrid to warrant attention here. Also, most professional writers move between film and television with regularity these days, and attempting one form usually strengthens your mastery of another.

Simply put, a *web series* is a sequence of short, scripted online videos meant to tell a story or inform an audience. The format reads like a television show in that it's episodic and focuses on one story, theme, or cast of characters over an extended period of time. However, a web series is far easier to produce than a television show, and it offers writers far more creative control.



TIP

Not familiar with the web series medium? You might have encountered one without knowing it, but if not, they're easy to view online. Here are some popular web series to check out:

- » **Broad City** (<https://www.youtube.com/user/broadcity>)
- » **High Maintenance** (<https://vimeo.com/channels/highmaintenance>)
- » **The Maria Bamford Show** (<https://www.mariabamford.com/web-series>)
- » **The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl** (<http://awkwardblackgirl.com/>)

Of these examples, the first three became notable TV shows, while *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* helped Issa Rae sell her HBO hit, *Insecure*.

Why should you write a web series? Well, here are a few reasons to at least consider it:

- » **It's one of the fastest ways to reach a wide and diverse audience.** Most people have access to the internet and at least one social media platform they visit regularly. As web series are generally hosted by YouTube or Vimeo, audiences can find your work easily, and you can advertise via your social media platform of choice. Audiences can view your series on their computer, tablet, or phone and, as we all know, accessibility is good for business.
- » **It's one of the fastest creative processes.** It's possible to write, produce, and launch a web series in a few months. The timetable obviously depends on how many episodes, actors, and locations you require, as well as the schedules of everyone involved, but creating a web series is far faster than writing (much less selling) a screenplay.
- » **You're the boss.** As the creator of a web series, you're in charge of all aspects of the vision and the production process. You'll collaborate on *how* the series gets made, but why it's being made and who it's for are up to you. You'll hire a production team, and you'll oversee location-scouting, casting, editing, marketing, and more. You'll "wear more hats," as the saying goes, but your vision for the work will remain intact.
- » **You're also the agent.** You have to be proactive to promote a web series. The process teaches (forces?) you to raise money, organize collaborators, invest in your community online and off, and speak about your work with confidence. Those skills don't all come naturally to most people, but they're necessary when you enter the showbiz industry.
- » **The feedback is interactive and immediate.** This is a "for better or worse" reality, as online criticism is often more scathing or cynical than criticism delivered in person. However, you won't need to wait for an audience response, and it's often easier and more fun to engage with people online. Also, you'd be surprised how quickly a fanbase develops when people can simply share a link to your work with their friends.

When *shouldn't* you write a web series? If the following statements are true, this isn't the format for you:

- » **Your web series is actually a full-length screenplay.** A web series and a film are two different mediums. So while it might be tempting to simply distribute your screenplay online one scene at a time, I advise against it. You'll waste valuable time trying to shoehorn one medium into another. It's important to respect the differences between forms so you can be successful in each.

- » **You're trying to raise money for your screenplay.** While writing a web series takes less time than writing a screenplay, it still takes time. So if you plan to churn out a web series in order to raise money or awareness for your film, you're better off just raising money and awareness for your film.
- » **You have no interest in television writing.** Again, the web series has more in common with television than with film, so while it can launch your career as a screenwriter, you won't enjoy the process if you don't like the form.
- » **You think this process will be easier than writing a screenplay.** Let me be clear. Fast and easy are not the same thing. Each webisode is its own short story and crafting one in five minutes or less is often more challenging than spreading a narrative out over two hours. Also, while being your own boss preserves your vision, it also involves doing a lot more than writing and pitching a film.



Pursue projects that excite you, especially when you're just starting out. If you're excited about the web series medium and what's possible within it, give it a go. If you're interested exclusively in film, focus your efforts there.

Because you're also the producer of your web series, you'll need to think like one, which means considering finances first.

Show me the money!

Every stage of a web series project involves money. You absolutely can launch a web series on a shoestring budget, but on average, a web series takes anywhere from \$5,000 to \$40,000 to complete. So consider your financial path before you begin. Luckily, crowdfunding has become a common and accepted way to raise funds fast, and there are grants for most every occasion. The most important financial considerations include

- » **Be savvy with your casting.** Actors with an established career or a popular online presence can entice advertisers or investors.
- » **Know the difference between an advertiser and an investor.** Advertisers want to sell a product to your audience, whoever they may be. They tend to care less about the content of your series, and more about your target demographic. Investors, on the other hand, stand to make money off your series and their names are attached to the content, so they care a lot more about your creative intentions. Therefore, you probably want to get advertisers on board first, so your investors feel better about their investment, and you'll want to emphasize different aspects of your project in your pitch to each entity.

- » **Lawyer-up.** While you might not need a lawyer on your team right away, it never hurts to court one early on. If you plan to utilize the help of advertisers and investors, you'll want a lawyer to draw up those contracts. If you're paying members of your cast and/or crew, it helps to have a lawyer look over those agreements as well, just so everyone feels secure, and an official process is in place should creative differences arise.
- » **Develop your crowdfunding prowess.** Crowdfunding is a relatively easy way to raise money for creative projects these days, especially if you and your team have a robust social media presence. Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and GoFundMe are just a few of the popular sites at your disposal these days. However, it's rare to reach funding goals this way, and you should plan accordingly. It helps to have a short trailer attached to your campaign and to strategically time the release. You should also choose the crowdfunding site that best fits your goals. Some sites allow you to keep the money you earn regardless of whether you hit your goal. Some sites are "all or nothing."

Some writers launch one big fundraising campaign at the start of their process while others launch several smaller campaigns along the way. Regardless of which approach you opt for, there are three stages of the process to finance: pre-production, production and post-production.

Tackling the pre-production work for a web series

Pre-production involves writing the web series and organizing your creative team. You may tackle both tasks simultaneously, or, if you're writing the series alone, you may wait to find collaborators who match the material until after it's written. Either way, the most important element of the entire process is the script.

Writing a script for a web series

The script for a web series is formatted the same way as a traditional screenplay, but it's built differently. Here are some key considerations before you begin:

- » **Your audience:** A typical web series audience is between 14 and 35 years old. Older audiences may see your work, and you can certainly write about mature characters, but your story should be relatable to younger audiences. The web series audience is also diverse, so your story should be built with diversity and inclusion in mind. Frankly, *all* stories should be built with diversity and inclusion in mind, but you'll be interacting with your audience in a way that studio executives do not, so it's important to build stories with the online community in mind.

- » **Episode length:** Each episode of a web series (*webisode*) is generally three to ten minutes long. There are certainly webisodes longer than that, but remember—people can click away from your work as fast as they clicked on it, so it's best to leave them wanting more. The three to five minute range is a great place to start.
- » **Series length:** You can script as many webisodes as you like, but six to ten episodes per series is a manageable length to aim for. The fewer episodes you script, the lower your budget will be.
- » **Series structure:** There will probably be a unifying element to your series. Web series most often highlight one protagonist's journey or a theme that several characters engage with over time. Either way, each webisode will have its own beginning, middle, and end, which is one of the fundamental ways this form differs from screenplays.

For example, Issa Rae's web series, *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, tracks the protagonist's clumsy attempts to socialize. Each webisode focuses on one uncomfortable social encounter. Each season is 12 webisodes that range from 4 to 14 minutes in length. The protagonist of *High Maintenance* is a marijuana courier, but each episode focuses on a set of customers and how their lives interact with his. Each of the six seasons is three to four webisodes that range from six to ten minutes in length.

- » **Series outline:** Because each webisode has its own story arc, you should outline the entire series in advance. Doing so will reveal how each webisode supports the main narrative, highlight unnecessary repetition, and point to places where a storyline falters. The outline also makes revision easier because you can track how one change affects the entire series.
- » **Production limitations:** In order to keep your series within deadline and budget, it helps to limit the number of characters and locations. Your production team will need to find and/or secure rights to each location, which takes time, and you'll need to schedule around the actors, which takes savvy. Limiting characters also helps an audience focus on your story which — remember — they're tracking in short intervals.

There are creative ways to get around this constraint if you're dead set on a large cast. You can focus each episode on a new set of characters or ask actors to play several roles. For example, Maria Bamford plays all the characters in *The Maria Bamford Show*. This choice works well thematically, as the story revolves around one woman's mental health, but it also made the series far easier to produce.

- » **Complication over climax:** While screenplays often drive toward one big confrontation called a climax, webisodes usually introduce a problem in the first 30 seconds, complicate that problem, and then resolve it or leave the audience wondering what will happen next. In this way, a web series can spin dramatic tension around everyday scenarios much like a collection of short stories.

- » **Nonverbal over verbal:** Because of your time constraints, each shot or scene needs to do several things at once. Therefore, you'll want to highlight information in as many nonverbal ways as possible. Can we discover who that teenager is from the posters on their wall or the way they hide behind their long hair? Can we sense a person's past trauma from the number of locks on their apartment door? If you convey information nonverbally, your dialogue can do something else. This rule applies to production as well. If your actors convey a character trait via performance, you don't need to highlight that trait in dialogue.
- » **The test drive:** While you can and will refine each webisode as you film it, bigger revisions should be made before production starts. If you have already assembled a cast, I suggest hosting an informal table-read (a script read-through) so that you can hear the cast members in their roles and they can offer feedback. I recommend letting the director and the cinematographer read the script as well.

As you can probably tell, the skills you develop building a web series are similar to those you flex when writing a screenplay. However, because you have to catch viewers' attention fast (in one minute or less) and craft stories where characters change quickly (in six minutes or less), this form is a crash course in efficient storytelling. The next step is to choose who you want to tell your story with, as described in the next section.

Assembling the creative team for a web series

Your creative team will consist of some combination of the following people: a director, assistant directors, actors, a script supervisor, a cinematographer, a colorist, sound and lighting designers, a special effects coordinator, a production manager, an editor, and a marketing specialist. You can certainly direct, perform, edit, and market your own series, but I encourage you to work with people who are as passionate about these jobs as you are about writing. It's more fun to collaborate, it results in a more polished product, and you won't burn yourself out. Your team may also include co-writers. If you go this route, make sure they share your artistic vision but possess different talents and points of view. These differences will keep the process active and the script sharp.

After you assemble your team, you need to:

- » Find and secure locations. Certain locations may require permits or limit shooting to specific hours, so you'll need this information in advance.
- » Create a budget for the series and be clear about who's being financially compensated.

- » Audition and cast the series.
- » Create a shooting schedule, bearing in mind that you'll need to shoot scenes out of order to best utilize everyone's time.
- » Find and secure all necessary equipment, props, and costumes.

After you complete all the tasks related to pre-production, you're ready to begin production.

Getting involved in web series production

Screenwriters aren't always involved in the production or post-production process, which makes crafting a web series exciting and unique. Production involves filming each episode, and that work is led by you, your director, your cinematographer, and your sound and light technicians. Whether you're filming each episode on your iPhone (which makes a very good camera!), or simply overseeing the production process, you'll certainly have input each step of the way. With that in mind, here are some considerations to guide you:

- » **Clearly establish production priorities.** Maybe you want your series to look glossy but you don't care as much about locale. If so, you should prioritize lights, editing, and your colorist, but not location permits. If you want a grittier aesthetic with a lot of action sequences, you can save money on equipment but you should prioritize special effects. Know what's important aesthetically before filming begins.
- » **Be prepared to revise based on production complications.** Locations fall through. Schedules shift. Actors make choices that challenge or change the direction of the material. Frustrating as these moments can be, I encourage you to see them as opportunities. Maybe that scene can take place somewhere else. Maybe a different backstory bolsters the character's motivation. Maybe that scene takes place at night instead of mid-day. It's often easier to use what you have rather than waiting for what you want.
- » **Be prepared to revise based on budget.** Time is money. The longer your dialogue runs, the more time you'll spend filming and the more money you'll need to pay your team. Locations, props, and food for the actors and crew also cost money, so don't be surprised if you need to revise a scene in order to make it financially feasible.
- » **Rehearse scenes before you film them.** Stage actors rehearse scenes for weeks before a performance, but that practice is surprisingly rare in the film world. One or two rehearsals of each webisode help actors clarify staging and help you clarify the script before the camera rolls. This practice saves you time and money on set.

» **Film more shots than you need.** This advice is connected to your equipment. The more cameras you have, the more points of view you can shoot at any given time. Make sure that you catch as many angles of any given moment as you think might be necessary later on. You never know when someone's reaction to a line will be more important than the line itself.



REMEMBER

Flexibility is the most important attribute in the production process. Allow elements that aren't within your control — budget, location, schedule — to guide the process instead of impeding it. Choose collaborators who remain calm in a crisis or who view challenges as opportunities to try something new.

Successfully steering the web series post-production process

After you film your web series, the final steps involve splicing it all together and building a buzz. Ideally, you'll do both at the same time. Here are some suggestions for this crucial final stage of the web series process:

Editing your web series like a pro

Editing involves knowing what's most and least important in any scene and how to get from one shot to the next in the most dynamic way possible. To accomplish it gracefully, you'll want to:

- » **Do less, better.** This motto applies to revising the script as well, but it certainly applies to editing. If you notice that an actor's performance in one scene makes another scene unnecessary, don't be afraid to cut that moment out. If your musical underscore conveys tension or emotion, perhaps some of the dialogue won't have to. Don't be precious in the editing phase of the project. When in doubt, strike it out.
- » **Know who's important in each shot.** As mentioned, the most important person in a scene isn't necessarily the one speaking. Often, the listener's reaction is more important or the character sneaking past the speaker. You'll likely have several shots per scene to choose from, so prioritize the person who's most important to the story at that time.
- » **Use transitions well.** Transitions are important. The way you get from one scene to the next is as important as what happens in those scenes. The pace and texture of a transition contribute to the style and the tone of an episode. Quick cuts between scenes often feel jarring and require an audience to catch up to the next moment, whereas slow crossfades between scenes create a fluid, dream-like feel. Articulate what you want transitions to do before editing begins.

- » **Let the software work for you.** If you are tight on budget, consider using one of the many free editing software programs as a guide through pre-production. Popular programs include Lightworks, Blender, DaVinci Resolve, and Openshot. Like most software programs, these include paid subscriptions or professional versions, if you want more options or fancier effects.

Promoting your web series with panache

After all your work financing the series, promoting the finished product should come easily to you. Generating the attention you need involves:

- » **Knowing who and where your audience is.** It's helpful to articulate who your target audience is before you write the series, but you'll certainly need that information once it's done. Figure out what social media platforms that audience frequents and what content they care about. Build a marketing strategy around that information.
- » **Capitalizing on your competition.** With the amount of online content available right now, it's inevitable that your idea might resemble someone else's. Make sure you're familiar with the competition and use this knowledge to articulate what makes your show unique. Online advertising relies on the slogan, the trailer, and the sound bite. Once you articulate how your show differs from others, your marketing strategy should become clear.
- » **Crafting the perfect press release.** Ideally, other people will write about you and your series. To make this happen, you have to write about yourself first. A compelling press release should read like a news article about you and your series. Beyond the basic information about how launch date and platform, it should include images from the series, quotes from the cast and crew, and a statement about why this series is important right now.
- » **Showing AND telling.** The online attention span is short, and news cycles are over before they begin. You'll need to find creative ways to remain on an audience's radar. Consider sharing all parts of the web series process online, from casting to filming to editing breakthroughs. Sharing these updates is one way to remain current without becoming repetitive. Done well, it also helps build buzz about your show before its launch.

If this process seems like a lot of work, that's because it is. A web series involves far more than just writing. That said, if the goal is to get your work noticed quickly, creating a web series is a smart path to choose, and the experience of producing your own series will pay off when you interact with agents, producers, and creative collaborators later on. The web series is also a new medium that's still evolving, which means you can make it work for you in ways no one has even thought of yet.

Scripting the Short (Film)

Like a web series, short films are an expedient and relatively inexpensive way to grab the attention of producers, agents, and audiences. Like a web series, you oversee the process, from writing, financing, and producing the film to promoting it via festivals or online. Like a web series, you don't work alone, but you have creative input from start to finish. The primary difference between the two processes is form.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Short films generally run from 15 seconds to 45 minutes in length, including the credits. There's no absolute consensus on time though, so if you're interested in submitting your script to a festival, check their requirements first. Yet, while the industry definition is somewhat flexible, most people agree on the following tenets of a short film:

- » **The simpler, the better.** Short films spotlight stories that can't sustain over an hour's worth of time, which is a useful parameter. Short films excel at highlighting one storyline, relationship, theme, twist, or metaphor in a few choice locations. It's possible to include several points of view, but there's a reason that the short film adage is "a simple story, well-told." In addition, the shorter the film, the less expensive it will be to produce.
- » **Find a genre and stick to it.** Genres are useful because they're quickly recognizable, provide a built-in fanbase, and they come with a series of expectations or rules to put your own unique spin on. Because of this cinematic "shorthand," embracing a clear genre allows you to suggest more story in less time.
- » **Show, don't tell.** Because time is of the essence, short films often convey most of the story via image and behavior rather than dialogue. As often as possible, find visual ways to convey backstory, personality, status, relationship, profession, and motivation.
- » **Have a clear beginning, middle, and end.** A short film should feel like a full story from start to finish. It should not feel like a scene from a larger movie. While short films don't necessarily follow the three-act structure, they do often begin with a problem, complicate that problem, and resolve or confront it in some way. They may end with a cliffhanger or a plot twist, but that twist should feel like an ending, albeit a surprising one. It's true that short films have been expanded into television shows and feature films. *Babadook* began as the short film, *Monster*. *District 9* began as the short film *Alive in Joburg*, and the TV show *UnReal* was inspired by the short cinematic memoir *Sequin Raze*. Nevertheless, in their original form, short films should feel complete.

- » **Don't cut a feature down to size.** If your story can be told in two hours, then it's a feature film. If your story can be told in 50 minutes or less, then it's a short. Like a web series, short films are their own medium with their own demands. Trying to cram all the details of your feature into a short film results in dense and convoluted drama.

Finding the Festival for You

It's fairly easy to circulate and promote short films on websites like YouTube or Vimeo following the same process as marketing a web series. However, film festivals are another excellent way to promote a short film, and there are oh-so-many to choose from. A few of the most popular festivals include:

- » **Sundance Film Festival:** Held annually in Park City, Utah, Sundance is the largest independent film festival in the United States. The entry fee is \$60, and to qualify, films must be under 50 minutes long, including credits.
- » **Palm Springs International Shortfest:** This is largest short film festival in North America and it takes place in Palm Springs, California, each year. Many Oscar-winning shorts have launched here. To qualify, films must be under 40 minutes including credits, and there is a \$50 entry fee.
- » **Cannes Film Festival:** Held annually in Cannes, France, this festival accepts films under 15 minutes in length with no entry fee.
- » **Aspen Shortsfest:** Though the entry fee for this Aspen, Colorado, festival is a hefty \$80, filmmakers who are accepted to the festival are provided lodging and transportation. To qualify, films must be under 40 minutes including credits.
- » **Los Angeles Film Festival:** Held annually in Culver City, California, this festival offers two categories of short films. The "short" shorts must fall under 26 minutes including credits and the "mid-length" short films must fall between 26 and 45 minutes including credits. There is a \$45 entry fee.
- » **Tribeca Film Festival:** Held annually in the heart of New York City, this festival also offers two categories for short films: Best Narrative Short and Best Documentary Short. Qualifying films must be under 40 minutes including credits and there is a \$60 entry fee. Tribeca is considered one of the better festivals for emerging writers.
- » **Telluride Film Festival:** One of the smaller festivals on this list, Telluride accepts 24 films each year, but they can be up to 60 minutes long including credits. The entry fee is \$95.

- » **Clermont-Ferrand International Film Festival:** Held in Clermont-Ferrand, France, each year, this is the largest international film festival. It offers one category specifically for French filmmakers and one for other filmmakers from around the world. To qualify, films must be under 40 minutes including credits, and there is no entry fee.
- » **Slamdance Film Festival:** Held annually in Park City, Utah, this festival focuses on low-budget films from emerging screenwriters. There are four categories for submission: Narrative, Animation, Documentary, and Experimental. Runtime must not exceed 40 minutes and the entry fee is \$50.
- » **Toronto International Film Festival:** This event is touted as the best attended festival in the world. Qualifying films must fall under 49 minutes including credits and there is a \$5 CAD entry fee.
- » **SXSW Film Festival and Austin Film Festival:** Both these festivals are held annually in (you guessed it) Austin, Texas. Both festivals are over a week long with short film categories in Narrative Short, Documentary Short, and Animated Short. Both request that films fall under 40 minutes including credits and require a \$60 entry fee.
- » **Edinburgh International Film Festival:** Edinburgh is the oldest international film festival. Qualifying films must not exceed 30 minutes including credits and may fall into the categories of fictional, experimental, animated, and documentary short. There is a \$30 entry fee.

Believe it or not, this list is just the tip of the short film festival iceberg. Virtually every metropolitan hub across the globe has a film festival. Some countries — like the United States, Mexico, France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom — have several. When researching festivals, make note of which one allow rough-cut entries, meaning the film may not be fully polished yet. You might also note which festivals are Oscar-qualifying, meaning that, if selected, your film would automatically be up for consideration by the Academy Awards adjudication committee. In addition, many festivals have reduced entry fees for students or for early submissions. If nothing else, I hope this list of festivals gives you hope. There's an entire world of opportunity waiting for the writer who has the patience and determination to craft "a simple story, well-told."

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Determining which stories are yours to tell
- » Remaining true to an audience and the work
- » Tackling difficult material with integrity
- » Learning to interview with storytelling in mind

Chapter 12

Maintaining an Audience's Trust

Cinema is a medium in which virtually any visual effect is both technologically and financially possible. Its audience also extends beyond that of most mediums, reaching millions of people every year. These elements in combination make film an incredibly exciting art form but a potentially dangerous one as well.

Why dangerous? Perhaps you've heard the saying, "With great power comes great responsibility," a sentiment often attributed to a character in *Spider-Man*. That idea certainly applies to film, and the responsibility falls to the screenwriter first. Every time you begin a project, the resulting work may affect audiences of all ages from different cultures, identities, and backgrounds. What you write may be seen and possibly believed by those viewers, and your name is on the material.

So before you transform your story into a script, consider its scope and your goals. Is this story really yours to tell? If so, how can you tell it responsibly? If you're not sure, read this chapter, which explores what a writer's ethical duty may be and how to shape a work so that it remains true to the subject and its intended audience.

Screenwriting and Ethics

Because film is so accessible and so much like a window to the world, it's easy to assume your goal is to create the illusion of reality. Yet in truth, the screenwriter's job isn't to re-create life but to sculpt it. The difference between these tasks is subtle but profound.

If I record the conversations around me and transcribe them onto the page, I'm re-creating life. The result may sound convincing, but it begs the question: So what? I'm not crafting the discourse; I'm simply writing it down — a big difference. But if I spend time replaying the conversations, weighing one section against another, selecting between them, and enhancing the results, I'm sculpting life. I have a grand scheme in mind. Writers craft text in this way. Even when they're adapting from a source or depicting historical events, they're selecting which events to include and how to present them with a grand intention in mind.



REMEMBER

Responsible writers ask three pivotal questions early on in their process:

- » What kind of world do I want to design?
- » Am I the right person to design it?
- » Why design that world instead of others?

Implicit in these questions is the idea of choice. Between you and every creative decision lie many options. Does your story include minority voices or is it about what it means *to be* a minority voice? Does your character survive, perish, or simply exit the story? Should you kill a character on-screen or off-screen? Does your story involve sexual intimacy and, if so, how explicit do you want those scenes to be? Sometimes you make a choice based on logic — it's a revenge story, so the protagonist's father needs to die. Sometimes, you make a choice based on style — it's an adaptation of pulp fiction, so the violence must be comically graphic. These types of decisions often take care of themselves. The more difficult choices are these: how do you kill a character on-screen, how explicit is your language or sexual content, and how do you write authentically about an experience you've never had? These questions are based on ethics.

Artists sometimes bristle at the word *ethics*. And yet, every script exists in an ethical realm. The study of ethics is the study of human motivation. You are presenting work to an audience, and that audience will weigh the choices that you have made therein. They'll search for motivations in each character's behavior, and they'll judge those characters accordingly. Are the characters honorable or despicable, do they elicit praise or disdain, are they trustworthy or two-faced, and is this an accurate depiction of a specific community? These questions are ethical questions, and they merit your attention. Because film is a social medium designed to elicit audience response, screenwriting is an inherently ethical craft.

Screenwriting and Responsibility

So what do ethics have to do with responsibility? Well, you are responsible for the ethics you present. You should know why you are writing the story and be aware of what you suggest in it. Screenwriters have a threefold responsibility. They have to consider themselves, the material, and the intended audience. If you write an irresponsible script, all three of these entities suffer *and* the medium itself suffers. Audiences enter the theater wanting to trust you. Don't let them down.

What are you willing to put your name on?

Right now, the script is yours and within your control. It may not be yours in the near future; it may be *optioned* (purchased for temporary consideration) or purchased for production outright, and what it becomes after that is often out of your hands. But right now, it's your story. How do you want to tell it? What do you want it to say? Because you are putting your name on this script, you need to be responsible to yourself in this way first.

Being responsible to yourself means remembering why you're writing the story and maintaining the integrity of its intention. What's sacred in your script? The depth of character? The thoughts and opinions expressed? The way that certain events transpire? List those details now and make sure that you accomplish them. Just as actors sign contracts stipulating what they will and will not do on-screen, writers make an agreement with themselves. That agreement may include the following statements:

- » I will write stories that I believe in.
- » I will consider several options before I choose one.
- » I will keep my audience in mind.
- » I will remember what drew me to the story in the first place.
- » I will do the best that I can.
- » I will be open to learning and feedback.



REMEMBER

Your intentions may shift along the way. Let them. This story is your opportunity to explore a new world, to ask difficult questions, to inspire yourself and others. Your vision may change radically in the hands of business executives, but a responsibly written script is more likely to become a responsible film. There are screenwriters who don't care about writing a responsible film and prioritize money and fame instead. But I'm writing this chapter as if you do care about the integrity and authenticity of your work. I'm writing this chapter in the hopes that

the community you write for and about is more important than the contract you sign. Ultimately, that care and attention builds the sort of reputation that money can't buy.

The immunity factor

When you first see a film, everything's new. You watch in a state of naiveté, during which many things may surprise, shock, or intrigue you. In other words, you're actively involved. After a while, you become more sophisticated to its design, and you develop certain expectations. If those expectations aren't circumvented, the film eventually becomes old hat, and you begin to predict events before they transpire. Once this happens, you become immune to any potential impact that the film may otherwise have had.

Immunity occurs over time and can be detrimental to any artist who doesn't foresee it. This immunity can happen to entire genres just as it happens during the course of a single film. The phrase "If you've seen one action film, you've seen them all" speaks to the dilemma, and it becomes dangerous where challenging subject matter is concerned. You probably don't want audiences saying, "If you've seen one drive-by shooting, you've seen them all," and yet films with excessive violence inoculate audiences to its effects. After several scenes where cursing prevails, I cease to hear the words. In movies with high sexual content, intimacy may lose meaning altogether.



WARNING

Violence, abrasive language, and sexual content offer distinct challenges in this regard. If you err on the side of caution, you risk credibility. If you opt for a completely realistic rendering, you risk distancing your audience from the narrative or making them immune to situations they should care about. I ask writers to consider three truths before choosing an approach:

- » **Images linger.** Film is a visual medium. Your audiences are going to leave the theater with a series of images in their minds. Which images do you want them to retain? Is your film really about a naked actress, or is it about two people falling in love? Do you want them to remember a gunshot to the head, or two children huddled together listening to that gunshot? Is it important to watch a man strike a woman, or to see the woman walking through public places wearing sunglasses that obscure a black eye? The images that linger come to represent the story itself. How is your story best served?
- » **Words have weight.** The film *RKO 281* contains a line that suggests that great speeches change the world. And they do. Why are presidential speeches so important? Why choose the wording on advertisements with so much care? Words are the vehicle between your mind and someone else's. They are active and can, therefore, inspire action.

As cinema is a public forum, the language that your characters use also enters a collective vocabulary. Those words remain with audiences and become more common as they're used more frequently. So consider your language carefully.

» **What attracts also distracts.** Many films openly advertise graphic violence and sexual content. Why? Because sex and violence sell tickets. Advertising agencies know it, so do studio executives. Although using these elements may make sense for financiers, it's a dangerous practice for screenwriters, whose first priority is to a story, not a violent moment or a sexual scene. Consider the problem of nudity. Audiences may flock to a film to see Jason Momoa's backside. But the moment that the scene occurs, those people are thinking, "That's Jason Momoa's backside." They're not immersed in your story.

So how do you protect your work against the immunity factor? Start by considering

- » What you want an audience to simply accept.
- » What you want an audience to hear and/or remember.
- » What surprises you have in store.
- » What facts are more powerful when suggested rather than presented outright.

Part of your job is to wake audiences up. With a nudge in the right direction, people's imaginations will concoct scenes more gruesome, delightful, terrifying, or inspiring than you may be capable of writing. Never underestimate the power of suggested violence or sexual contact, and whatever you do, don't let audiences become immune to the very thing that you need to convey. Write a film that challenges their expectations or forces them to create new ones.

Finally, after you complete a draft, imagine different audiences for it. Imagine a child in the theater, a veteran, or an elderly couple. Imagine a victim of violence or sexual abuse. Imagine someone who has lived through the events that you're dramatizing. Will they be adversely affected by what they see? This procedure doesn't mean you'll change the script to fit their needs; you may not. You may feel strongly that it's important in your piece to dramatize war in a graphic, realistic way. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are examples of such films. But the responsibility to the audience begins with you.

Is this story for you? Appropriation and authenticity

With the rise of social media platforms amplifying all manner of public discourse, you might think the debate over cultural appropriation is a new one. It's not. The argument over who has the right to tell which story is age-old. It arises with vehemence every time someone writes something inauthentic or offensive to a marginalized community, and I, for one, am glad that it does. Why? Because screenwriters don't write screenplays for themselves. Even the most escapist action film has the potential to challenge or enforce harmful stereotypes or assumptions, so it's important to calibrate the narratives responsibly.

First things first, though — what is cultural appropriation? The common definition involves “the adoption of elements of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture.” In screenwriting, it assumes an imbalance of power between the writers and the characters they create. People often think this term only applies to white writers, and yes, if you're white, you should absolutely consider your social privilege when you approach stories about non-white communities. That said, the term is relevant to any number of situations. As an able-bodied writer, I enjoy privileges that people with disabilities do not. As a cisgender woman, I enjoy privileges that my non-binary friends do not. Does that mean I can't write non-binary characters or characters with disabilities? Of course not. If writers could only pursue stories about people like themselves, writing fiction would prove impossible. In many ways, a writer's job is to empathize with experiences that aren't their own.

However, there's a difference between empathizing with someone's experience and centering an entire film around an experience you've never had. So if your story revolves around people whose identity or culture differs from your own, ask yourself the questions described in the following three sections before you begin.

QUESTION 1: WHY DO I WANT TO WRITE THIS STORY?

If your answer to this question is “because I've never seen it before,” or “because it would make such a great [insert genre here] film,” then you might not be the best person for the job. At the very least, you should give your intentions some deeper consideration. However, this might be a story to pursue if your answer is any of the following:

- » I have a personal investment in part of the narrative.
- » I identify with one character or experience in the larger narrative.
- » I am dedicated to supporting the community involved.

If you have a personal investment in part of the story, or if you share an experience with a main character, you have an authentic foundation upon which to craft your script. You may also discover what sets your screenplay apart from similar films. If you're dedicated to supporting the community involved but you don't share their perspective or experience, consider the question in the next section.

QUESTION 2: HAS ANYONE FROM THE STORY'S COMMUNITY WRITTEN A NARRATIVE LIKE THIS BEFORE?

Find out whether anyone from the story's community has written a narrative like the one you want to write. If no one has, this may not be a story for you. And that's okay! Not every story is meant for you. This statement holds true for audience members and writers alike. After all, it's not a writer's job to please every audience member, so one shouldn't expect to see themselves in every film. It's healthy, actually, to recognize when a story wasn't written with you in mind because it provides an opportunity to listen and learn. Similarly, writers must learn to recognize when an experience is best written by someone who lived it.

If members of this community have produced stories of their own, you'll know how your film differs from theirs, and you can get cracking with the question in the next section.

QUESTION 3: HOW CAN I WRITE AUTHENTICALLY ABOUT AN EXPERIENCE I'VE NEVER HAD?

The best writers approach their work with humility. They always assume there's more to learn. This approach is especially important when your story includes diverse perspectives. Here are some respectful ways to craft characters who differ from you in defining ways:

- » **Clearly define your differences.** Do your characters differ from you with regards to race, religion, gender, sexuality, physique, cultural identity, ability, ethnicity, or class? Have they experienced or witnessed trauma or abuse? Do they have specific compulsions, phobias, or addictions? It's likely that they differ from you in several key ways, and it's important to articulate exactly how so you know which parts of your narrative require extra care.
- » **Acknowledge your privilege.** Once you've articulated how you differ from your characters, consider how much more or less power you hold as a result of those differences. What situations are more or less fraught for you than for them? What has come more or less easily to you than for them? Acknowledging your privilege should illuminate your creative blind spots, spark story ideas, and focus your research.

- » **Challenge stereotypes.** It's important to understand the negative assumptions associated with your characters so you can avoid those stereotypes or challenge them outright.
- » **Read books about the community you are crafting.** Ideally these books are written by people from that community. If they're not, take note of the source and any potential bias therein.
- » **Consider a writing partner.** Whether you cowrite an entire screenplay or just collaborate on certain scenes, it's sometimes wise to enlist the help of artists who share your story's culture or experience. This practice grounds your narrative and amplifies artists from that community.
- » **Go directly to the source.** Reading about a community is one thing. Speaking to them is another, and there's no substitute for an in-person conversation. I discuss interviewing techniques in the next section. I encourage you to schedule a few conversations before crafting your first draft.
- » **Find readers with personal investment.** I talk about finding readers for your work in Chapter 17, but it's always helpful to enlist at least one reader who's personally connected to your material. They can suggest what feels inauthentic or misinformed, and they may help steer your research as well.
- » **Remain calm in the face of criticism.** Repeat after me: "I will get something wrong." Now repeat it until it doesn't scare you anymore. The more your life differs from your characters' lives, the more likely you are to miss crucial information or misunderstand a lived experience. The last thing you want to do is become defensive when someone points out what you got wrong. Thank them, instead. Better to discover it now than on opening weekend.

Because the media thrives on controversy, examples of filmmakers getting this process wrong or disregarding it entirely get top billing. However, there are plenty of situations where creators approached unfamiliar material in a responsible manner. For example, the movie *Winter's Bone* revolves around a young woman struggling to keep her siblings alive in a part of the Ozarks ravaged by the opioid epidemic. The filmmakers are not from the Ozarks, nor do they have direct experience with addiction. However, they chose to adapt a novel by a person who is familiar with the Ozark community rather than penning an original work. They conducted extensive research and interviews while adapting the novel, and the director (who co-wrote the film) included local residents in her cast. In fact, most of the movie is filmed in the businesses and homes of the people who live there. As a result, the film looks, sounds, and feels authentic, and the community had ownership over how they were portrayed.

The movie *Eighth Grade* is another example of responsible filmmaking. Writer/director Bo Burnham crafted the story around a 13-year-old girl, which may seem like a stretch for a 25-year-old man. Yet both Burnham and the protagonist suffer

from crippling anxiety, so he had an authentic way into the story. He spent months consuming the sort of Snapchat content and YouTube channels that frame his protagonist's life, and he gave the actress free reign to improv, edit, and add to the script during production. The result is a heartfelt and often devastating look at what it means to grow up in the "age of anxiety," that spoke to audiences of all ages.

If the idea of appropriation makes you uncomfortable, that's okay. All progress stems from some degree of discomfort. Let that discomfort guide your efforts, and take solace in the fact that in doing this work, you are accelerating a crucial industry change. Hollywood has been painfully slow to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion. By considering your creative intentions now, you become part of the solution to an age-old problem.

A Gift for Gab: How to Conduct a Meaningful Interview

As mentioned, there's no substitute for direct conversation when you're attempting to understand an identity or an experience different from your own. Interviews provide unique, authentic, and detailed information that ground your story and your characters. They raise your level of authority on the subject matter at hand. They force interactions that at worst expand your world view and at best create relationships that you can return to over time. They're useful in any creative endeavor, but they're essential if you're crafting material based on identities or cultures you don't share.

If you were born gregarious, interviewing someone may not seem daunting at all. Most writers, however, harbor some degree of social trepidation when it comes to requesting hours of time to discuss personal information from a complete stranger. Fear not! Interviewing is a skill like any other, and after a little practice, most writers jump at the opportunity to go directly to the source.

Preparing for an interview

As is the case with most skills, preparation is paramount when it comes to conducting an interview. Here are some advance considerations to make the process move smoothly:

- » **Frame it as a conversation.** Calling something an interview often formalizes the process in an unhelpful way. You're having a conversation. You're forging

a relationship. You're learning something new. Frame the endeavor in a way that prioritizes the process and not the product. It helps to reiterate to your interviewee that they don't have to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable, and encourage them to contribute to the questions in advance.

- » **Do your research.** Familiarize yourself with the defining information about the interviewee (where they're from, what they do, what they're known for) as well as their point of view about the subject or subjects pertinent to your story. See whether they've been interviewed before. Learn more about the people or the sources they cite as formative. Look into the organizations they've been a part of or support. Get a sense of the history of the community they're a part of and learn what current events or political actions are affecting them now. Ultimately, you're looking for places to start a conversation, anything the two of you may have in common, or details you need clarity on.
- » **Prioritize your questions.** You probably won't have time to discuss everything in one interview, or you won't be able to pack all your questions into the time you have. Often more than one interview is required, but never assume that's a given. Highlight the subjects you most want guidance on, and lead with those. Be sure to ask open-ended, non-leading questions that invite anecdotes. Yes or No questions don't fuel an interview.
- » **Be aware of your bias.** You may have opinions about the subjects you want to discuss, or you may have formed assumptions based on previous research. Be sure to articulate what you assume to be true before you request an interview. This practice helps you remain open to contradictory or conflicting information. It's also easy to sense someone's bias in the way they ask questions, and a person is far more likely to open up to you if you seem open to new opinions or ideas.

Setting up an interview

Whether you plan to conduct the interview in person or via technology, you can use a few methods to put the interviewee at ease beforehand. Those methods include

- » **Introducing yourself in a professional and personal way.** Obviously, it's important to provide professional context for the person you're hoping to speak to, but it's also helpful for them to get a sense of who you are and what you might have in common. Often you can combine these ideas by talking about what inspired you to write the story in the first place and letting them know what you hope to learn more about.
- » **Collaborate on the format.** Will your interview take place in person, on the computer, or over the phone? Would they like the questions in advance, or

are they comfortable with a general sense of what you'll be discussing? Is there anything they would rather *not* discuss? How long do you expect the conversation to last?

- » **Address confidentiality.** Let them know in advance who, if anyone, will have access to this interview beyond yourself. Ask whether they have any reservations about the process so that you can troubleshoot their concerns in advance.
- » **Obtain permission to record.** You will not remember everything you discuss. I repeat, *you will not remember everything you discuss*. Even handwritten notes may lose their exact meaning over time, so try to obtain permission to record your conversation. If they're not comfortable with being recorded, at least you'll be ready to write quickly in advance. Be sure to test any recording equipment in advance, including Zoom or Skype capabilities, if necessary.
- » **Ask if they have any questions about the project or purpose of the interview.** Even if you've clearly introduced yourself and your intentions, this is a helpful way to assess their discomfort (if they have any) and grant them some control.
- » **Decide on a quiet, distraction-free location for the interview, if possible.** If they're more comfortable in a public space, make sure to account for time of day, crowd size, weather, and ambient noise. If you're conducting the interview remotely, make sure you're both able to be in a relatively calm environment where you're unlikely to be interrupted.

Conducting an interview

If you have done your prep work, both you and the interviewee should feel more confident about the conversation. That said, no interview goes exactly as planned, so here are some ways to get the most out of the time you have while navigating any surprises that may arise:

- » **The questions are a blueprint for the conversation, but they are not set in stone.** Be prepared for the conversation to veer off topic. Honor what you learn in each detour and find creative ways to return to an earlier subject if you need more information.
- » **Lead with establishing or context questions.** Where was this person born? What are some memories that shaped them? What do they treasure or fear most right now? These sorts of questions help you find common ground, if any exists, and they warm a speaker up to their role as a storyteller. It's helpful to return to these types of fact-based questions throughout the interview, especially when discussing controversial or charged subjects.

- » **Ask only one question at a time and avoid interruptions, even if the speaker is getting “off course.”** It’s easy to get caught up in a conversation and interrupt or add your thoughts mid-stride, but try to squelch that urge. Often the most illuminating information occurs at the end of an answer when the speaker has time to sort through their thoughts.
- » **Word your questions in a neutral way. Try to avoid suggesting any bias or assumptions on your part.** Depending on the subject at hand, it may be hard to hide your point of view, but it’s vital not to give yourself away. Implied bias creates an unsafe vibe, and your interviewee may be hesitant to be honest in their responses.
- » **When you jump to a new topic, provide some sort of transition.** For instance, if you have been discussing a person’s childhood for a while, but you would like to hear about a recent event, be sure to say something like, “I’ve enjoyed hearing about these experiences from your past, and I’m wondering how they informed this recent experience of yours.” Help your collaborator understand your path from one subject to another.
- » **Ask people to describe an event rather than just talk or tell you about it.** The invitation to describe a situation often leads to more evocative details and emotional information that can be useful to your story.
- » **If you are surprised or confused by something that’s said, or if you disagree with it, try leading with the phrase “can you tell me more about that?”** Asking this question gives you time to adjust and allows them to clarify or expand on what they’ve said. It also preempts any bias you might reveal, which could make the moment unnecessarily tense.
- » **Ask for their response rather than guess at it.** It’s always better to say, “How did that moment make you feel?” instead of “I bet that moment felt exhilarating.” Assume there’s more to learn and phrase your questions accordingly.
- » **Maintain eye contact whenever possible and be mindful of your body language.** Interviews can be lengthy, and conversations can become fraught, but don’t let your body language hijack the tone of the interview. Eye contact suggests you take the speaker seriously, and if you’re confident and relaxed, they will be, too.
- » **Be respectful of the time.** You can always set up a follow-up interview or send follow-up questions.



REMEMBER

If conversations with strangers make you nervous, you’re not alone, but consider that by learning how to interview effectively, you kill two birds with one stone. You develop skills that will strengthen your stories for years to come, and you practice the kind of interaction you’ll have all the time in the industry.



Turning Your Story into a Script

IN THIS PART . . .

Encapsulate your story's core concept, transform that concept into a film treatment, and outline the action in advance.

Battle writer's block by returning to research, reevaluating your process, and enlisting outside help.

Master all aspects of screenplay format, from page settings, to character introductions, to cinematic description and camera concerns.

Craft a dynamic first draft in three-act, five-act, or eight-sequence structure.

Successfully navigate the revision process and find the right reader to critique your work.

Learn how to approach film adaptation and collaborate with a co-writer.

- » Telling your story in a nutshell
- » Treating your story to a treatment
- » Crafting a “beat” sheet
- » Choosing the outline that’s right for you

Chapter **13**

Mapping Out Your Screenplay

Writers spend months constructing characters, choosing locations, researching events, and conceptualizing the angle their stories will take. Yet, despite this preparation, few screenwriters jump immediately into composing a first draft. Why? They don’t know where to start. Or they know where to start, but they don’t know what comes directly after or what the first scenes are moving toward. More often, they’ve envisioned the beginning, middle, and end of the story, but they have only a vague idea of how to get from point to point.

A full-length screenplay is a vast project, generally between 90 and 120 pages long, hinged together by countless visual moments. Ideally, no detail is wasted; the writer reveals every piece of information for a reason. Can you visualize all those pieces? If the answer is no, don’t worry. Most seasoned writers can’t either. It’s a lot to consider all at once. So when you complete the initial research, you have two choices: start writing immediately and risk staring at a computer screen for hours wondering what comes next, or plot out the story in advance.

This chapter is all about the second path. I show you how to plot out your story, from the initial premise to the pivotal events to a working outline. You’ll still stare at the screen for hours — even an outline can’t cure that — but at least you won’t be wondering what comes next.

Conceptualizing Your Concept

If your script makes it to an agent, manager, or producer, here are a few questions that you'll hear fairly often:

- » What's the hook?
- » What's the big event?
- » What's the tone, style or genre?
- » What's it actually about?



TECHNICAL
STUFF

These questions are really asking the same thing: What's your film's core concept? The *hook* is an early moment in your story that ropes an audience into that concept. The *big event* is usually the first major turning point in the protagonist's journey. In some films, the hook and the big event are the same thing. In *Jurassic Park*, a zookeeper is eaten by a creature as he tries to load it into a pen. The title of the film suggests this creature is a dinosaur, but it's clear the story takes place in our contemporary world where dinosaurs don't exist. Or do they? That hook is clearly linked to what the film is actually about — the dangers involved in some scientific advancement.

Identifying the tone, style or genre of your story will set useful creative parameters to guide your work. It's also helpful to consider which other movies share those elements so your film remains unique, and to help producers more easily envision it later on.

If you've written a personal synopsis of your story, your core concept should already be clear. If you're curious about how to craft one, see Chapter 5. Either way, now's the time to turn that concept into a logline.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A *logline* is a one or two-sentence encapsulation of your core concept. Notice I did *not* say it's a one- or two-sentence condensation of your 120-page plot. Your *concept* gets people excited to see or produce your film. People don't need to know the entire plot of *Jaws* to get excited about a killer shark stalking a seaside town during tourist season. They just need a sense of the main conflict, the main character(s), and any aspects of the piece that make it unique. That's your concept, and that's what a logline should highlight.

Here are a few examples from established films. Sometimes loglines take the form of questions, so I've included a few of those as well.

» **E.T.:** When an alien is stranded on Earth, a young boy and his family struggle to help it get home before time runs out.

or: What happens when an alien lands in a young boy's backyard and finds itself unable to get back home?

» **Get Out:** A young black man visits his white girlfriend's parents for the first time and soon discovers their smiling faces mask a dark intention.

» **The Shape of Water:** A mute woman working as a janitor at a government lab falls in love with an amphibious creature being held there against its will.

Even epic-length films can be whittled down to size:

» **Lord of the Rings:** A ring of power surfaces after years hidden away, and many forces seek its dark authority. The fate of Middle Earth depends on the hobbit Frodo, bearer of the ring, and his decision over its demise.

or: A dark ring of power is entrusted to the hobbit, Frodo. Will he find a way to destroy it, or will its power corrupt him as it has so many others before?

» **Raiders of the Lost Ark:** Artifacts unearthed in Egypt reveal the whereabouts of the mythic Lost Ark of the Covenant. Only one man stands between Hitler's Nazi regime and the Ark — fabled archaeologist and university professor Indiana Jones.

or: Artifacts unearthed in Egypt reveal the whereabouts of the mythic Lost Ark of the Covenant, an object fabled to possess measureless power. Will Hitler and his Nazi regime find the Ark first, or will Indiana Jones beat them to it?

Do you see how these snippets depict the crux of each film? These snippets are core concepts. From a business perspective, more films are bought and sold over concept than on outlines or full drafts combined. From an artistic perspective, the concept is your greatest ally when writing the first draft. It keeps you on track when the story eludes you. It also fuels the eventual outline.



TIP

Less is more where loglines are concerned. Aim for 30 to 50 words. After you craft that logline, double-check that the following elements are true:

- » Your concept is clear and easily understood.
- » It suggests the primary conflict in the film.
- » It suggests a protagonist or a cast of characters.

- » It suggests what is unique about the story.
- » It suggests the intended audience.
- » It suggests what is easily marketable in the story.

As a final challenge, layer in character motivation. In other words, your characters want something for a reason. What is that reason? Frodo must destroy the ring or be destroyed himself. The employee in *The Shape of Water* risks her life to save an unusual companion. If your film provides life-or-death consequences, add those consequences to your premise.



TIP

If you're having trouble making your logline active, try completing this phrase:

When (your inciting incident) happens, (your protagonist) must (primary objective) before (your time clock runs out or whatever's at stake is lost).



REMEMBER

Take your time. It's often more difficult to encapsulate an idea than it is to outline the whole story, but it's worth it. A clear concept provides the foundation for every draft of the script that you write thereafter.

How to Treat Your Treatment

If you had to write reports in school, you're probably familiar with a *treatment*. Most class projects require an introduction that explains which topics the report includes and what the report ultimately strives to prove. A treatment is the screen-writing equivalent of that introduction, albeit more entertaining. It is intended to entice industry executives, directors, and actors to your material, but it's also a useful way for writers to determine what's really important to the story itself.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

A *treatment* is a narrative summation of your script. It's part synopsis and part short story. It runs anywhere from 5 to 20 pages in length, depending on the scope of your film, and it depicts all pivotal scenes or sequences in the same style or tone as the film itself. It does not usually include dialogue examples, unless that exchange is critical to the story.

In five-page treatments, Page 1 is generally dedicated to Act I, Pages 2 through 4 illustrate Act II, and Page 5 sums up Act III. A film's second act is twice as long as the first or third and therefore requires more explanation. Most screenplay

treatments run longer than five pages though. If your film is three hours long, or includes several subplots, it may require a lot more.



WARNING

Treatments that run longer than 20 pages are generally overwritten. After all, most first acts are around 30 pages long, so at 20 pages, you may as well start writing the script.

Before you begin

A treatment is meant to introduce your characters and organize your action, so make sure you're clear on the following elements before you craft one:

- » **A brief description of your main characters (villains included):** Character introductions are important. Your audience will judge their initial actions based on that introduction. The characters will also change as your story unfolds. If they make strong first impressions, it's easier to recognize those changes as they occur. So think: What do your characters look like? How do they spend time? How do they communicate, verbally or otherwise? In other words, what are they like when they first enter the scene in five sentences or less?
- » **An immediate sense of their goals and motivations:** Most stories entail what people want and how they strive to get it. You'll probably want to reveal the first part of that statement, the "what people want" bit, early on. If you establish character goals quickly, you'll have more time to pursue them.
- » **The platform:** What is your protagonist's life like prior to the first big event? What's their routine? This routine includes job, family, friendships, romantic involvements, hobbies, and so on — basically, anything that constitutes a normal way of life for your main character(s).
- » **The catalyst:** What event changes that routine forever? What event launches the film? This event may be as large as a military invasion or as simple as a first kiss. If it topples your character's sense of normal, it's a catalyst.
- » **Plot Point I:** What event forces the character into action? At what point do they commit to the journey? This event is generally the time when your character decides to pursue their goal. Whether or not they do so willingly is up to you.
- » **Plot Point II:** What event determines whether or not the character decides to face the primary conflict once and for all? This is generally a moment of great pressure for your character. They may want to give up, or a pivotal event may strengthen their resolve to continue forging ahead.

- » **Climax:** What scene or sequence of events depicts the final battle? Pay particular attention to your antagonist or your villain here. How does that force behave in these scenes?
- » **Resolution:** What is the outcome of that battle? What does the world of the film look like now? What has changed or remained the same?

I discuss these plot considerations at greater length in Chapter 16, but this list provides an overall sense of what to include in a treatment. If you envision a number of important events, touch upon as many as you can. If your story has subplots, scatter that information throughout. Consider your first pass at a treatment as a creative litmus test. How well do you know your characters? Are their goals strong enough to fuel an entire story? Where is the action unclear? If you find that you need more details, do more research and layer it in. A treatment sorts through your drama. It prioritizes events. It reveals holes in your storyline. You may find yourself tweaking it as you script the first draft or writing a new one before you revise. After you are comfortable with the process, you'll find it to be invaluable to your writing.

Putting it on the page

Like the concept, you are constructing a treatment with two minds. Artistically, you want people to visualize the action and fall in love with the characters. From a business standpoint, you want to emphasize target audience and marketability. So although treatments take many forms, the following guidelines usually apply:

- » Treatments are written in the present tense, so that they are active and immediately accessible. This guideline remains true even if the story takes place in the past.
- » They are written in brief paragraphs, spaced on the page so as not to become overwhelming to readers.
- » They are not meant for personal commentary, psychological analysis, or editorials; include only what you intend to put on the screen.
- » They may be written in the style of the film.
- » They emphasize the visual action of each scene.
- » They may include bits of dialogue, especially those written for comedies. (Dialogue in a treatment is placed in quotes, unlike dialogue in a script, which is not.) However, use dialogue sparingly and only when absolutely necessary.

- » They share the goals of a first draft, namely:
 - To grab a reader's attention
 - To elicit emotion
 - To create a specific world and atmosphere
 - To communicate genre
 - To highlight aspects that are particularly unique as well as those that are familiar to a target audience
- » Though it's not required, it's *smart* to format the treatment in a way that emphasizes pivotal names, details or turn of events. That might involve bolding character names, breaking important events into smaller paragraphs, or employing transitional phrases like "Suddenly," or "In a surprise turn of events," and so on.
- » The shorter your treatment is, the better. However, don't skimp on description in an attempt to be brief. The treatment should help your readers see the film in advance.

Treatments are usually formatted in 12 point Courier or New Courier font (though font is negotiable in a treatment). The information tends to be laid out in this way:

The film's title

The date of the treatment

The writer's name

The logline

Character introductions

Detailed synopses of each act, including brief descriptions of all pivotal scenes and any key change in character motivation or personality

As mentioned, though, treatments take many forms. The following two excerpts shown in Figure 13-1 are meant to give you a sense of just how different they can be. The first is from the spy-thriller *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* by Simon Kinberg, and the second is from the television police drama, *The Circle* by John August (not to be confused with the reality show). Note that both excerpts clearly introduce the hook in the first paragraph (or sentence, in the case of *The Circle*). Both immediately introduce the protagonists (husband and wife in one, a small team of detectives in another). While *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* focuses on the protagonists' marriage and how espionage might save it, *The Circle* focuses on Alaska, and how isolated law enforcement teams are there. Genre is on full display in the first example; gritty research is on full display in the second.

However you structure your treatment, the goal is to help a reader envision your story and its style, so if it's useful to include an image here and there, or thematic quotes, or a joke from the script, then try it. If those elements become distracting, you can always delete them. The process takes a while, but persevere! It helps assess the strengths and weaknesses of your idea. It reveals which characters jump off of the page and which remain vague, repetitive, or stereotypical. It provides a road map for you to return to while scripting your first draft, and eventually, it will help you sell your script.

MR. AND MRS. SMITH

By Simon Kinberg

OVERVIEW:

"**MR AND MRS. SMITH**" is a sexy, stylized action-comedy that's a duel-to-the-death between the world's top two assassins... who happen to be husband and wife, hired to kill each other. In hunting each other, their dying marriage turns into a passionate love affair, as they go toe-to-toe, playing cat and mouse... and slowly falling back in love in the process -- seeing, understanding, appreciating each other for the very first time—in the midst of battle.

Their process is really like the process of marriage therapy, which is intended to help a couple: initiate, interact, communicate, compromise, adapt, and ultimately fall in love. Through their hunt, they have to do these same things—because these are also the primary skills an assassin uses with a mark: initiating, interacting, compromising, and adapting to the target.

Tonally, the film should be a collision of different genres—action, romance, comedy, even social (suburban) satire. The world of the Smiths is slightly hyperreal, mischievous, and always dangerous.

CHARACTER SET-UP:

We meet our main characters JOHN and JANE SMITH in marriage therapy. They say they don't want to be here. But we see they need to be here—little conflicts rolling under the surface. Their therapist asks them how they met, and we see a spark in their eyes, as we cut back to—

BOGOTA, COLUMBIA. Five years ago. John and Jane meet in the midst of upheaval and chaos. A drug baron was killed in town, and police are rounding up single tourists as suspects. Rather than spend a night in a Colombian jail, John and Jane pretend to be together. That pretense turns real, as a spark catches. They fall in lust fast, flirting, dancing, sleeping together. As they return to their lives in New York, their lust quickly turns into love. In montage, we see them falling fast. The perfect couple. Despite misgivings from their friends, John and Jane get married. And they settle into...

The cozy, comfortable suburbs of Westchester County, New York. We pick them up years later. And the spark is gone. They're essentially sleepwalking through their marriage, totally devoid of any intimacy or intensity. They are bland, boring suburbanites. But they are living a massive lie, because in their real lives...

They are the top assassins on the East Coast. Neither of them knows their spouse's real identity.

©Simon Kinberg, 20th Century Fox, 2005

THE CIRCLE

The Show

It's a show about murder in Alaska.

Specifically, it's about the people who deal with the murders in Alaska: the law enforcement officers, the CSI guys, and the prosecutors.

On a really basic level, if you smushed *Law and Order* and *C.S.I.* together, you'd have the format of the show, in that a typical episode would have: (1) a body, (2) some investigators who go around following leads and interrogating people, (3) some cool C.S.1./Quincy stuff, and (4) a trial in which you hopefully convict the bad guy.

It's all plot, and all twists-and-turns. You think it's this guy, but he has an alibi, then it turns out his business partner was actually selling heroin to school kids. Regardless of what actually happens, It's all self-contained within the 60 minutes.

What's different about the show is where it's set. As I started doing more research, I found out that Alaska is really, really, really different.

First off, the state only has 500,000 people. That's the population of Long Beach, except that they're spread over a state the size of California, Texas and Montana combined. If you live there, the General Fund pays you about \$2,000 a year.

Less than one percent of the land is privately owned. Some of it is owned by the state, or by tribal corporations, or by the U.S., who bought it from Russia for about a million dollars. Literally, they just wrote a check.

Things are organized very differently. They don't have counties, they have **boroughs**. They don't have local judges, they have **magistrates**, who can basically settle things as they see fit. If you get caught shoplifting, there's no trial. You or your family just sort of negotiate for how many days in jail or whatever. There's four main **tribes** that are organized into corporations that control millions of dollars, most of it from oil-drilling rights.

The biggest and most important difference for our show is that once you get outside of Anchorage, **Alaska doesn't have police** the way we think of them. It has the Alaska State Troopers, who are sort of like sheriffs, except they also handle fish and game. There are only 200 of them to cover the entire state.

FIGURE 13-1:
Screenplay
excerpts.

©John August, Touchstone/ABC, 2003

Exploring the Ins and Outs of an Outline

An *outline* is a further breakdown of the treatment into individual scenes. If you're writing an outline without a treatment, think of it as a chronological list of the actions in a given scene for an entire script. I encourage you to write a treatment first, though, because, in doing so, pivotal actions, images, and transformations automatically emerge.

Outlines come in several types, and the structure of each differs according to individual preference. Like the initial treatment, this outline is for you. You aren't likely to be asked to submit a scene outline to studios initially. This request is usually made after the completion of a first draft. The outline is an integral part of the screenwriter's process; it allows you to write the bulk of the script with a sense of purpose and destination. It troubleshoots many of the story flaws in advance, preventing innumerable bouts of writer's block. It also serves as a formatting liaison between the prose of a treatment and the technical lingo of a screenplay.

So choose the form that feels right and mold it to fit your needs. The goal is to become comfortable pouring information onto the page, so that you can later convert it into coherent cinema.

One beat at a time



A *beat sheet* is a short list of the pivotal actions and emotional turning points in your story. Each beat may be rendered as a bullet point or a full sentence, but the idea is that an important event is being condensed into a concise and active phrase.

If you are uncertain how to identify beats, they almost always take the form of an event, a realization or epiphany, a transformative interaction, or a decision. Often one of those beats leads directly to another.

Beat sheets can be formatted in different ways and the number of beats vary depending on the scope of your film. That said, there are certain story points that you definitely should include. Those are

- » **The initial image (or the opening frame).** In *Gone Girl*, for example, the opening image shows the protagonist, Amy, with her head on her a man's chest, as, in voice over, her husband talks about cracking her head open to get "answers." It focuses our attention on a mystery involving her, and it combines intimacy with violence.
- » **The introduction to the protagonist's world.** In *Moonlight*, that world involves the projects in Miami, drug culture, and the ocean.
- » **The introduction of the protagonist(s) and the antagonist(s).** In *Get Out*, we get to know the young interracial couple before meeting her parents and their circle of friends. The broad antagonist is a racist society; the specific antagonist is the girlfriend's white community.
- » **The inciting incident (the moment where your protagonist's life first changes).** In *Coda*, that incident involves a hearing girl from an all-deaf family meeting a choir teacher who recognizes her talent.

- » **Internal conflict (where your protagonist decides how to react to the inciting incident).** Also in *Coda*, the protagonist struggles with the guilt of putting her own needs over those of her family as she is their constant translator in the hearing world.
- » **The moment your protagonist chooses or is thrust into their new path (the start of Act II).** In *Matrix*, Act II begins when protagonist Neo wakes up outside the Matrix. He is no longer in his simulated world of computer programming; he is now in the sci-fi reality of the film.
- » **Introduction of your subplot, also known as the B-story (often where the theme is revealed or enhanced).** In *Juno*, as in many films, the subplot is a romance. In this case, it's with the protagonist's friend and the father of the child she's trying to put up for adoption.
- » **Rising to the challenge (where your protagonist gains the skills or associations needed to succeed).** The protagonist in *American Sniper* spends part of Act II increasing his military kill count and enhancing his professional reputation.
- » **The midpoint (halfway through the story, a high point or a low point for your protagonist and the moment their momentum shifts in a new direction).** In *The Big Sick*, the stand-up comedian is heckled by a racist patron in front of his future in-laws, leading to a fist fight and a newfound understanding of the treatment he regularly endures.
- » **Things get worse (for example, the antagonists become more powerful, a new challenge arises, or an internal conflict rears its head).** In most action films this is when the "bad guys close in," but you can use that phrase metaphorically as well. The "bad guys" might be internal, or to do with social or environmental forces beyond anyone's control.
- » **The darkest hour (where all hope seems lost and the protagonist has either exhausted their current options or has lost faith in themselves).** In *Mitchells vs. The Machines*, this occurs after the protagonist's family is kidnapped by malevolent robots and she fears she's to blame.
- » **Rejuvenation (an event that breaks through the protagonist's malaise and inspires them forward, the start of Act III).** In *The Forty-Year-Old Version*, struggling playwright, Radha, finally visits her recently deceased mother's home and reunites with her brother. Newfound appreciation for her heritage spurs her forward in her career.
- » **Big battle (the primary conflict is confronted; the conflict may be an internal or external conflict, or both).** In *Hidden Figures*, this is the moment discrepancies are found in John Glenn's launch calculations, and the protagonist scrambles to get his team back to earth.

» **The final image (or the closing frame).** *Gone Girl*'s final image is the same as the opening shot, but now an audience understands who Amy is lying with and what her husband's voice-over really means.

Your beat sheet may only include these moments, or it may also include the scenes that connect these points. As a result, your final product will probably be between 15 and 30 beats long. It's also good practice to write more beats and then pare them down. As with your treatment, less is often more here.



TRY IT

You can practice the beat sheet form off the page as well as on. Watch the people around you and choose someone engaged in an interesting activity. Can you break that activity into separate moments? Try it. Convert each detail into a sentence. For example, I'm watching a woman give a campus tour. My imagined outline may look like this:

The tour guide corrals the over-sized crowd into a designated area.

She rattles off practiced information about the architecture on campus.

She's interrupted by a boy on a bicycle who calls out her name and waves as he rides by.

She scrutinizes him, temporarily forgetting that her tour group exists.

In four sentences, I suggest two characters (the tour guide and the boy), a location (a university campus), and something that makes the moment memorable (the attention she gives him). The scene is brief — it may take less than a minute of screen time — but it conveys key information, and it raises a few questions — namely, who are these people to each other, and what will happen between them?

Filling in the gaps

Once you've written a treatment and a beat sheet (or at least one of those documents), the next step is to craft a story outline. This process would seem daunting without all your preparation, but at this point, you're just expanding on what you already know. A story outline is simply a scene-by-scene breakdown of the entire script.

A story outline follows the same process as a beat sheet, with a few additions:

- » It includes act breaks and scene headings with the location and the time of each scene.
- » Under each heading, you describe what happens in the scene, highlighting the actions taken, the tactics used, and any resulting discovery or transformation. How do characters change, and how do their relationships change in each scene?

- » Dialogue may be included. You are not writing the screenplay yet, but if pivotal lines or exchanges occur to you as you outline, include them. In this way, the character voices are revealed as is the tone or style of the film.
- » The actions of one scene inspire the actions of another.

Crafting the conclusion

Hopefully, you can now envision the story's conclusion. With that end in mind, highlight the moments that take you there within each scene. To rewrite my beat sheet example then, I must decide where that moment between the tour guide and the boy on the bicycle will lead. When I imagine the guide's raging crush on this boy and determine that this event propels her to ask him out, I can add the scene to my outline. The rewritten version might look like this:

Act I, Scene 6 — Ext. Campus Street — Day

A tour guide wearily corrals the over-sized crowd into a designated area.

She recites various facts about the architecture on campus.

Suddenly, she is interrupted by a boy on a bike. He calls out her name and waves.

He passes her, as if in slow motion, revealing his wink and his dazzling smile.

She watches him ride off, oblivious to the group she's in charge of.

Someone in the crowd clears their throats and says "Hello? Is the tour over already?"

She glances at them for a second, then takes off after the boy, calling to him as she races across the campus green.

The heading of each scene in an outline corresponds to the slug line that will eventually appear in your script. Slug lines include the basic information needed to set up a shot. I talk about them at greater length in Chapter 15, but for your purposes here, just remember to include an indication of where the scene fits in the chronology of your story, a location, and a sense of time. If the following scene in the tour guide drama takes place in the bookstore where she tracks the boy down, the next portion of the outline should begin:

Act I, Scene 7 — Int. Campus Bookstore — Day

If you want to be even more specific about time here, the next bit may read

Act I, Scene 7 — Int. Campus Bookstore — Moments later

Story outlines often begin on index cards. The slug line or scene heading goes somewhere at the top, followed by a short description of the action in that moment. How much or little information you include on each card is up to you. For some writers, three or four sentences of description are enough; other writers include sensorial details such as sounds or light, or a sense of how each shot is framed. Do you need to break down the action on index cards first? Of course not. However, this technique allows you to shift the order of events, as well as quickly eliminate or add scenes. The ability to spread the scenes out in front of you and rearrange them until you're satisfied is often invaluable.



REMEMBER

Outlines help you organize the action. Preparing so thoroughly may seem tedious at first, but eventually, this blueprint becomes second nature and, in many cases, necessary to clarify holes in your story, unnecessary repetition, or lags in momentum.



REMEMBER

A story outline does the following:

- » Runs in chronological order from Act I through Act III
- » Is broken into sequences introduced by the act number, scene number, location, and time of day
- » Is broken down within each sequence into individual actions, revelations, and emotional turning points
- » Highlights the characters, events, consequences, and the pace of each scene

What to Do When the Outline's Through

If you're satisfied with your story at this point, the next step is to start writing. However, few writers complete an outline satisfied. You'll either have sections of the story that need to be reworked or moments that are missing entirely. Here are a few questions to ask yourself after you have completed one or all of the previously mentioned outlines:

- » Do you have long sequences of dialogue or action? How might you break these sequences up so that they don't become monotonous?
- » Are the characters' goals clear? Are they obtained in the end?

- » Do your characters acquire new skills or information along the way? In which scenes?
- » What relationships exist at the end that did not exist at the beginning? Do you have enough scenes to plausibly support that interaction?
- » Is your villain fully represented?
- » Are your subplots represented? Do they support the main plot?
- » Is each scene motivated by a preceding scene or moment? In other words, does every scene inspire another to occur?
- » Does each scene propel a reader to the climax in some way?
- » Is enough backstory introduced to successfully frame the action?
- » Does the choice of location strengthen the theme or the action?
- » Does your script contain surprises? If so, where are they?



TRY IT

OUTLINING SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

This project is familiar to many television writers who rely on it to acquire a feel for any new series. It's helpful to feature-film writers as well, especially because outlining someone else's script is easier than outlining your own.

Stream an episode of your favorite TV show or your favorite film. You can do this project with a piece of paper or with note cards in front of you. If it's a TV show, watch the whole thing once through; if it's a film, choose a section of it to watch. Take note of the following details:

- Order of locations
- Character introductions
- Major events
- Minor events
- Actions that caused other actions

When you're through, watch it again. Keep the pause button close. See if you can construct a sentence or a step-by-step outline of what you see. Finally, watch it again with the outline in hand to see what you missed. By the time you're through with this exercise, you'll know the story, the genre, and the structure of the piece that you selected. You'll also know how to approach an outline of your own work.

Be on the alert for too many scenes in one location, or of one quality in succession. Your script is like a visual symphony; too much of one melodic line quickly becomes repetitive. Break up action-packed scenes with moments of shifting character relationships. Break up image with dialogue. Find any way you can to vary the form and content of your story.

Also, beware of action that happens to or around the protagonist. You want the protagonist to happen to the script, not the other way around. Force your character to make choices, and the scenes will become active and dynamic. By the time you're finished breaking down and reorganizing your action, you'll know the story inside and out — which is convenient because the next step is composing a first draft!

- » Adopting a healthy view of writer's block
- » Reevaluating your work schedule
- » Getting help from your friends and colleagues

Chapter 14

Surviving Writer's Block

If you have ever taken up exercise, you know what writer's block feels like. You're running on that treadmill, your pulse rate is high, your breathing is steady, you feel invigorated and alive. "This is easy," you think, and for a while, it is. Then, all of a sudden — bam! Your muscles tense up, your legs give way, you're winded, and you have to stop. The impetus and the desire to run are gone, seemingly forever. The next day, beginning again is infinitely more difficult, if not impossible.

Writers experience this same cycle. One minute, characters speak unbidden, and images fly across the page, the next minute nothing, no pictures, no voices, no sense of what comes next. It's called *writer's block*, the not-so-great equalizer. It strikes without discrimination or warning, it leaves you uncertain of how to proceed or panicked that you can't proceed at all, and it afflicts the most prolific writers in the business. The Coen brothers famously wrote *Barton Fink* as a way to escape their writer's block over *Miller's Crossing*. Aaron Sorkin claims to be in a perpetual state of writer's block, punctuated by short bursts of time where he manages to get something done.

But what is writer's block really? Is it an affliction or a natural part of the creative process? Is it to be feared or embraced? Can you do anything to avoid it? And what, oh what, do you do when it strikes? If you have ever experienced writer's block, or if you're curious about how to handle it when you do, you're in the right place. This chapter takes on all those questions and more.

Moving from Panic to Peace

In conversation, writer's block sounds like a disease. It certainly has all the symptoms: confusion, lightheadedness, loss of appetite, insomnia, restlessness, headaches, and nausea. I know a writer who hyperventilates at the mere thought of writer's block, and another writer who swears that she can sense its approach by the twitch in her left hand.

Every year, a student asks me whether I believe that writer's block is contagious. I usually say, "Not unless it's code for something medical," but I know why they're uneasy. Writer's block is associated with more legends than any other part of the artistic process. Horror stories abound, from novelists unable to complete more than one novel to dramatists with award-winning ideas who abandon projects halfway through the first draft. People hear these stories and develop all sorts of misconceptions. A few years ago, I compiled a list of fallacies related to this issue. The following are among the most common:

- » Writer's block means that you're a bad writer.
- » Writer's block means that your story isn't worth telling.
- » If you enjoy time away from your work, you're not really a writer.
- » Some writers don't experience writer's block.
- » Writer's block means that you're not psychologically ready to write this story yet.
- » After you've written several screenplays, writer's block disappears.
- » If you ignore the problem, it will go away.
- » If you tell people that you're experiencing a block, they'll think that you're inexperienced or mediocre at your craft.
- » If you don't find a way around writer's block, you'll never be able to accept work with a deadline.
- » Writer's block is something you have to face alone.

None of these things are true, yet they're only a few of the beliefs circulating among writers. With all this bad press, it's no wonder people fear the ordeal.

Surprisingly, though, writer's block isn't something to fear. In fact, fear is the problem. Look at other professions. Would anyone expect a doctor to offer diagnosis after diagnosis without pausing for thought? I doubt it. Would anyone expect teachers to understand students at a glance or fault them for puzzling over students until they determine how each one should be taught? I hope not. Yet many

writers expect to maintain a breakneck pace and a rigorous schedule without allowing for an occasional question, a pause or, heaven forbid, a moment of indecision. Why? Because they're afraid, and thus, they're artistically exhausted. If you look closely, you'll see that fear is the culprit lurking behind virtually all forms of writer's block.

The top reasons for writer's block

Writing is a private process, so finding an explanation for every creative obstacle is difficult. However, as most writers experience the same stages of the creative process, they often share problems inherent in that process as well. You can, therefore, trace the most frequent blocks to one of the following causes:

- » **Something about the story needs to change.** After you outline a script, you'll probably write it scene by scene. However, stories change as you write them, and you'll probably deviate from that outline a bit, sometimes a great deal. Unfortunately, tracking larger changes in structure can be difficult when you're entrenched in the details of scene work, and you may finish one scene only to find yourself confused as to how the next should look.
- » **You've written past your initial design.** Your story develops as you write, so the landscape and the characters in the second portion may not match their original form. Writers often become frustrated by plot and character inconsistencies halfway through a script, fearing that the story has gotten away from them.
- » **You're under a strict deadline.** Some people work well under pressure; others do not. Although deadlines provide clear artistic goals, they also require a strict schedule and a pace that allows little time to daydream — let alone question a story. The pressure of meeting those demands often makes it impossible to do so.
- » **Your expectations are unreasonable.** Writers aren't robots, so you shouldn't be expected to churn out the same material in the same way every time you write. Some days, you'll produce a lot of work; other days, you'll produce none. Some days, your writing will be palpable and precise; other days, it will drag across the page begging you to hit Delete. Impossible expectations put undue pressure on you, and they virtually ensure failure of some sort.
- » **The last thing you wrote was fantastic/wretched.** The last thing you wrote was successful, so this one might be a flop. The last thing you wrote was unique, so this one might be clichéd. The first script was horrific; this one might be worse. If thoughts of what your script "might be" keep you from writing, these thoughts "might be" your block.

- » **You're unable to admit uncertainty.** Today's society doesn't applaud indecision, and it certainly doesn't reward hesitation. People feel a need to provide answers instead of asking questions. Writers are no exception. Without a ready answer, many writers panic and can't write at all.
- » **You're a perfectionist.** Your script is never going to be perfect, and it won't even be close when you first start writing. If you worry about perfection (whatever that word means), you'll never get past the first page. Rather than worry about it, consider it a relief that you don't have to and just get something, anything, onto the page. You can revise it later.
- » **You're facing a pivotal script decision.** When facing a pivotal decision, some writers trace each option through the remainder of the story as if it were a game of chess. They're afraid of making the "wrong" choices, so they don't make any. This deliberation often lasts a long time, and, as a result, little work gets done.
- » **You write quickly.** I know what you're thinking: If writing quickly is a problem, send it your way. Writing quickly can be a blessing, but it can just as easily be a curse. In your artistic frenzy, you may lose sight of the story as a whole. When you finally do come up for air, you may have to take a while to assess what you've written and what to write next.
- » **You're overwhelmed by the prospect.** When you first start writing any script, it can feel like an impossible task. Please bear in mind you're not sitting down to write the entire screenplay. You're sitting down to write one small part of it. Break your project into manageable pieces. Then script one at a time. Eventually, the entire story will emerge.
- » **You're constantly interrupted.** Few people can write in the 15 minutes between phone calls and meetings. Your imagination needs time to shift into work mode, to focus on your characters again and determine where you left off. Interruptions make it impossible to switch into work mode and, as a result, to work at all.
- » **Your life is in transition or crisis.** Artists need more than just space and time to work efficiently. They need exercise, sunlight, sleep, a support network, and financial stability. If your health or your well-being are compromised or in a state of flux, focus on attending to those parts of your life first. Your story will be there when you're ready for it.
- » **You don't allow time for a personal life.** Although you need uninterrupted time alone with your work, you also need time away from it. Many writers view free time as wasted time and fear that they'll lose momentum if they don't spend every minute with the characters. Yet without time off, you may end up with one-dimensional characters and contrived plot points. Life problems often become writing problems. If you are tense and/or exhausted, your writing probably will be too.



REMEMBER

Notice a pattern? Unrealistic expectations, excessive pressure to succeed, lack of personal time — these factors underscore the entire list, and they're all fueled by fear. You're afraid to fail, or afraid to succeed, or afraid to succeed and then fail. In any case, fear is what's stopping your pen.

Can you avoid this predicament? No, but you can survive it. The first order of business involves a change in attitude. Despite the symptoms, writer's block is not a disease; it's a natural part of the creative process — maybe even an important part. Nine times out of ten, writer's block means that you're on the verge of some discovery. Tedious and irritating as it may be, writer's block can be beneficial. Here are a few things that it may suggest:

- » **Your abilities as a storyteller are improving.** Writers sharpen their skills as they write. Perhaps you're becoming more adept at the craft, and your imagination needs time to adjust. If you stop and reread your work, you may be able to catch the improvement on the page.
- » **The characters have something unexpected to say.** When people spend enough time together, they can close their eyes and re-create the sound of the other person's voice. The same process occurs as you get to know your characters. If you spend enough time with them, they start speaking to you unbidden. You know them better now than when you first began writing, so don't be surprised if they're saying something new.
- » **Your reason for writing the story has changed.** Some people have a clear reason for writing from the beginning. Others do not. Events that you discover as you write or that occur in your personal life may change your reason for finishing the project. Use the extra time that writer's block bestows on you to reconsider that position.
- » **Your subplot is becoming more important.** Subplots have a way of becoming more dynamic as a script develops. Your creative block may be fueled by that subplot, tugging at your sleeve for attention.
- » **You forgot a critical piece of information.** If you're entrenched in the work and writing at a fast pace, you can easily lose sight of backstory and exposition. After all, you understand the story; you don't need that piece of information. Your audience will need it, though. Double-check that you've included all the information that an audience needs to understand the world of your script.



WARNING

Creative blocks are like red flags meant to catch your attention. If you ignore them, they just get larger. If you become angry with them, you exhaust yourself beating them down. Instead, consider them a warning and try to discover what they have to say. Maybe — and this is most often the case — you just need to relax. Take a breath. By way of analogy, farmers fallow their fields, leaving one

unplanted for a season so the soil has time to regenerate. The imagination also needs time to regenerate. Time spent away is not time wasted; it's preparation for the work to come. You have nothing to fear; if anything, you're about to learn something new.

A survival guide



TIP

Are you breathing? Good. If you've reached a creative standstill, the best thing to do is direct your attention away from the block and all the horrible things that might happen if you're stuck forever. You're not stuck forever; you're just stuck now, and now is the time to concentrate on other things. Here are a few "other things" that you may want to try when writer's block strikes:

- » **Do something else.** Sometimes, you just need a break from the computer or from your notepad, even if it's just for an hour. The best ideas always find me in the shower, on a walk, or in the car. So take a drive, go for a run, have lunch with a friend, or indulge in a nap. Trick your mind into thinking that you just don't care about that script. Answers often arrive when you least expect them.
- » **Switch projects.** John Logan, writer of *Gladiator*, *Penny Dreadful*, *The Aviator*, and *Skyfall*, likes to juggle several projects at once. Why would anyone do that? First, doing so diverts your mind from the creative impasse and keeps you writing at the same time. Also, what you learn on one project may clarify a problem in another. Jordan Peele of *Get Out* fame calls this approach "following the fun." When one project becomes cumbersome, jump to one that's not. If you try this strategy, make sure that the projects are at different stages of development. If you're in the first draft of script one, for example, script two should be in development or revisions. Otherwise, you risk ending up with not one, but two cases of writer's block.
- » **Outline the script.** You probably outlined your script before you began writing, but it never hurts to do it again. Outline what you've already written first and then move on to what you intend to include later. If your story has changed, the outline will show you how. Tracing the steps leading to the block may lead to the next scene. You might also try writing a new synopsis of the story. As you try to convey the plot in prose form, you may discover holes or shift in the story that are keeping you from moving forward.
- » **Read, read, read.** Other artists offer techniques, dramatic examples, and inspiration. You don't need to limit yourself to screenplays; read literature, poetry, and nonfiction, too. Read newspapers or old letters. Read anything that ropes you into a world other than your own or the one that you're creating.

- » **Return to research.** In Chapter 4, I detail the creative process. Part of that process involves the *saturation stage*, where writers seek creative input of all kinds that may inform their script. Return to that stage now. Visit museums, collect photographs, listen to music, eavesdrop on conversations, and record what you hear. You have written part of the story, so your mind knows what to look for now. You may discover details that you missed the first time around.
- » **Try alternate forms of writing.** By alternate, I mean try writing something other than a screenplay. Write a letter, send an email, start a diary, or give yourself an assignment and write for an hour. Like switching projects, this strategy also redirects your concentration while keeping your imagination alert.
- » **Sleep on it.** If you've been tackling a block for a while, you're probably tense and exhausted. Go to bed. Your mind still works while your body sleeps. You'll definitely wake up refreshed. You may even wake up with an answer.



REMEMBER

You'll discover more routes through creative standstills with each scene you tackle. Do what works for you — just don't give up. The worst thing that you can do is push the script aside completely. You're almost always abandoning something worth keeping, and more writer's block is waiting for you eventually. If you don't overcome it now, how will you survive it the next time?

Reevaluating Your Routine

A solid work regime helps writers coast through creative blocks with their sanity intact. It also cuts the frequency of the encounters in half. If you think that your routine can stand a change, try one or all of the following suggestions:

- » **Write at the same time every day.** As I say in Chapter 4, the more habitual your writing routine is, the better. If your schedule allows you to write from 9 a.m. to noon every day, your imagination will adjust accordingly. Pretty soon, you'll be in working mode by the time you sit down, and if the muse is looking for you, it'll know where to go and when.
- » **Set aside preparation time.** Preparation time includes anything and everything you do to prepare yourself to write. I keep a Later list near me at all times. This list reminds me of the parts of the script that I intend to write later. It includes character details, events, pieces of conversation, or images that occur unexpectedly. This way, I always have something I can work on when the current scene eludes me. Some writers spend an hour each day dreaming up tomorrow's scenes. Doing so leaves them ready for the next day, but more importantly, it leaves them excited to begin again.

- » **Keep a notepad handy.** You never know when inspiration will strike. My best ideas arrive while I'm driving, walking, or in the shower. Many writers find ideas bubble up right before they fall asleep. Make sure that you have a way to catch those ideas as they strike. Don't make the mistake of thinking you'll remember them later. Trust me, you won't.
- » **Set clear goals.** Some writers try to finish a certain number of pages each day; some writers set aside a certain amount of time. When three hours are done, so are they. You may find it easier to work through choice moments, completing a scene or a pivotal moment, for example. The specific goal is entirely up to you, but do try to achieve it. You'll always feel better if you end each day with some sort of success.
- » **Devise an opening ritual.** Sometimes, the imagination takes a while to warm up. Find a way to help it out and start each day with that procedure. Some people write three to five pages of stream-of-consciousness thought each morning. Writing letters or rereading past work also prepares the imagination to begin. The opening ritual is yet another way to make the writing process habitual. Also, your ritual may not involve writing. A nice long walk may be just what your system needs to kick itself into high gear.
- » **Keep a writing journal.** Writing journals are different from diaries. Everything in a diary is personal; it grants writers an outlet for pent-up anger, joy, and pain. Keeping a diary is a form of therapy. Writing journals are reserved for your work. Give yourself an assignment and record it here. Stuck on a scene? Write it in prose form in your journal. If you're a pen writer (as opposed to a computer writer), maybe your whole first draft belongs here. In this way, you separate unwanted emotion and personal judgment from dramatic writing.
- » **Make a writing playlist.** Many playwrights create music playlists that they reserve for when their writing or thinking about their current project. The tracks may help you capture the pace or style of the story, or they may simply be tracks that relax you and prime your mind to write.
- » **Stop when you know what comes next.** Here's a piece of advice from Ernest Hemingway. He told young writers to stop writing when they could envision what the next moment in the story would be. That way, they always had a place to begin.



REMEMBER

Improving your routine won't stop writer's block entirely, but it will help to make it occur less frequently. Your creative routine represents the personal side of the process or the measures you take on your own. If you plan on writing professionally, you may also want to seek the help of others.

Seeking Outside Help

Writing is often a lonely endeavor. It requires time away from family, friends, and the outside world in general, which can be disconcerting for all involved. However, you don't need to cut yourself off entirely while completing a script. Writer's block is the perfect opportunity to enlist support. Here are some ways that your colleagues and loved ones can become involved in the process:

- » **Share your schedule.** Alerting other people of your writing schedule is advantageous in two ways. If people know when you work, they're less likely to interrupt you. Also, if they know your goals in advance, they may be able to help you accomplish them. Not all writers make a living at their craft, and the encouragement of friends and family often takes the place of financial support.
- » **Write with others.** Do you know any writers? Meet them for a few hours and write together. If you arrange the meeting, you'll most likely show up, which means that work will probably get done. If a script problem arises, there's someone across from you to help. Watch out though — you may have to enforce a strict “no gabbing” rule to ensure that work gets done.
- » **Join a writing group.** Writing groups usually meet once or twice a month, and they can be a wonderful place to workshop new scripts as well as to make connections. Every writing group is structured differently. Some groups simply present and discuss new work. Other groups include exercises for participants to try in between sessions. Some are mediated by an instructor and may charge a joining fee; others are more informal. I encourage you to try several before committing to one. These groups should act like support groups. They remind you that you're not alone in this crazy creative endeavor. Writing groups often post information on how to join at local libraries, online forums, universities, and frequently in writing journals or magazines. If you can't find one, you can always start a group yourself.
- » **Talk it out.** I'm of two minds on this method. I suggest waiting to talk about a story until the idea's fleshed out, and you have at least one outline in place. In the early stages, you can talk about an idea until the immediate need to write it disappears. Wait until you're developing scenes and then seek advice. A new ear picks up details that you've long since forgotten, and remember, other people don't know the story yet. Their questions and reactions will quickly reveal any confusing or inconsistent moments. You may also consider this discussion to be your first pitch. How can you sell the story from the start?
- » **Plan group readings.** Do you know any actors? Do you have any dramatic friends or family members? Invite them to read a few scenes out loud. Assign someone to read the description as well. There's no substitute for hearing your words out loud. If they flop in your living room, they'll likely flop on set. But if they fly now, they'll likely fly on-screen.



TRY IT

KNOCKING YOUR BLOCK OFF

Here's a project that I use when a student gets stuck. It's a timed writing. In this case, you'll be writing for two minutes, and you'll be using a *tag line*, which is the first phrase you write and the phrase you return to if you can think of nothing else to write.

The rules of the timed writing are simple:

- Keep your hand moving on the page. If you can't think of anything to say, continue to write the tag line until something occurs to you.
- There are no expected responses. You're recording your thoughts as you think them; go where they take you. And don't limit yourself creatively here. A response you think is crazy can be more helpful to you than the more commonplace options.
- Pay no attention to grammar or spelling. They're entirely unimportant in this exercise.
- Stop writing when the time is over, even if you're mid-sentence.

So, those are the rules. Here are two tag lines. Write for a minute and a half on each one. The tag lines are:

- "Today I am . . ."
- "What I want most is . . ."

After you've written your responses, read them out loud. Circle any phrase or image that sparks your fancy. After you're done, you can choose tag lines that direct your energy toward a specific script. Here are three such tag lines to get you started:

- "I see someone who . . ."
- "If you listen closely, you'll hear . . ."
- "Soon I expect that . . ."

A strong support group may help you end the period of writer's block more quickly. Having the support certainly makes the process bearable at the very least. So the next time you're in a creative rut, don't rant and rave in private. Rant and rave with others.

All in all, the best advice I've ever gotten about writer's block was from an old colleague who said, "Don't let it eat you alive; use it to sharpen your teeth." Writer's block isn't an end; it's a beginning. Use the break to reflect on your story and hone your skill. If it's true that human beings grow the most during times of struggle, you'll be infinitely wiser by the time your script is complete. Each draft of your script will reflect that new wisdom.

- » Setting up your page
- » Scripting character introductions
- » Writing compelling description
- » Understanding the camera's perspective

Chapter **15**

Formatting Your Screenplay

Skim a few books on how to land a great job, and you'll notice at least one similarity: They all reserve a section, if not a chapter, on first impressions. If you walk into an interview looking like you just rolled out of a bed and proceed to speak in half sentences while tugging at a hole in your sweater, you're not leaving with the job. If you walk into the interview in a tiara or a tux, touting your credentials and qualifications, you're not leaving with the job. To land the position, you should look and sound like you mean business. You should be clear, confident, and concise. You have a first impression to make, so make it well.

In screenwriting, your format is your best shot at a good first impression. If your format looks professional, the readers will assume you're a professional. Unlike plays and novels where the format is fairly loose, screenplays are written within precise guidelines. Our challenge as screenwriters is to tell a unique story within those guidelines. Even if you're writing for the fun of it and have no intention of sending your script out, a screenplay isn't a screenplay without the format. It keeps your writing organized, economical, and most importantly — visual.

This chapter guides you through basic screenplay format to help lift your ideas from the outline stage to the printed page. It also highlights the tools that you need to make a good first impression.

How the Screenplay Looks on the Page

As a screenwriter, your job is to immerse the readers in your story. Those readers may be friends, editors, agents, producers, studio execs, actors, or directors — anyone you hope to interest in your piece. You want their eyes moving down one page and onto the next without having to stop or flip back in confusion. For that reason, the screenwriting format is designed to fade into the background. Once mastered, it allows a screenwriter to convey location, character, and action in a quick and efficient manner. It also enables them to design the mood, angle, and pace of a scene without drawing attention to the mechanics involved.

Formatting a title page

First things first. Let's format your title page. A screenplay's title page includes these components:

- » **The title:** Centered on the page, written in all caps, and spaced one-quarter to one-third of the way down the page.
- » **The "by" line:** This is literally the word "by" four return spaces below your title.
- » **Your name:** The most important component, two return spaces below the "by" line. If you co-wrote the script add an ampersand (&) in between your names. Writing "and" between them suggests one writer was brought in to revise the other writer's work.
- » **Based on:** If you're adapting the film from a primary source, include that information four return lines below your name.
- » **Your contact information:** When you're starting out, this info will include your phone number and email address. Once you have a manager and/or an agent, their information will be listed instead of your own. This info should appear in two single-spaced lines at the bottom of the page on the left margin or against the right margin.

Figure 15-1 shows a sample title page for reference.

Congratulations! You have a title page. I hope the endeavor feels a little more official. Now you can format the story itself.

FIGURE 15-1:
A sample
title page.

TITLE OF YOUR SCREENPLAY

by

YOUR NAME or (YOUR NAME & YOUR CO-WRITER'S NAME)

Based on (if applicable)

YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION
Email address
Phone number

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Setting up the seven components of a page

Every page after your title will be formatted the same way. So, to start, imagine a blank page. In the screenwriting format, seven components are vying for space on that blank page. Those components are

- » **Scene heading or slug line:** This line offers a quick sense of location, such as whether the scene takes place inside or outside, or during day or night (or sometime in between).
- » **The action:** Who's in the scene and what are they doing? The action is sometimes referred to as the *business* of the scene.
- » **The character name:** The person doing the talking.

- » **The character dialogue:** What that person says.
- » **Parenthetical directions:** How the person says a line. The general rule here is “less is more.” Better to let the scene convey how a line should be delivered than to direct every line reading. Also, parentheticals should not be confused with action. They describe how a line is delivered, not what’s going on at the time it’s delivered.
- » **Transitional directions:** Any indication of how the scene should be visualized or read, or how one scene moves into the next.
- » **The page number:** Page numbers appear on the top-right side of every page except the title page, which is numberless. Scene numbers, however, are not necessary. Those are reserved for shooting scripts and will be added by studio personnel later.

Each component has its own placement on the page, and a reader should be able to distinguish one component from the other at a glance. Together, these components convey the necessary information to an audience, and they help your future collaborators know what’s important in a scene right away. To get a sense of how these elements look on the page, see the example in the next section of this chapter.

Setting your typeface and margins



TIP

The proper typeface for your script is 12 point Courier font. Courier is the font most widely used in the industry because it’s a monospace font, which means each space and character is the same width. Why this rule? This type size ensures that, on average, one page of script reads at one minute — a detail helpful to directors trying to determine the running time of an individual scene or of the script as a whole.

After you set your typeface, program your computer to remember the following marginal guidelines for each formatting section.

- » **Left margin:** 1½ inches
- » **Right margin:** 1 inch
- » **Top margin:** 1 inch
- » **Bottom margin:** 1 inch

- » **Scene headings (also known as slug lines):** Begin at the left margin. Scene headings are always capitalized.
- » **Action:** Runs the length of the page (after you've set your margins)
- » **Character name:** 3.7 inches from the left side of the page (2.2 inches from the left margin)
- » **Dialogue:** Begins 2½ inches from the left side of the page (1½ inches from the left margin) and ends at 6½ inches from the left side of the page (5 inches from the left margin)
- » **Parentheticals:** 3.1 inches from the left side of the page (1.6 inches from the left margin)
- » **Page numbers:** Flush to the right margin, ½ inch from the top of the page, should be followed by a period.

Figure 15-2 shows an example of the traditional screenplay format. Additional examples can be found in this book's appendix.

Transitional directions (which mainly convey camera information) are always capitalized. They take several forms and have several placements on the page. I detail those forms later in the chapter in the section called "Camera concerns."



REMEMBER

The method behind this margin madness is simple: Actors concentrate on dialogue; directors look for the composition and pace of each scene; and cinematographers focus on landscape, mood, and key imagery. If your format is correctly aligned, everyone's happy. You've created special compartments for each element. A glance down the left side of the page reveals the primary locations and actions of each scene. A glance down the center provides the character list and accompanying dialogue. This structure lets readers concentrate on one portion of the scene at a time.

Spacing your script correctly

A screenplay is not a novel. A screenplay is comprised of quick visual scenes. Your central images should be strong and easily accessible. If you lump three or four together in the same scene, they'll be neither. Seeing blocks of text with little or no interruption can be daunting to a reader. If I get tired just glancing at your script, I'll be unlikely to start reading it and even less likely to finish it. Your format is an invitation to read.

"A DIME A DOZEN"

FADE IN:

EXT. A COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The road is empty. Fields of corn stretch for miles along either side. Nothing but green and gold.

ELLEN (V.O.)

I used to think there were places that time didn't touch. Places too small to consider.

An abandoned tractor lies by the side of the road. A scarecrow leans awkwardly in one of the fields.

ELLEN - (V.O.)

Where people do as they've always done and days go on and on and... on. Places like my home town.

The sound of a car ENGINE RUMBLING farther off. It grows louder over the following speech.

ELLEN - (V.O.)

Now though, I wonder if time's just waiting. Waiting for its moment to pull everything apart.

A sleek black car barrels down the road spinning dust in its wake.

EXT. A ROAD-SIDE FRUIT STAND - DAY

DARRYL HOPKINS, the 75 year old owner of the stand helps RUTH MADSON, 60, load bags into her vehicle.

The black car streaks past them. Pebbles fly up around its tires. A few of them slam into Ruth's shoes.

Darryl spins around fast enough to catch the

LICENSE PLATE

which reads PUMA 30.

DARRYL

Puma.

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RUTH
(quietly)

You know what that means.

DARRYL

Trouble with six cylinders.

RUTH

Car like that? Going that fast? More like
eight, Darryl. Eight and some change.

They exchange a glance, then peer down the now empty road.

EXT. SIDE OF THE ROAD - MOMENTS LATER

Wide-eyed ABBEY REYNOLDS, 8, and her friend ELLEN KURTZ, 13,
walk home from school. Abbey carries a pinwheel.

ELLEN

Hurry up, Abbey, we're going to be late. Not that
it matters.

ABBEY

If it don't matter, why're we hurrying?

ELLEN

'Cause I'm not getting in trouble over something
that don't even matter, understand?

An ENGINE ROARS behind them. The black car streaks past.
Abbey's pinwheel twirls furiously in her hand.

ABBEY

Whoa.

ELLEN

Double whoa.

ABBEY

Think that's him?

ELLEN

Maybe. But I sorta hope not.

The girls exchange a glance, then take off down the road. The
top of Abbey's pinwheel twirls off its handle, and as she runs
it falls to the ground.

FIGURE 15-2:
A sample scene.

Here's how to space your screenplay to highlight each image in a visually inviting way:

Single space:

- » All description
- » All lines of dialogue
- » All parentheticals
- » All camera directions, sound cues, and visual effects
- » Between the character name and the ensuing dialogue
- » Between the character name and an ensuing parenthetical

Double-space:

- » Between the *slug line* (see the "Making Your Format Flow" section, later in this chapter) and the action
- » Between paragraphs of lengthy description or action
- » Between the end of one character's dialogue and a new character's name
- » Between the end of one character's dialogue and a new line of action

Triple-space:

- » Before starting a new scene

After you become familiar with these parameters, you have a choice to make. How do you want to move between them? You may tab from one element to the next. However, this method makes editing cumbersome because any revision disturbs the spacing. As an easier choice, most computers allow you to define and name new styles (dialogue, character, and parentheticals, for example) and assign them to a keystroke. One shortcut key takes you to the dialogue margin, another to the name, and so on. On most computers this feature is found in the toolbar at the top of your page under Format. A quick scroll through the Format drop-down menu should reveal the Styles component. Click that option and follow the directions from there. Defining your styles makes editing easier as you rework each section individually.

Microsoft Word also has a screenplay template that you can download off their website. Or, as a more professional (and more expensive) option, you may purchase a program designed to format the script for you. See the sidebar later in this chapter called “Screenwriting software: Let your computer do the work” for software programs I recommend.

Making your computer work for you

Many screenwriters write with specialized software, and I detail those options for you later in this chapter. However, it’s important to know how to write without that software, if only to understand formatting basics. Screenwriting format is like a calculator. It will solve problems for you, it will simplify your efforts, but if you don’t understand the principles behind it, you’re losing a skill.

Therefore, I encourage you to create your own formatting template before relying on a program. And while every computer differs slightly, there are ways to spatially structure your page on both a Mac and a PC. I will assume that you’re working in Microsoft Word. If you don’t own that program, go purchase it. Then, in Word, try setting up your page this way:

- 1. Open a new Word document.**
- 2. Set your margins.**

If you’re working on a PC, you find this option by choosing File ⇨ Page Layout. If you’re working on a Mac, choose Document ⇨ Format.
- 3. Set your font to 12 point Courier.**
- 4. Type a character’s name and space it in the appropriate margin on the page.**
- 5. Highlight that name so that the computer recognizes it.**
- 6. Choose Format ⇨ Styles.**

The Styles command is sometimes found under the Document menu where it is called Styles and Formatting. Either way, Styles is what you are looking for.
- 7. In the Styles dialog box, click the New Style or Create New Style option.**
- 8. After you choose that style, name it.**

I suggest calling it Name or Character so that you can recognize it quickly.

9. After you name your style, click the Format or Options button.

The Shortcut Key dialog box appears. The shortcut key is what you'll press every time you want to write a character's name.

10. Choose a shortcut that's easy to type quickly.

Shift+N or Shift+C are good, because you can remember them as Shift Name or Shift Character.

11. Click Apply Changes.

After you create a Style for character names, you can make similar styles for description, dialogue, and parentheticals. This way, you can move between them with a keystroke rather than a lot of tabs.

Creating a PDF

PDF means *portable document file*, and it's a quick and easy way to freeze your script in one format. You should create a PDF of your script before you print it or email it to a reader. That way, your format doesn't become confused in transfer.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Most computers come with the option of turning a document into a PDF. You can find that option when you try to save or print your script. Under the Print box (where it asks you how many pages and what printer) is a PDF icon. Click that icon instead of clicking Print, and your computer will convert your document into a PDF. Other programs allow you to save your text document as a PDF by using the Save As command. If your computer doesn't come with either of these options, consider using one of the many free PDF programs available online.

It may also be advisable to purchase Adobe Acrobat. It not only creates PDF files, but it helps you read more unusual files that may be sent to you. Acrobat is a bit pricey, though, so try the free downloads first.



TIP

Remember that once you create a PDF of your script, you won't be able to alter it in any way, nor will the people you send it to. Always save your non-PDF draft (such as your Microsoft Word version) before you convert it to a PDF. The original draft is the one you'll revise as needed. You'll probably create many PDF versions of your script as the process unfolds.

SCREENWRITING SOFTWARE: LET YOUR COMPUTER DO THE WORK

Some writers find the screenwriting format to be overly complicated and time-consuming. After all, you want to spend your time concentrating on the story, not how it looks of the page. It's important to know basic formatting rules, but once you have those down it may be time to purchase some screenwriting software. Software certainly allows writers to work more quickly without the hassle of individual tabulation or margin setting. It also produces scripts that look industry-ready right away. Screenwriting programs abound these days, so peruse your options carefully. The best packages do the following:

- Format and paginate your script as you write
- Provide templates for movie scripts, teleplays, and stage plays
- Offer direct web links to screenwriting sites
- Organize your notes for quick reference
- Help you register your scripts online with the Writers Guild of America
- Provide troubleshooting advice from professionals on everything from character development to writer's block
- Break your script into sections and transfer those onto index cards, which is particularly helpful when you want to rearrange scenes or eliminate them altogether
- Help you turn your script into a stage play, television series, or novel (should you want to)

I encourage you to investigate your software options online prior to purchasing anything. Some systems focus on story and/ or character development; others also tackle production concerns. Of the systems available, the most common are Final Draft (www.finaldraft.com), Celtx (www.celtx.com), Fade In (www.fadeinpro.com), and WriterDuet (www.writerduet.com).

These programs are compatible with Microsoft Word and offer a similar array of features. WriterDuet and Fade In are often cited as more user-friendly and easier to navigate for beginners. Fade In, WriterDuet, and Celtx are cloud-based, so they offer real-time collaboration opportunities and online/offline editing options. Final Draft is more story-centric—it has a story map option and multiple ways to help you build the story. Celtx is more production-centric—it includes scheduling, budget, and group management options. Final Draft is the industry standard, and it comes equipped with more television and stage play templates, but it's also the most expensive of the four options.

Making Your Format Flow

Here's a dilemma: You are an aspiring screenwriter struggling to format your script correctly. You have a lot to say and little time in which to say it. You can't be terse or verbose; you must land somewhere in between. To top these requirements off, you want the script to smack with a unique style and flair. Now, how are you going to do all that?

In a first draft, your primary objective is to get the information onto the page. You can trim, twist, and tweak it into a work of art later, but for now, craft one element at a time with an eye toward a story. What's happening, who's it happening to, why is it important, and how efficiently can you let an audience know these things? The format directs your information to its proper location on the page, and every location has a distinct set of tasks.

Cinematic description

Screenwriting is a visual art, so visual description makes up more than half of every strong script. Screenplay description includes

- » The slug line
- » A description of each location
- » The choreography of characters in a scene
- » Any and all ensuing action



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The first line of every scene is called a *slug line* or a *header*. Slug lines guide readers through changes in time and locale.

Slug lines

Master slug lines are informative tags that appear at the beginning of every scene. They provide the following information in this order:

- » Whether a scene takes place inside or outside (INT./EXT.)
- » The scene's location
- » Whether it's day or night

A typical master slug line looks like this:

INT. AIRPORT TERMINAL — NIGHT

Subsidiary slug lines, also known as abbreviated slug lines, indicate that the action has switched to a different area of the same general location. Because time also remains consistent, subsidiary slug lines include only the new location. They may also be used to call attention to one important object in the scene. Because slug lines are important, they're always capitalized. They run from the left margin to the right and are generally one line in length.

Slug lines should be as standardized as possible. They're designed to quickly establish the general location and time of each shot. For this reason, slug lines are always capitalized and *interior* and *exterior* are always abbreviated (INT. and EXT.). You skip a space and provide a more detailed description of the action after the slug line. For example:

INT. AIRPORT TERMINAL — NIGHT

The terminal is all but deserted. An elderly MAN and a teenage GIRL slump on chairs at opposite ends of the space. He is asleep. She is amped up.

Notice that I'm also capitalizing MAN and GIRL here. Character names are always capitalized in cinematic description to emphasize their importance and so that readers imagine them as they read. If your action now switches to the check-in counter, you might follow this description with a subsidiary slug line.

THE CHECK-IN COUNTER

Two AGENTS wearily type information into the computer. One agent looks up, gives the girl the once-over, then returns to his work.

If he notices that she has a tattoo, another subsidiary slug line may read:

One agent looks up and gives the girl the once-over. His eyes linger on her shoulder and

HER TATTOO

of a dragon with a sword in its mouth. He then returns to his work.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This capitalized line suggests that the camera lingers on the image of that dragon. Perhaps it will be important later. Generally, slug lines require no more information than location and time. The following exceptions to this rule are called *exceptions* and should be used sparingly:

» **An establishing shot:** Establishing shots are designed to orient a reader to a new location. If my film begins during a poetry lecture in a high-school classroom and then jumps to the dining room of a wealthy estate, my audience will have no idea where that dining room is in relation to the school.

To solve this problem, I add an establishing shot of the outside of the estate and then move to the dining room. In this sort of a slug line, the word ESTABLISHING follows the DAY or NIGHT direction.

EXT. GEORGIAN MANSION — DAY — ESTABLISHING

- » **A stock shot:** Stock shots are images that will be pulled from previously filmed footage. They're clips from other movies, newsreels, documentaries, and so on that are now "in stock" at a film library, waiting to be reused. Skylines and historical landmarks are prime stock material, as are beach, woodland, or generic neighborhood shots. You format stock shots in the following way:

EXT. THE CHICAGO SKYLINE — DAY (STOCK)

- » **An indication of specific time, time passing, or season:** If your film takes place in 1885, you should include the year in the slug line. If your action spans several time frames or seasons, you may add that detail as well.

EXT. THE CHICAGO SKYLINE — DAY (WINTER)

EXT. PARIS — DAY (1885)

EXT. TIMES SQUARE — DAY (13 YEARS EARLIER)



REMEMBER

A reader will read these distinctions, but a movie audience knows only what it sees. Always follow a slug line with some description of the location that indicates how an audience might know that it's winter or 1885.



WARNING

Notice that I'm not including scene or act numbers here. Scene and act numbers are used only in outlines to help writers organize the scenes prior to writing the draft. Never include them in a working draft, as they distract a reader from your story. The director and cinematographer will number scenes for the shooting script in production.

Character introductions

Always capitalize a character's name when they first appear in the script. This layout indicates a new figure on the protagonist's or audience's horizon and focuses the attention, however briefly, on a new energy in the story. From that point on, only capitalize the character's name prior to their dialogue.

When you introduce a character, give a brief but telling description, and then plunge them into the action. For example:

MOLLY MALONE, a 30-something former beauty queen, strides confidently into the room.

I use all capital letters for Molly's full name this first time she's introduced, and then I type it normally throughout the ensuing text. If she first arrives as a mere figure or a silhouette, the initial description might read as follows:

The FIGURE of a woman stands in the doorway. Moonlight sparkles off her sequined form.

This is the first character description. When Molly moves into the scene, the description then reads:

The figure steps firmly into the room. It's MOLLY MALONE, a 30-something former beauty queen with the confidence of a bobcat and the claws to match.

I've capitalized both introductions, first the figure, and then Molly Malone, emphasizing the transition from the suggestion of a character to the character herself.

Here are a few more details to keep in mind when crafting character introductions:

» **Use full names for the character's initial introduction, and one part of the name thereafter.** My character's full name is Molly Malone. I let the reader know this when she enters, but thereafter, I refer to her as either "Molly" or "Malone" in both description and in dialogue. If your character's full name is Mr. Nelson, refer to him as "Nelson" for the rest of the text.

» **Allow incidental characters to remain incidental characters.** Your script may call for a waitress, a busboy, a nurse, a ticket agent, a clerk, and so on. These characters are functional roles and will return in your story sparingly, if at all. Therefore, their introduction need only be minimal. For example:

The WAITRESS, clearly a veteran server, brings him coffee and winks in passing.

Two ARMED GUARDS barrel past, shoving people out of their way as they charge after him.

The HOTEL CLERK checks the bill and glares at him before disappearing into the back room.

More description than this is distracting. It diverts attention from your main character and the scene's action. Capitalize incidental characters' titles, suggest an age or distinguishing characteristic if necessary, but don't linger on them. They're meant to fulfill a functional role and disappear.

» **Avoid using names of real actors.** You may imagine your main character with the charm of Idris Elba or the grace of Meryl Streep. You may imagine as much, but don't include those details in your description. Actors reading your script want to imagine themselves (who else?) in the role. They'll be discouraged at best and insulted at worst to see someone else's name on the part.

» **Avoid detailed description of age or physical characteristics unless pertinent to the story.** Consider this character description:

Sarah Smith, a 29-year-old, 5-foot-10-inch strawberry blonde, strolls into the office.

No look says 29 years old, so unless the script centers around her age, you'd do better to say "late 20s" or "pushing 30" here.

You're trying to capture the character's essence. I want a suggestion of age and type, yes, but more importantly, I want a peek at her fundamental nature. If her hair, eyes, height, weight, age, and so on help suggest that nature, include them. It's important, for example, that Erin Brockovich wears tight, revealing clothing. Her physique becomes an asset to her in the quest for information. However, if these details are unimportant to the story, including them simply limits you to actors with a certain physique. Why alienate talent unnecessarily?



TIP

Finally, avoid overly brief and overly long character descriptions. Here are two examples of awkward introductions:

Too brief:

Leslie Bell, a typist in her mid-20s, jogs through Central Park.

What does a typist look like, exactly? I'm not sure. This description provides information but fails to suggest a picture of the person in question. Also, I now have two totally different frames for this character in my mind—a typist and a jogger—yet neither suggests her personality.

Too long:

Leslie Bell, a short powerhouse in her mid-20s, with dimples and a persistent twinkle in her green eyes, sprints through Central Park in her purple Adidas sportswear with a water bottle in one hand and her iPhone in the other. She stares ahead, her gaze fixed on some unseen finish line, her brow furrowed in determination.



TIP

This example provides more details than a reader can absorb. Character descriptions should be short, no longer than two sentences if possible. Adjectives and adverbs are the enemies of clear writing. Does the running suit absolutely have to be purple, and must her eyes be green? Probably not. When in doubt, cut it out.

Here's a possible reworked version of the description:

Leslie Bell, a powerhouse of a woman in her mid-20s, sprints through Central Park, her eyes fixed ahead. A quick glance at her shoes reveals the soles are worn thin.

This rewrite may even be too long for some tastes. However, I've consolidated it to include the most telling details, those that suggest a person behind the physique.



REMEMBER

A capable introduction of a minor character offers the necessary information without detracting attention from more important players in the scene. On the other hand, a compelling main-character introduction shouts, "Here I am! Watch me!" and follows the character into action.

Location, choreography, and action

Most cinematic description is composed of single-spaced prose paragraphs that run from the left margin to the right. They're generally no more than three or four sentences in length, if that. Readers like to see as much white space as text, so reserve a separate paragraph for each shot. Double-space between these paragraphs. Doing so divides the action clearly on the page. For example:

INT. FAMILY ROOM — DAY

Two small GIRLS press their faces to the window and exhale. They giggle at the prints they've left on the glass. One draws a heart in the print, then slashes at it with her finger.

A WOMAN tiptoes up behind them, ready to pounce. The oldest girl spins around seconds before her hand reaches their shoulders.

When describing location, avoid including too many physical details. Close your eyes, envision the setting, and then describe any essentials that the camera will pick up. If the shot is of two children in their play room, I might need to see a trail of crayons leading from the door to where they sit, but I probably don't need to know exactly what color those crayons are.

The other type of description appears in the parenthetical portion of the script. Parentheticals are typed in lowercase letters and are offset by parentheses. They generally depict how a line should be said. For example:

SANDY

(softly — after a moment)

I don't think that's going to happen.

These descriptions are only necessary if nothing else in the scene suggests how a line should be read. Strong actors often discover the intent naturally.

Sound and special effects

Detail both sounds and special effects in the description of a scene and capitalize them. With sound cues, capitalize the sound of the effect — for example, the WHISTLE of a train, or the KNOCKING on a door. The capitalization is reserved for sounds made by outside or off-camera forces. Sounds made by characters in scene do not require capitalization.

Special effects are sometimes abbreviated FX or SPFX, but this term is generally reserved for shooting scripts (drafts that a director and cinematographer have added camera notes to). If you envision special effects in a scene, describe them so that the director can envision them, too. For example:

EXT. PARKING LOT — DAY

Without warning, the station wagon EXPLODES, spewing flames and debris onto nearby cars.



REMEMBER

All description follows the same basic rules as character introduction: Be clear, be compelling, and be concise.

Transitional directions

Transitional directions dictate when your film begins and ends; they convey how one scene moves into the next; and they help readers imagine dialogue that occurs over or outside of a scene.

Fade in

Screenplays usually begin with these words. They suggest the movement from darkness to an image on the screen. They're typed in all caps at the left margin followed by a double-space and the first slug line.

FADE IN:

COLLEGE LIBRARY — DAY

Fade out

These words usually end a screenplay. They're typed two spaces below the final line of the script, flush to the right margin. After FADE OUT, writers generally space down several lines and type THE END in the center of the page.

Henry and Sarah link arms and walk into the sunset.

FADE OUT.

THE END

V.O.

V.O. is shorthand for voice-over. This direction is used when the audience hears a character speak who's not in the scene. It's often used to underscore a scene with narration.

EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE — DAY

The ranch-style home is in desperate need of attention. Weeds obscure the front path, and the remaining shutters threaten to fall on passersby.

HENRY (V.O.)

I've always thought my neighbor's house would look better as a parking lot or a strip mall.

O.S. (or O.C.)

Shorthand for off-screen or off-camera, these abbreviations are used when a character speaks outside the camera's view, or when the audience hears a sound but doesn't see where it's coming from.

A door SLAMS (O.S.) then FOOTSTEPS hurry toward him.

Or:

SARAH (O.C.)

As usual, we want different things.

Remember, V.O., O.S. and O.C. are abbreviations to be placed after a character's name. Use the whole phrase (off-screen, off-camera, and voice-over) when utilizing them in description.

Cut to

This term was used to cut quickly between scenes. It appears at the bottom of a scene, to the right side.

Henry pulls Sarah close, and they begin to waltz.

CUT TO:

Dissolve to

This direction is used in place of the CUT TO when you want to suggest a slow transition from one scene to the next. You may dissolve to suggest the passage of time between one shot and another, or because you want the effect of one image fading into the next.

Continuation

When a scene or a speech is interrupted by a page break, type MORE in parentheses at the end of the last line on the first page, and then type CONT'D after the character's name on the next page.



TIP

Many of the preceding considerations are automatically formatted for you with screenwriting software. Knowing where these elements belong on the page is helpful, but you certainly can save time by using a computer to place them automatically. I cover several software options previously in this chapter, in the sections “Making your computer work for you” and “Creating a PDF.”

HENRY

I wish you'd thought of this sooner. It would have

(MORE)

-----page break-----

HENRY (CONT'D)

Saved us so much time if you had.

When a speaker is interrupted by an action, use a dash to suggest the interruption, type the action, and then type “continuing” in a parenthetical after the character's name when they start speaking again.

HENRY

I wish you'd thought of this sooner. It —

Sarah hands him the plane tickets and her purse.

HENRY

(continuing)

Would have saved us so much time.

You can also script that last line as:

HENRY (CONT'D)

Would have saved us so much time.

As with all creative elements, formatting takes time. Screenwriting is an art, and as every artist differs, so will every format a little. Notice I say, “a little”, though. Clear screenwriting format is vital to being taken seriously in the industry. The key rule to remember with presentation is this: If it doesn’t look right, it’s probably not right.

Camera concerns

You’re a writer; your job is to tell the story. The director and cinematographer will rewrite that story in a language designed for the camera. Therefore, your concern isn’t the camera or its terminology. In fact, technical jargon will distance a reader from the world of your story.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The script that you’re crafting is known as a *speculation (spec) script*, or the *reader’s script*, which is the draft designed to seduce a reader into seeing the film. If you’re writing something that no one is paying you to write, you’re “writing on spec.” Any technical encumbrances, such as camera angles and scene numbers, are removed to let the story emerge.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The *production script*, or the *shooting script*, is the director and/or cinematographer’s script. This draft occurs after the film has been slated for production, and it includes technical notations, such as scene numbers, camera angles, location details, and special effects.

That said, you may find it helpful to understand the camera and its associated terms so that you can visualize a scene and emphasize certain details within it. You can suggest virtually any angle or effect without using the technical term.

For example, if Henry proposes to Sarah in the scene and you want a close-up of the engagement ring, you might write the scene in one of two ways:

Henry pulls a small box from his coat pocket. He opens it to reveal a large

DIAMOND RING

He takes Sarah’s hand and slips the ring on her finger.

Or:

Henry pulls a small box from his coat pocket and opens the lid. Inside the box is a large diamond ring. It sparkles in the light.

He takes Sarah's hand and slips the ring on her finger.

In both cases, the description suggests a close-up of the ring, without jarring the reader with terminology. A director would have to linger for a second on the ring itself, prior to the shot where Henry slips the ring on her finger. Without the close-up indication, the description would read

Henry pulls a box from his coat pocket and opens the lid. He removes a ring from the box and slips it on Sarah's finger.

Whenever possible, imply the necessary camera angle. Doing so not only keeps a reader locked into your story but also hones your writing skills.



WARNING

The following sections cover some basic camera directions, but be warned: I include these terms only as an overview of possible effects. I strongly advise you not to include the technical jargon in the reader's script. It distracts a reader's attention away from your story and annoys directors and cinematographers who may envision a shot differently than you do. So craft description that conveys the effect you want without calling attention to the camera itself.

Intercut

This direction indicates that two scenes are occurring simultaneously in separate locations. This term appears in all caps as the slug line or in the description. See the following examples:

INTERCUTTING:

Sarah tries on several wedding veils, Henry teaches himself to knot his own tie.

Or:

INTERCUT: SARAH AND HENRY

The scene INTERCUTS between Sarah trying on wedding veils and Henry learning to knot his own tie.

You would then describe individual moments of each scene without needing a subsidiary slug line to bounce between them.

Insert

A writer uses this direction to highlight an object in the scene or include a detail that's outside the scene but important to it. To complete an insert, do one of three things: Return to the dialogue, switch locations with a new slug line, or type **BACK TO SCENE** at the end.

Henry removes a photograph of him and Sarah from his office bulletin board.

INSERT — PHOTOGRAPH

Small scissors remove Sarah from the image.

BACK TO SCENE:

Series of shots versus Montage

The series of shots or montage techniques abridge action sequences involving a main character that span a period of time, usually without dialogue. The terms are often used interchangeably, but the techniques differ as follows:

- » **Series of shots:** This technique tells a story spanning a short amount of time. A series of shots conveys one event broken into a series of images.
- » **Montage:** This technique tells a story spanning a longer amount of time. A montage often conveys ideas in story-form (such as a child growing up, two people falling in love, or soldiers preparing for battle).

To indicate whether you imagine a series of shots or a montage, the same formatting rules apply. Type **SERIES OF SHOTS** or **MONTAGE** in place of a slug line, double-space, and then list a short description of each shot. Double-space between each description. You may assign a letter to each shot, but many screenwriters opt not to. End the series by typing **END SERIES OF SHOTS** or **END MONTAGE**. Here's an example of a series of shots conveying Henry and Sarah's first "date" followed by a montage showcasing the first era of Henry and Sarah's life together.

SERIES OF SHOTS

A) Henry sits alone at a reunion table, nursing a drink.

B) Sarah enters with her friends, nervously glancing around the room.

C) Henry eagerly waves at her to join him, spilling his drink in the process.

D) Sarah brings Henry a new drink, and they share a smile.

E) Sarah and Henry spin around the dance floor, awkward but having fun.

F) Sarah and Henry break from a huddled conversation to discover they're the only people left at the reunion.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

MONTAGE

A) Sarah and Henry notice each other across a reunion dance floor.

B) Sarah and Henry dance together at their wedding.

C) Sarah lies in a hospital bed, watching Henry cradle their newborn baby.

END MONTAGE

Notice that both techniques tell stories with a distinct beginning, middle, and end, and dramatize a passage of time. These moments can also be scripted traditionally, as individual scenes with slug lines, but writers generally prefer a series of scenes or montage because they suggest a certain pace.

Close-up or Close on

A *close-up* or *close on* is a shot that emphasizes a detail in a scene. It's often abbreviated to CU or CO in shooting scripts, as follows:

CU — IMMENSE DIAMOND RING

Angle on

This shot suggests another view of a previous shot. Here's an example:

ANGLE ON Sarah staring down at the ring.

POV

Shorthand for *point of view*, this direction implies that the scene is being viewed from another character's perspective. You must identify whose point of view it is and what exactly that person sees. If the POV alternates within a scene, employ the term REVERSE POV.

SARAH'S POV

Henry stares at her across the table, then pushes an envelope her way.

HENRY

He wants you to have this.

REVERSE POV

Sarah takes the letter and rips it in half.

SARAH

As usual, we want different things.

For strong examples of POVs, watch horror films. They're commonly used when a killer is pursuing their next victim.

Split screen

This shot indicates two subjects in different locations on-screen simultaneously. *When Harry Met Sally* uses this shot when the protagonists share a phone conversation from separate bedrooms.

Sally dials Harry's number.

SPLIT SCREEN

Harry and Sally lie in their beds watching the same film on TV.

The split-screen shot conveys a distinct film style and is somewhat uncommon.

Super

Shorthand for *superimpose*, this term is used if another element is being superimposed over the action of a scene. A super is often used to show dates, locations, or translation texts.

The yacht barrels toward the shore. The mainland looms ahead.

SUPER — MARSEILLES 1921

All these examples convey a specific camera effect, but in doing so they remind readers that they're reading a screenplay. For example, seeing the POV abbreviation reminds us that we're reading a film and takes us out of the story for a moment. You can convey that point of view is important to a scene by simply stating who's observing the moment. If you tell us your protagonist is watching two children play in the park, a director knows how to film that point of view and a reader will imagine it as you intend. It definitely helps to know what the camera is capable of, but your goal is to trap readers in the story, so find creative ways to suggest the effect you want, without relying on technical terms.

Sample Scenes

The format becomes clear when you see it on the page. I've included samples of screenplays in this book's appendix. Hopefully, they'll help clarify the spacing and several key formatting components for each genre. You can also find screenplays online or at your local library or bookstore. I've included websites where you can find reader's drafts of screenplays in the appendix as well. The more you read, the more ingrained the format will become.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Crafting a dynamite first image
- » Establishing your story's world
- » Structuring your action
- » Working toward a resolution
- » Structuring your subplots
- » Choosing the right structure for your story

Chapter **16**

Putting It Together: Structuring Your First Draft

Every writer reaches a point where the cup of possibilities runneth over. The head spins with evocative locations, fleeting conversations, feats of strength and daring, impossible odds, side-splitting witticisms, moments of agony, and, above all, hope. You can't possibly absorb any more. And what do you have to show for it? An outline, a treatment, maybe a pile of notes.

At this stage of the writing process, you're like a field guide. You have a destination in mind and a troupe of individuals (otherwise known as your audience) behind you, ready to follow your every move. You have a sense of what you'll encounter along the way, and you know why it's important to try and make it out with everyone intact. You're looking for the road map. In screenwriting terms, you're looking for the *structure*. In this chapter, I focus on one structure in particular — the three-act structure. It is the most common, and therefore, the most useful structure — designed to help you reach your destination. I also discuss a few variations on the three-act structure, for stories that don't quite fit that mold.

Traversing the Three-Act Structure

Every great story is composed of three principal segments: a beginning, middle, and ending. In screenwriting, those segments are known as Act I, Act II, and Act III. Without a strong opening, no one wants to watch your film. Without a strong middle, the audience will lose interest partway through it. Without a strong ending, well, that's like the radio cutting out on the last line of your favorite song. The audience leaves unresolved — confused at best, angry at worst.



REMEMBER

Scene and act numbers are only used in outlines to help writers organize the scenes prior to writing the draft. Never include them in a working draft, as they distract a reader from your story. The director and cinematographer will number scenes for the shooting script in production. I talk about these rules in greater detail in Chapter 15.

The lengths of each act may differ film to film. As movies are getting longer, so are their acts. Traditionally, though, feature films run from 90 to 120 pages in length, which is roughly two hours of screen time. Each act in a 120-page script is broken down into the following number of pages:

- » **Act I:** Pages 1–30 (pages 1–23 in a 95-page script)
- » **Act II:** Pages 31–90 (pages 24–70 in a 95-page script)
- » **Act III:** Pages 91–120 (pages 71–95 in a 95-page script)

How important are these divisions? There are variations to be sure, but if you're a new writer, you should try to stick to industry standards for the first few scripts you craft. Why? The most important reason is perhaps only obvious after you complete a first draft. The three-act structure is a strong organization of text. Stories seem to fall into it naturally, and they were falling into it well before Aristotle publicly analyzed the structure's worth in 320 B.C. (more on Aristotle's *Poetics* in Chapter 5). Like any craft, if you understand the basic rules of this structure, you'll be better equipped to alter them when necessary, later on.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Many agencies and film companies give new scripts what's known as the *five-and-dime treatment*. They read the first five pages of your script and the last ten and determine its worth from there. If you've followed the three-act structure, which calls for a bang-up opening and a swift conclusion, you may just make the cut. If a producer notices that your script is less than 90 pages long, they may assume that your story doesn't have enough punch to make a feature film. If they notice that it's more than 120 pages, they may doubt your ability to streamline action. Your best bet is to fall somewhere in between until they know and trust your work.

The three-act structure isn't a formula; it's a guide. It won't write your film for you or hinder your creativity, but it does provide a solid foundation on which to build. Each act traditionally contains several landmark moments. By *landmark*, I mean events that help structure the action or pivotal moments in your story. Again, these landmarks are simply suggestions for how to structure your piece. They're not meant to provide a formula. In fact, writers are increasingly crafting their stories using a five-act or an eight-sequence structure, which are variations I cover later in this chapter.

Act I: Introductions

Every act in the three-act structure has a set of tasks to accomplish. The first act serves as your audience's introduction to the entire world of the script — people, places, time frame, genre. Remember that your audience begins in darkness. In their advance toward some new awareness, they're not unlike visitors to a foreign country. You need to orient them fairly quickly to the story that's about to unfold. The first act is all about setup.

Your opening moments



TIP

If I could offer you one piece of advice concerning your first act, it would be this: Begin with an image. Stories that begin with anything else, voices in darkness or immediate dialogue, for example, are often difficult to absorb. A strong opening image can convey backdrop, character, and theme in seconds. For example, *Kill Bill* opens with a bride, badly beaten, clawing her way across the chapel full of dead wedding guests. This image and the film's title pit good against evil from the start.

The eye picks up details much more quickly than the ear, and nothing's more disconcerting than staring at talking heads. In a way, you haven't earned the right to open verbally. As someone in the audience, I don't yet know the people speaking; I haven't decided whether they're interesting enough to pursue. Let me watch them for a bit and make some assumptions before you let them talk my ear off. Doing so keeps me actively involved in guessing what your story will be.

Also, everything that happens in the first moments of a film is important. If you provide vital information verbally, I'm likely to miss it in my quest to appraise the environment visually. There are, of course, successful exceptions to this rule, but generally speaking, people come to the movies to see pictures in motion. Why begin with anything else?

The first fifteen pages

If your opening image grabs my attention, you have roughly 15 pages after that opening to convince me that your film is worth watching. Don't believe me? The next time you go to a movie, ask yourself how you feel about it after the first ten minutes. If you're bored or confused, you won't trust what comes next. If you're riveted, you'll expect something exciting to occur.

The first 15 pages offer an initial criterion on which to judge the ensuing story. They should provide just enough information to establish a clear world without giving away too much of the plot, and they should create enough mystery to keep me wondering what's in store. Your first 15 pages should accomplish the following tasks:

- » Introduce the main characters and establish their primary intentions
- » Establish the primary environments
- » Convey a distinct mood or atmosphere
- » Establish the time period
- » Illustrate a pattern of behavior, a routine, or way of life
- » Provide any relevant *backstory* (events which transpired before the film began)
- » Introduce the central conflict and antagonist

If you haven't already settled on an ending to your script, now is the time to do so. If you don't know where the script is going, how will you determine which pieces of information to highlight at the beginning?



REMEMBER

Everything that happens now is a setup for what comes next. So you need to know what comes next. No one expects you to plan every moment of the action in advance, but you should know what moment the story is driving toward.

Some films reveal the villain right away. The opening scenes of *No Country For Old Men* reveal the character Anton Chigurh to be a ruthless sociopath. By contrast, the murderer in *Ghost* seems to be a nice guy until well after the protagonist is killed, and we spend most of *Knives Out* waiting to discover who the true antagonist really is. When you reveal the antagonist is up to you; you don't have to do so in the first 15 pages. However, if you wait much longer, you risk a restless audience.



The inciting incident

The *inciting incident*, also known as the *catalyst*, marks the film's first turning point. It tilts the story from order to chaos, from complacency to combat. It's the point of no return. In this moment, you answer three questions:

- » What do your characters want?
- » Why do they want it now?
- » What might prevent them from getting it?

Together, these queries make up the film's *premise*, or what it's ultimately about. In *Lord of the Rings*, one hobbit wants to rid Middle Earth of an evil force. The Dark Lord and human greed stand in his way. In both *Good Will Hunting* and *Da 5 Bloods*, protagonists struggle to confront their tortuous past. Personal demons and past trauma stand in their way. Quieter films have equally clear inciting incidents. For example, in *Lady Bird*, the protagonist applies for an elite university despite knowing that it will throw her family into emotional and financial turmoil. A strong premise clearly defines a need, a reason for that need, and an impediment. As soon as an audience senses these details, you can pose the central question:

Will your protagonist(s) succeed?

If the answer is yes, you may have a happy ending; if it's no, a tragedy is in the works. Your inciting incident isn't complete until you pose this question. Until then, audiences wait. They wait for action; they wait for intent; they wait to be told what they're waiting for.

An inciting incident generally occurs in one of the following ways:

- » An action plunges the characters into conflict.
- » A piece of critical information arrives.
- » A sequence of small events prepares an audience for the story.

In *Pulp Fiction*, a young couple robs a diner. In *Arrival*, a linguistics professor receives word that aliens have landed in Montana. That news flash launches their journey together. The film *Zorro* is an example of the third technique. Two brothers witness Zorro attempting to thwart an execution. They save his life in the process, and he rewards them with a silver medallion. Government troops then invade Zorro's house, kill his wife, abduct his child, and throw him in jail. Years pass before he escapes. Meanwhile, the brothers, now grown up, also flee government soldiers. When one of them is killed, the other would risk his life avenging the death, if he wasn't first intercepted by (who else?) Zorro. These events prepare

an audience for the real story, which involves the training of a new masked hero. This preparation takes longer than 15 pages, but the result is the same.

Plot point one



Plot point one is the first big turning point in your script. It occurs at the end of the first act, approximately 27–30 pages into the action, and propels an audience into Act II. It must do the following things:

- » Push the action in a new direction
- » Force the protagonist to make a choice and take a risk
- » Raise the central question for the first or second time
- » Raise the stakes

Pivotal events like plot point one are usually surprises. Audiences know that something grand will happen eventually. They might even know what the result of that event will be. But don't allow them to guess the details of the event itself or you'll spoil the surprise. *Star Wars* audiences know that Luke Skywalker will eventually be called away from the safety of his family and into training. They may also guess that, as a result, he will have to fight Darth Vader, but they don't know exactly how these proceedings will transpire. Stories that hint too thoroughly at upcoming events become predictable and less exciting to watch.

In the Australian horror film *Babadook*, a young widow witnesses her only son's behavior become erratic as he shirks sleep to enact violent battles with an imaginary monster. At the end of the first act, a pop-up book titled *Mister Babadook* appears on their doorstep. It depicts a tall, taloned man who torments people once they realize he exists. We end the first act wondering if the mother is strong enough to protect them from this supernatural threat. The first plot point may be as shocking as the death of a loved one, as mysterious as the arrival of a wrapped parcel, or as gentle as the touch of a hand. All three actions have the power to launch a great story.

Act II: Salting the Wound

If Act I ends by asking, "What does your protagonist want?" Act II continually begs the question, "What will they do to get it?" In many cases, Act II tests not only what your character will do, but also what your character will *endure*. Act II is like a video game with life or death odds. Each level pits the protagonist against

stronger resistance, be it outside forces or internal turmoil. The protagonist must defeat them all in order to succeed. Traditionally, these conflicts arrive more frequently as the story progresses, with the most difficult obstacle lying in wait until the end.



REMEMBER

Don't put the toughest obstacle first, or you'll have nowhere to go but down. Instead, script your obstacles to escalate in difficulty as the story unfolds. Don't forget that psychological turmoil can often be the most difficult obstacle to defeat.

Your job in Act II is to create a snowball effect with your action. One moment adds to the next and the next until the action barrels toward some culminating event. Harnessing the momentum so that you can steer it without slowing down is a constant challenge. Because Act II is twice as long as the first and final acts, writers commonly bemoan "second-act problems" as the task of keeping track of the various characters, their conflicts, and their goals becomes unwieldy. Here are a few checkpoints to help you manage the second-act madness:

- » Make the conflict personal.
- » Let the protagonist fail more than once.
- » Allow the antagonist to succeed, perhaps several times.
- » Teach the protagonist a new skill.
- » Test the protagonist's current abilities and/or expertise.
- » Further explore the subplot.

Think about how each of those points affects the action. First, your protagonist needs a personal stake in the conflict, or they might jump ship halfway through. Zorro and his apprentice, for example, desire revenge for the murder of their loved ones. The young mother in *Babadook* must protect her son from a taloned predator. Theirs are highly personal fights.

Next, the failures of your protagonist create extraordinary odds, especially if the antagonist thrives during this time. Audiences can't be sure the protagonist will prevail; they can only hope for this. Both Zorro and his apprentice fail to protect their loved ones. The mother in *Babadook* becomes monstrous herself. These characters err in several ways throughout the film, and these failures prove them capable of personal defeat. Depending on the film's genre, we may assume a happy ending, but these failures suggest there's no guarantee.

Finally, human beings are not perfect; neither is your protagonist. Protagonists who learn from their mistakes and who acquire new skills to help them succeed are that much more human. If they triumph despite startling odds, using abilities

they have newly acquired, you've crafted an inspiring tale that audiences can relate to. Zorro's apprentice doesn't become the masked avenger until he's undergone rigorous training. He has natural talents that help guide him, but he must also acquire new skills before he can succeed.

The second act is often dedicated to raising the stakes in one or all of these ways. These points strengthen your script's conflict and make the protagonist's success that much more important.

Know where the action is

Even if your second act boasts all the items I list in the preceding section, its structure still may elude you. Here's where the formula for action comes in handy: Actions cause other actions to occur. Notice that I'm not saying that action causes reaction. It might, of course. If a son does something to make his mother cry, then his action has caused a reaction. However, her crying may not lead to anything else. If that's the case, it's a logical but inactive choice. If his mother's tears cause the son to become further enraged and do something reckless, then the choice to have the mother cry becomes an action. Try structuring your plot with the following techniques in mind.

Create scenes that result in other scenes

When you're overwhelmed with the multiple plotlines of Act II, it may help to strictly follow the rules of action. That means structuring each action so that it causes not only a future scene but the next scene. Here's a sequence from the second act of *The Untouchables*:

1. Eliot Ness successfully raids Al Capone's illegal liquor warehouse.
2. Capone sends him a bribe to stop the raids.
3. Ness publicly refuses the bribe.
4. Capone's thugs threaten Ness's family.
5. Ness relocates his family and retaliates with another successful raid.
6. In this raid, he confiscates Capone's financial records.
7. His accountant pursues Capone for income-tax evasion.
8. Capone has the accountant killed.

The action in this second act is tight; every scene sparks the next. The cause and effect relationship holds the act together, refusing to let it stray into unimportant events. You can do this as well. The trick is to create action that's so poignant, so

shocking, so compelling, or so revealing that it immediately sparks something new to occur.

Create strong impediments



TECHNICAL
STUFF

An *impediment*, or a *roadblock*, is an unforeseeable event that forces the protagonist to switch tactics or formulate another plan. Suppose that your main character spends their entire journey searching for one corner of a treasure map. If they find the person with the map but that person doesn't speak English, that's an impediment. If that person swallows the map in the protagonist's struggle to obtain it, that's another impediment. In the first example, the hero needs a new tactic. In the second, they need a new plan.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Tactics refer to the specific methods that a character employs to reach a desired end. They're always actions—preferably strong actions—and they're most powerful when protagonists attempt more than one. Seduction, bribery, bartering, guilt, pleas, tricks, and threats are among the most common tactics humans use to get what they want.

Impediments or “roadblocks” force the character to make a different choice and act upon it, often immediately. By seeing what choice the characters make, the audience gets an opportunity to glimpse their true nature. What lengths will they go to, how quickly do they think, what skills can they muster?



TIP

Be sure to let your protagonists find the answer and choose the new route themselves. Don't let them become passive in the action or contrive an easy answer for them. If your characters are running from an army of opponents, let them disguise, dig, fight, or swing themselves out of harm's way. You could simply toss them a hiding place, but where's the fun in that?

Plant future conflicts



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Plants are conflicts that you foreshadow in an early scene and bring to fruition later. The audience anticipates that they'll be a problem eventually, and your job is to make that moment arrive. The age-old adage is that if you reveal a gun in Act I, you best use it by Act III. Similarly, if your character confesses a fear or a weakness early on, they should be forced to confront it later. If your character is constantly giving up their own activities to help their family, as Ruby does in *Coda*, chances are an opportunity will eventually arise that they can't pass up. Indiana Jones makes his fear of snakes known right away, yet later he must confront what? You guessed it. A cave full of snakes.

If you plant the potential for these conflicts in the first act, let them pay off in the second. Or, plant them early in Act II and let them pay off at the end. If your audience watches for them, you've created dramatic tension. If it forgets about them, they're in for a satisfactory reminder.

The about-face

Much like the military command, an *about-face* is an abrupt and complete turn-around in the action. The turnaround, also known as a *reversal*, may be physical or emotional in nature. If your characters begin as rivals, as they do initially in *Love and Basketball*, they'll be allies (or lovers) by the end. If your female character struggles to trust men, as Cassie does in *Promising Young Woman*, she'll meet a man who gains her trust eventually. The about-face is as exciting as a breakthrough. Both moments propel the characters into a new understanding and an opposite path.



TIP

Use this technique sparingly so that it doesn't lose its punch, but when the opportunity for an about-face arises, take it. Audiences love the surprise.

The midpoint

There is one more event that can help structure Act II — the creation of a *midpoint*. Can you guess where this turning point lands? If you said halfway through the script (around page 60 in a 120-page screenplay, 47 in a 95-page screenplay), you guessed correctly. More importantly, this event divides the second act in half, providing much-needed structure in a portion of your story that's so immense.

In *When Harry Met Sally*, for example, the protagonists sleep together. They don't mean to; it just happens, and the action reverses from there. In *Parasite*, the first half of the film is spent watching one family steal each servant's position in a wealthy household. The midpoint occurs when one of those servants returns and upends their plans.

Not every script has a midpoint; some stories don't require one. How do you know if yours does? If your protagonist's motivation changes halfway through, or if you plan to reveal a big secret or jump locations or time frames partway through, a midpoint might make sense. Otherwise, build your action consistently toward the next major plot point at the end of Act II.

Plot point two

Plot point two occurs at the end of the second act, roughly around page 80 in a 120-page script and page 70 in a 95-page script. It mimics the tasks of the first plot point: It broaches the central question again, propels the action in a new direction, raises the stakes, and forces a choice that involves risk. However, at its conclusion, you will do two things:

- » Remind the audience of a ticking clock
- » Either lift the protagonist's spirits or crush the protagonist's will

In *Speed*, the villain reminds the protagonists (and therefore the audience) that their time on the bus is running out. In the historical drama, *Selma*, civil rights activists, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are attacked by state troopers as they march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge. The attack is televised, and the negative publicity throws the future of the march into question. The attack also makes the activists more determined than ever to succeed.

Act III: The Final Frontier

Act III begins around page 90 in a 120-page script (page 70 in a 95-page script) and runs for 20 to 30 minutes, although because of its fast pace, it often seems like less. At this point, you've raised the central question, "Will my protagonist succeed?" several times. Why? Your entire film revolves around the quest for an answer. Act III provides that answer.

At the beginning of Act III, your protagonist either faces the upward hike or the downward sprint to the most gripping moment in the script. To push them toward this last lap, one of the following things generally happens:

- » **The protagonist abandons hope and must be inspired back to action.** In *Juno*, a young girl watches the couple she's chosen to raise her baby dissolve their marriage. She has to re-imagine the future she planned for her child before she's prepared to bring it into the world.
- » **The protagonist makes a breakthrough discovery.** The protagonist in *Get Out* discovers that his girlfriend and her family harbor a malevolent secret.
- » **The protagonist acquires a final necessary skill.** Ralph Macchio's character gains the life lessons necessary to bolster his newfound karate skills in *The Karate Kid*.
- » **The villain forces the hero into combat.** In *Rear Window*, the villain discovers that he's being watched and brings the fight to Jimmy Stewart's apartment.
- » **The protagonist overcomes an internal obstacle that enables them to fight a physical antagonist.** In *Eighth Grade*, the heroine overcomes her anxiety and confronts her school nemesis.

Shortly after Act III begins, the protagonist has to make the choice to continue forward. It may be a reluctant choice, but it nevertheless pushes them to pursue one last chance for success.

The climax



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The *climax* is your script's final battlefield. It represents the most intense and, generally, the grandest scene of the film in which the protagonist makes one last attempt at achieving their goal.

There's a subtle irony surrounding your story's climax. Your entire plot moves toward this point in one sense or another. It's the most shocking, devastating, hysterical, or frightening scene in the film. And how long does it last? A few minutes at most. The climax, which begins around page 110 (or 85 in a shorter script) usually lasts about five to ten pages and is followed by an even faster resolution. Why build 100 pages to such a short burst of action? There's a saying, "Life's a journey, not a destination." That saying's true of film life as well. *You've* had your eye on this final battle, but your film is really about how you got there.



TIP

Keep these points in mind when crafting your climax:

- » Your character should be an active participant.
- » Your villain should be equally formidable.
- » Something personal is now at stake.
- » There should be little time to think.
- » Something unexpected should occur.
- » Your character should use some acquired skill in their attempt to succeed.
- » You should answer the central question, which for most stories is, "Will your protagonist succeed in achieving their goal?"



REMEMBER

Don't let life happen to your protagonist; let them happen to life. Keep the pace fast and create a few surprises, impediments, or miscalculations — anything to force the characters to think on their feet. And by all means, force them to confront the central conflict. If your character succeeds, marvelous. If they fail, so be it. But give your audience its well-deserved conclusion.

The resolution

The key words for the final one to ten pages are fast, fast, and fast. You've illustrated the most dramatic scene, and your character's solved the problem or been defeated by it. Don't linger too long thereafter. A slick resolution offers just enough time for an audience to absorb the final outcome without getting ahead of it. In those few pages, the action may

- » Suggest a future life for the protagonist
- » Illustrate the repercussions of the climax
- » Establish any changes in the protagonist and their social or physical environment
- » Suggest a just or an unjust world

The resolution tackles the question, "So what?" What sort of world have you led your audience to, and was it worth the journey? Ideally, the answer is yes, it was well worth the journey.

A Note on Subplots

Often, writers will pitch an idea based on some theme that they're enamored with only to realize that there's little in the idea to generate a plot. In fact, themes don't make great foundations for a story; they tend to produce theoretical discussions in place of goal-oriented action. Yet every story needs a theme. For this reason, most screenwriters rely on subplots to carry their theme.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Subplots are plots involving supporting characters included to provide depth and dimension. Movies without them tend to be dull and/or self-indulgent. Supporting characters provide new outlooks, differing opinions, and alternate ways of life. They often bolster the main character's confidence, provide necessary tutelage, or sharpen the protagonist's personal beliefs by disagreeing with them or pointing out their blind spots. In some cases, subplots arise between protagonists.

In crafting your subplot, follow the three-act structure of the main storyline. In the following list, I provide a series of questions for you to answer, and I use Inigo Montoya's subplot from *The Princess Bride* as an example of each:

- » **What setup does your subplot require?** In *The Princess Bride*, the audience needs to meet the swashbuckling Inigo Montoya and learn about his lifelong quest to avenge his father's death.

- » **What is your subplot's central question?** In this case, the subplot's question is similar to that of the main plot: Will the characters achieve their destiny or be destroyed by the effort?
- » **What event launches the action?** Inigo is hired as an assassin and ordered to kill the protagonist. That plot is thwarted when the two become friends and the protagonist pledges to help Inigo seek revenge.
- » **What obstacles do the supporting characters endure?** The first obstacle lies in tracking down the six-fingered man who killed Inigo's father. After that, most of the obstacles are external (his foe is a formidable fighter guarded by soldiers, and Inigo's allies are temporarily incapacitated). However, a few obstacles are internal (he gives up hope and doubts his own fighting prowess).
- » **How do they answer the central question?** This is a romantic comedy, so good prevails over evil, and the protagonists ride off into the sunset.

However you craft your subplots, make sure that they do the following:

- » Require their own setup, turning points, climax, and resolution
- » Offer the protagonists a chance to breathe, confess, love, rage, dream, and so on
- » Criss-cross the main plotline at pivotal moments
- » Express the story's theme
- » Offer opportunities to witness changes in the protagonist

Allow the supporting characters to be as strong and vibrant as possible, but make sure that the protagonists match that vitality in some way.

Finally, remember that your supporting characters don't know that they're part of a subplot. Craft them as if they were main characters and allow them to be unwilling, skeptical, and unkind should the situation call for it. Otherwise, they become pawns, fulfilling a role that you've contrived for them. They become punching bags or sounding boards for the main characters, both of which are dull and unrealistic options. They're an integral part of the story. Let them be cruel or supportive, but above all, let them be complete.



STRUCTURING A FAIRY TALE

Because restructuring an existing story is less intimidating than structuring your own, I include a project here that lets you do just that. See whether you can pinpoint the three-act elements in some of your favorite fairy tales. The following elements lie somewhere between “once upon a time” and “happily ever after”: the setup, the inciting incident, the central question, plot point one, the midpoint, plot point two, the climax, and the resolution.

I’ve broken down *Jack and the Beanstalk* as an example.

Act I

The setup: Jack and his mother are so poor that she instructs him to sell their last cow for money or food.

The inciting incident: Jack meets a man who claims he has magic beans, and Jack trades the cow for those beans instead of money or food.

The central question: Will Jack find a way to provide for his family?

Plot point one: Enraged that Jack has returned empty-handed, his mother tosses the beans out the window. They grow into a beanstalk overnight.

Act II

Midpoint: After climbing the beanstalk and discovering the giant’s castle, Jack successfully steals the giant’s golden egg. This success emboldens Jack to return to the castle after a bag of gold.

Plot point two: Jack tries to steal a magic harp, but it sings a warning, and the giant wakes up.

Act III

The climax: The giant chases Jack down the beanstalk. Jack chops the beanstalk down with an ax.

The resolution: The giant perishes in the fall. Jack and his mother live a prosperous life thereafter, and (hopefully) Jack has learned a life lesson about theft.

Now, you try it with a fairy tale you’re familiar with. I recommend *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, or *The Princess and the Pea*, but if you don’t know these stories well, just pick whatever fairy tale you like best.

Variations on the Routine

While the three-act structure is the foundation of most screenplays, it's by no means the only approach to cinematic storytelling. The following two story structures are popular refinements of the three-act structure. They break your story into essential turning points, and they might prove useful if you find the three-act structure a little too broad.

The five-act structure

The five-act structure is often attributed to the German playwright and novelist, Gustav Freytag, who developed a narrative “pyramid” made up of what he saw as the five key stages of a story. It's known as *Freytag's Pyramid*, after the shape it most resembles when you graph it. The five key stages are

Introduction: The first 20–30 pages in which you establish

- » The setting and characters
- » The exposition
- » The conflict (the inciting incident)

Rising Movement: The next 50–60 pages in which

- » It becomes more important that the protagonist succeeds (raising the stakes)
- » The antagonist grows stronger
- » A possible but often ill-fated solution to the conflict appears (a midpoint)
- » The obstacle becomes more daunting or more obstacles appear
- » The protagonist's moral compass or system of beliefs is challenged

Climax: The next 5–10 pages in which

- » The plot and the subplot collide
- » The menace or magnitude of the conflict threatens to overpower the protagonist
- » The story's outcome is thrown into doubt
- » The protagonist confronts the central conflict in a way that cannot be undone

Falling Action: The next 10–15 pages in which

- » The characters emerge from the conflict transformed
- » The characters attempt to re-enter their world in this transformed state
- » The characters' world accepts or rejects them (or they accept or reject their world)

Resolution: The final 5–10 pages in which

- » The characters discover why their transformation matters
- » The characters discover that their lives are better or worse than when their journey began

The eight-sequence structure

The eight-sequence structure hails from a time in movie history when celluloid film was played on projector reels. Those reels had to be changed every 12 to 15 minutes, which roughly breaks down into eight reels of film. Because audiences became irritated every time a reel was changed, screenwriters began introducing cliffhangers at the end of each one — and thus the eight-sequence structure was born.

This form easily fits into the three-act structure, in which Act I is two sequences long, Act II is four sequences long, and Act III is two sequences long. The form can also challenge those constraints, however, so it offers you more storytelling freedom.

The eight sequences are roughly 10–20 pages long and break down in this way:

- » **Sequence 1:** An opening image or action that excites the viewer (the “hook”) followed by an introduction of the character, the setting, and the exposition. Sequence 1 ends when the conflict is introduced (the inciting incident).
- » **Sequence 2:** The protagonist struggles to return to their “normal” way of life but fails and is thrown into a worse situation. The story’s thematic question is introduced in this sequence. That question might be plot-based, as in *Jaws* — “Who will win? Man or beast?” Or that question might be thematic, as in *Parasite* — “Do the ends justify the means when survival is at stake?”
- » **Sequence 3:** The protagonist is now locked into the conflict and must confront it. They try to solve it and a potential solution arises.
- » **Sequence 4:** That solution fails and a new obstacle presents itself. The protagonist becomes more desperate to succeed and attempts one or two more solutions to no avail. Sequence 4 ends with a crisis culminating in a revelation or a reversal of fortune (the midpoint).

- » **Sequence 5:** If your story runs out of steam, it will most likely be here. Tension mounted during Sequence 4 so it can falter a bit here as the protagonist tackles the outcome of that crisis. To combat that lag, it's helpful to introduce new characters or opportunities or let the subplot take over, especially if that subplot makes the protagonist's life more difficult.
- » **Sequence 6:** In traditional structure, this sequence culminates in the film's climax. A new crisis develops or the protagonist exhausts all reasonable options to solve the conflict. Either way, the protagonist must confront the central dramatic question. Viewers leave this sequence unsure whether the protagonist will succeed or fail in their new course of action.
- » **Sequence 7:** The decision made by the protagonist is proven to have flaws. A new tension emerges, whether it's a twist in the plot or a personal realization. The protagonist must adjust accordingly.
- » **Sequence 8:** The protagonist succeeds in overcoming the primary obstacle/ antagonist or they fail and emerge with a newfound awareness of their place in the world. The action of this sequence often recalls that of Sequence 1, as the characters and the audience discover what's changed and why that change matters.



TIP

So how do you know which structure is right for you? Unfortunately, it isn't always clear when you begin writing, and there are many variations on all three of these routines. Often the structure needs to be adjusted as your story unfolds. That said, consider these suggestions:

- » The *three-act structure* is particularly useful for films that move steadily toward a final confrontation or battle. Those stories involve a clear setup, confrontation, and resolution, which is why so many quest or "hero's journey" films thrive in this form.
- » Stories that focus on transformation often fit better into the *five-act structure*. After the initial setup that's common in all three forms, you can think of the remaining four acts as places for physical, then emotional, then psychological, then spiritual transformation. Five-act screenplays are also useful if you have more than one protagonist, as there's more action to track in that case.
- » The *eight-sequence structure* works well for stories that feel like a series of arcs instead of one long arc. Each arc has its own rising emotion and/or action, and each complicates the protagonist's journey in some way. This structure is great for writers whose events don't adhere to the strict page count standards of the three-act form, or writers who manipulate time in nonlinear ways.

Regardless of how you structure your screenplay, I hope it's clear that the deciding factors in a dynamic story are *what* your characters want to achieve and *why* it's difficult for them to do so. If your protagonist needs something desperately enough and the challenges they face are formidable, an audience will engage regardless of exactly how (or at what page count) your story unfolds.

- » Completing a technical revision
- » Tracking character arcs
- » Reworking problematic scenes
- » Recruiting the perfect reader

Chapter **17**

Take Two: Rewriting Your Script

Ernest Hemingway once said that the first draft of anything is garbage. His language was more colorful than that, but the sentiment remains the same. Everyone's first draft requires a revision or two or ten. If your first draft is perfect, stop reading; you don't need this book. And don't tell any writers. Trust me: They don't want to know. For most people, the second draft is where the real writing gets done.

Writers have two modes in which they work: the right-brain mode and the left-brain mode. Consider them the wild horse and the rider, or the creator and the critic. However you envision them, one mode scribbles madly in bold color while the other erases until a recognizable form appears. The right brain produces the first draft, and the left brain manages the revision. This chapter concentrates on the latter: revision.

Downshifting between Drafts

Many writers tackle the first draft at a feverish pitch, churning it out in record time. Why the haste? They know that first drafts are about immersion, about pinning down the story without concerns about spelling, grammar, and possibly even

format. The first draft is the story-only draft. If you worry about perfection, you'll lose time, momentum, you may even drop the project before completing a draft at all. Perfection isn't possible yet. You don't know what the story's about, not really. You won't know where you've been until you get to the finish line and look back.

When you throw your office door open (or exit the coffee shop) and stride into the world, exhausted with a full draft on your desktop, then and only then can you worry about perfection. And even then, you'll hold off because the first thing that you're going to do is rest.

How to work when you're not working

How long should you stay away from your first draft? It's up to you, but I advise a two-week hiatus at the very least. If you're on a deadline, two weeks may be all you get, but if not, take more. Save the draft, move the file off your desktop, and forget about it. You have other things to do.

Some writers can't abide the thought of leaving their work. After all, it consumes your life for anywhere from three months to a year, and now I'm telling you to forget about it? Yes. You need to ignore that voice screaming at you to rework the draft right away. Here's why:

- » Your imagination needs time to replenish itself.
- » You need time to absorb the story's conclusion.
- » You're going to slash it eventually. The less consumed you are with the project, the less personal it will seem when you do.
- » Now's your chance to return to visual research.

Writing an original piece is like raising a child. By the time you complete a draft, you know it intimately, you respect what it has become, and you're likely to protect it at all costs. You need that sensitivity to fade. It's difficult to protect a work and critique it at the same time.

What do you do in the interim? You continue working, of course. But you work minus the computer, the late nights, and the aching wrists. You're going to be visually employed now. Here are a few suggestions for keeping your mind on your story and your hands off:

- » **Immerse yourself in the time frame.** Now's the time to revisit past research. Read novels written at the time your film takes place; find newspaper clippings, classified ads, and obituaries. Peruse the poetry and music of the

era. Do anything to keep the views and language of the time frame alive. If your story takes place in a futuristic or fabricated era, see whether you can dig up stories that suggest what you envision. Other writers and filmmakers have presented fictional worlds — are they similar or different from your own?

» **Return to other visual mediums.** Photographs, paintings, sculptures — these mediums helped craft your backstory, so return to them now. Different images will catch your eye, or you'll discover new details in an illustration you previously visited. Playwrights surround themselves with images that convey details in a play. What happens if you do the same? You'll be surprised what catches your eye after completing a first draft.

» **Visit appropriate locations.** Does much of your script take place in an office? Find one and spend some time there. With this kind of research, you're seeking out an environmental rhythm. The pace, the sounds, and the patterns of movement in Grand Central Station, for example, are considerably different from those in Central Park. If you can't visit a similar location, if your settings are obscure or fictitious, find places with a similar vibe. Maybe I can't visit a circus or an amusement park with ease, but I can sit at a McDonald's play area for a while or drive past a grade school at recess. It's possible to glean some of this information via online videos, but there's no substitute for the immersive experience.

» **Observe human behavior.** Does your protagonist fall in love? Are they cynical or guarded? What does that behavior look like? Observe a few people who share tendencies with your main characters. Which set of gestures, postures, and activities seem to match? Watch duos or groups of people and search for status. This search is about perception. If you *perceive* that the woman in the park dominates her romantic relationship, for all intents and purposes, she does. Why did you make that assumption, and how might you translate it to the page?

» **See lots of films.** Other films may help you clarify and further define your sense of structure. Dynamic films can provide useful examples, but even weak films do their part. Hopefully, you'll be able to pinpoint what you believe makes a story more or less compelling before you revisit your own.

» **Read books on the craft (or reread them).** The first read is about trying to find techniques to complete a draft. The second go-around is to compare what you're reading to the draft you now have.

Generally, I advise writers to avoid films with premises comparable to their own. If the other film's great, you'll worry that yours doesn't match up. If it's wretched, you'll worry that your own premise is too. Either way, you'll worry. And who needs that when you're trying to write?



WARNING

So, when *will* you revisit your story and get started on the revision process? That depends, but I tend to think you're prepared to rewrite when one of the following three things occurs:

- » You feel you're refreshed enough to return to the work.
- » You are considering or have begun another project.
- » You stop worrying about your script every day.
- » You have forgotten details of character or plot development.
- » Your deadline approaches.

Your first time back: Read-through #1

Your first glance through a draft may feel like a punch in the gut. You may find so many awkward phrases and glaring improbabilities that you decide to leave the writing profession altogether. However, if you have allowed yourself enough time away from the piece, and if you prepare yourself for the encounter, revisiting your first draft needn't be traumatic. It may feel like coming home.



TIP

Reserve a stretch of time for this first read. In order to assess the draft as a whole, you need to be able to read it in one sitting. If you absolutely must divide up the reading time, I suggest skimming the first act, stopping, and then skimming the second and third acts together. The second act is traditionally where your problems arise, so it's important to read that as a unit. Oh, and before you do, silence the phone and close the door.

The first thing you'll need is a pen of some distinguishing color. If you prefer to revise on the computer, track your changes or switch the color of the type so that you can see your edits. I advise printing a hard copy, though. Flipping between pages is less cumbersome than scrolling through a draft. You may want to rearrange the order of scenes or read scenes side by side, and marking your script by hand often feels more personal.

After you've chosen a pen, consider how you're going to use it. Every writer devises a set of revision symbols, those chicken scratches in the margins that scream, "Hey you! Come back to this section later." This first read is technical, so the symbols that you choose will delineate the following details:

- » Misspellings
- » Grammatical errors
- » Formatting trouble

- » Awkward description or exposition
- » Unanswered plot questions
- » Character inconsistencies
- » Implausibility
- » Excessive, inauthentic, or clumsy dialogue

Of that list, misspellings, grammar, and formatting are the easiest to correct. You can fix them quickly as you go. The last four items on the list require a rewrite, and I advise you to simply mark those sections and move on. This first read is your chance to sense the story as a complete entity, to determine where it gains momentum and where it falls flat. Pausing that process to rework a scene defeats the purpose. You'll have time for that later.



TIP

Some writers keep lists as they read. When they stumble upon clumsy dialogue or a bland character voice, they mark the page number on one list. On another list, they keep track of questions the draft raises and double-check later to see whether those questions find answers. A third list might be reserved for consistency and plausibility concerns, a fourth for details to add, and so on.

When you realize your main character spends the first act afraid of heights and the second act leaping across the roofs of buildings, you have a consistency problem. If the protagonist runs into the barn crawling with spiders in *Arachnophobia* right away, this action would be inconsistent with a fear of those insects. When your main character, who's never left their house, drives the getaway car in scene five, you have a scene implausibility.



TIP

Here's a quick way to determine the difference between consistency and plausibility problems:

- » If your character *would* never do something that they do, you have a consistency problem.
- » If your character *could* never do something that they do, you have a plausibility problem.

The most important revision symbol you should employ is for clear, well-written drama. Even the worst drafts harbor cinematic gems. Odds are that you've done something right. Circle it, star it, flag the page, whatever. If there's something you want to keep, find a way to remind yourself or you're likely to rewrite it along with everything else. You'll enjoy the comfort that those triumphs provide when you're wading through the not-quite-so-brilliant scenes ahead.

A second glance: Read-through #2

You probably don't know this (we've never met, after all), but I have Aristotle's *Poetics* taped to my computer screen. They're that important to my writing. I outline Aristotle's *Poetics* in Chapter 5. You can refer to that chapter to get the full scoop, but in a nutshell, they are the building blocks of a story. Aristotle's *Poetics* can help you devise backstory, prioritize exposition, generate action, and, yes, even help you revise. Those poetics are plot, character, thought, spectacle, diction, and music.

In the revision process, each poetic becomes a lens through which to view the draft. One lens enables you to isolate action, another highlights character shifts, still another focuses your attention on language, and so on. The first revision is technical and should move quickly. The second revision takes longer. In this stage, you trace the movement of each dramatic element through the text. In medical terms, these are preliminary tests you run before offering a diagnosis.

Deconstructing plot

Most first drafts suffer from flashes of plot frailty. I say flashes of frailty, not frailty in general, and therein lies the problem. If your entire plot is weak, the solution is simple — start over. But chances are your whole plot isn't weak; moments of it are. Certain actions feel unsubstantiated. Something's missing from the final scene. You can feel the story falter, but do you know *why* it falters? Can you locate the source of the trouble?

You can't fix a script unless you know what's broken. For this reason, I usually begin my second round of revisions by tracking the action. Remember that plot is a sequence of actions, and actions spark other actions. That cause-and-effect relationship can be traced, and more often than not, the resulting outline reveals much of what needs to be changed. Here's how you begin:

1. **Number your scenes.** If you're revising on the computer, you'll remove these numbers later. For now, number them and open a new document in which you'll record the actions within each scene.
2. **Move from beginning to end, hunting for actions.**
3. **Jot each action down under the appropriate scene number.**
4. **Find the result of each action in ensuing scenes; record those results below the original action.**
5. **Also below the action, write the number of the scene where its result occurs.**

For example, suppose that your protagonist robs a business in scene one. This robbery results in the closing of that store, the death of its owner, and another robbery years later. Your outline for that action will look like this:

Scene 1

Action: Dennis robs the local drugstore. A child witnesses the crime.

Result: The store is forced to close. (Scene 3)

The owner passes away. (Scene 6)

The child robs a bank years later. (Scene 22)

These results will probably spur further actions. When that happens, rerecord them in the same way. If the protagonist realizes that they are responsible for the second robbery and decides to end their wicked ways, that action will look like this:

Scene 22

Action: The child robs a bank.

Result: The protagonist realizes that this robbery is partially their fault, and they seek out a job in law enforcement. (Scene 24)

This process may seem tedious, but after a few scenes, it moves quickly. And take the time you need; it's important to be precise. If an event has no payoff, this outline will let you know. If your plot has a hole, this outline will tell you where. The action outline is invaluable. It's like the red arrow on the map that says, "You are here," and then proceeds to mark all locations that you need to hit before you leave. The outline is your revision road map.

Character makeovers

Dull or inconsistent characters are the next most common script ailment. In the first-draft dash to capture the plot of a story, many writers neglect the players. That's to be expected. Fix them now. Here's how:

- 1. List your main characters in a separate document.**
- 2. Reread the first act and the third act, assessing each character.**
- 3. Make a list of each character's physical and emotional qualities prior to Plot Point I.**
- 4. Make a list of each character's physical and emotional qualities after Plot Point II.**
- 5. Compare the lists.**



These inventories represent the beginning and the end of your characters' arc, or their transformation. Act II takes them from one point to the other. If you compare the lists and find that your characters change in a plausible way, congratulations. That's one less rewrite. However, most writers discover one of the following complications:

- » The character doesn't change.
- » The character changes completely.
- » The character's change is implausible or inconsistent.
- » The character hasn't learned anything new.
- » The character's motivation is inconsistent.

Your action outline may troubleshoot some of these complications. Characters often seem inconsistent because scenes supporting their transformation are missing. The fact that the protagonist in *Arachnophobia* is afraid of spiders in Act I but battles a barn full of them in Act III seems inconsistent. However, scenes in Act II justify the change. Characters are only inconsistent if they change without explanation. In other words, I have to see it to believe it. Use the outline to check Act II for those crucial transition scenes. If your character doesn't change at all, restructure their arc. Something about them should flourish, and something should fade.



People don't often reshape their entire lives; it's unrealistic. A timid person may perform a courageous act, but that doesn't prepare them to become the next superhero. It's essential that your characters change somehow, but don't erase their fundamental personality traits as you transform them.

Here are some final techniques for identifying potential character revisions:

- » **Revisit your backstory.** Backstory refers to events that took place prior to your first scene. Backstory also includes all the research that made it possible to write your story. Although revealing all that information to an audience isn't useful, those details often add dimension to your characters. For example, the fact that Captain Quint in *Jaws* has hundreds of shark jaws hanging in his shop is an exciting but unnecessary detail. The writers include it to further illustrate his obsession with the hunt. In *Baby Driver*, the protagonist's love of music began as a way to assuage tinnitus and became the key to his success as a getaway driver. Every heist has its own soundtrack. He's at his best with headphones on. You may have such details in your backstory that are waiting to be incorporated into the action. Now is a good time to revisit the information that you came up with prior to writing a draft.



TRY IT

ONE VOICE AT A TIME

Here's an exercise that I call "The Character Thread." I sometimes like to imagine that the story is like a tapestry, and every character is a different thread. So the goal of this exercise is to isolate one character "thread" in your script so you can see their journey more clearly and strengthen it.

This exercise is best done with a supporting character first, or someone who only shows up at a few pivotal moments in the action.

First open a separate document. Then copy and paste into that document all the moments where that character appears or where that character is mentioned. Copy only the sections that include the character; if they're only in half a scene, copy and paste only that half into the document. Find a way to indicate when you're jumping to a new moment in the script. I often use a dotted line in between segments, but I have friends who prefer a page break, even if they're only pulling one or two lines of dialogue from a scene.

The result will look a little like a poem, but if you then read that thread in one sitting, here's what should become readily apparent:

- **Repeat information:** What does an audience learn more than once from or about this character? Find the most compelling moment to convey that info and cut the rest.
- **Personality inconsistencies:** Does your character reveal a deep love for their family in the first act but never mention them in the second? Does your character swagger through the first half of the film and stumble through the rest? If so, either create an event that explains that inconsistency or address it in some other way.
- **Useless skills:** If your character is a master lock picker in Act I but never needs to pick a lock in the film, that's a useless skill. You either need to replace it with a more useful skill or create a lock for them to pick. Similarly, if your character is a plumber, that profession should either shape how they view the world or your story should include an opportunity for them to use their prowess.
- **Plot holes:** A familiar adage says, "If your character hides a gun in Act I, it better go off in Act III." If it doesn't, that's a plot hole. Similarly, if your character expresses a goal or a dream early in the story, make sure that they have an opportunity to attempt or abandon it.

Trust me, it's so much easier to see these inconsistencies when you're looking at only one character's text. And once you practice the exercise with a supporting character, you can try it for the protagonist, the antagonist, or both.

» **Trace your character's talents and opportunities.** Two things commonly result in contrived action. First, a character suddenly exhibits skills that just happen to push the plot forward. Second, a character's original skills just happen to solve every conflict that they encounter. Notice the repetition of the phrase "just happen to"? When things "just happen to" work out in a script, the tension fades away. It's unrealistic, and it's too darn easy. Here's how you fix it:

- Create a conflict that requires a new skill or a new plan.
- Make sure your character begins the journey with a limited number of skills. (They may be super heroic skills, but limit the list.)
- Create scenes that require the help of another individual.

The buddy-action film, *Rush Hour*, employs all three techniques. Two detectives, one from Hong Kong and one from LAPD, are assigned to a kidnapping case. They each possess limited, though effective, fighting skills, and they're forced to learn from each other to solve the crime. While it's not necessary, it helps that they don't like each other at the top of the film, because each moment of triumph is earned emotionally as well as physically. However you approach this story element, try not to give your character talents simply to solve a problem. Real people in real trouble who have to earn their way out — that's your goal.

» **Strengthen your antagonist.** If your characters feel flat or simplistic, reinvestigate what they are up against. In theory, the obstacles that a character faces should exceed their ability to overcome them. Audiences want your characters to survive in spite of the odds against them. If your antagonist is too easily defeated, your action will seem unimportant. I call this a *false conflict* — which is any conflict too easily solved or that an audience could solve faster than the protagonist.

» **Mix and match your characters.** Look at your cast of characters. Have you placed each character together in scene? Introducing your villain to your protagonist's best friend may not make sense now, but could it happen in the next draft? Even if you decide against a pairing, it never hurts to consider it.

Giving it a thought

For writing purposes, *thought* refers to the intention or the argument of your script. What are you trying to communicate and to whom? Why did you write this story in place of others? Many films are thoughtless, and I don't mean inconsiderate. Action-adventures are often written for entertainment purposes alone. The *Mission Impossible* films are fast-paced and fun, but what do they really communicate? Many of the James Bond movies are written to raise the collective pulse of an audience and little else. Comedies often fall into this category as well. Look at

Airplane, the original *Death at a Funeral*, and the *Naked Gun* series. What's the point? Entertainment is the point.

Nothing's wrong with this type of movie, and they're often highly entertaining, but most first-time screenwriters have a point, thank goodness. They have an opinion, a belief, and, most importantly, a question that they want to explore on the screen. If you want your movie to have a clear purpose, glance through your draft with the following questions in mind:

- » Which characters share your beliefs?
- » Which characters oppose your beliefs?
- » Have you given them opportunities to actively share their views?
- » Are their arguments clear?
- » Have you portrayed more than one side of whatever theme you're exploring?

Every smart lawyer knows that in order to win a case you have to understand the opposing counsel's argument. The same is true with thematic structure. You have something you want to say — fantastic. You have something you fervently believe — better yet. However, a script shouldn't become a vehicle to brainwash an audience into agreeing with you. A script lets you craft scenes in such a way that an audience understands your point of view. Whether they believe it or not is up to them. Great drama doesn't preach — it persuades, it seduces, it confronts, it explores, and most importantly, it asks. Controversy works in film. Nobody likes to be told what to think.

If you want to write about substance abuse, you should understand substance abusers. *Winter's Bone* showcases some hardened drug addicts who behave in seemingly heartless ways, but it also showcases how little help they have kicking the habit, how hard their lives have been, and how much they struggle with their own demons. I might pity them or fear them depending on the situation, but I leave with an understanding of how they became who they are. So check your work. Are you asking a question or pushing a belief? Have you crafted people with different values than your own and, more importantly, have you crafted them with equal vigor? If you don't at least hint at a choice between points of view, you're not crafting drama. You're writing a public service announcement.

Re-envisioning your visuals



Spectacle refers to the images in your piece that elicit a palpable response from your audience. They shock, they arouse, they frighten, they delight, and the most compelling examples help an audience better understand the story. Because all cinematic scenes rely on moving pictures, it's easy to forget that some images are

more powerful than others. As you revise, look for the two kinds of spectacles that may enhance your action:

- » **One-time spectacle:** These images crop up once in a film to liven it up, to cap an action, or to provide work for the special effects department. A little girl staring down a giant prehistoric boar in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the first kiss in *The Notebook*, the sprint across a battlefield sporting little more than wrist cuffs and a shield in *Wonder Woman* — these are prime examples of one-time spectacle. They catch your eye and steal your breath.
- » **Recurring spectacle:** These images crop up periodically as reminders of the film's theme. The movie *Chocolat* is about two people who move from town to town, leaving when the winds return. When they finally settle into a home, the writers craft images to remind them of life on the road. The winds return periodically. Shots of the woman's suitcase suggest she could leave any minute. *Magic Mike* is built around recurring choreographed routines at a strip club. While those scenes are flashy and fun, they become the key to assessing the protagonist's confidence or lack thereof. While recurring images vary in form and dramatic weight, they often serve as reminders of a key thematic pattern in the story.

Recomposing the score

Music and diction problems generally result in awkward dialogue, flat character voice, and generic locations. The good news is that they're easy to find and fun to fix. A few simple tests reveal the moments that need help:

- » **Compare the length and look of character dialogue.** If you glance through a scene and discover that every character speaks in three-line sentences, you've got a problem. If every character ends sentences with an exclamation point, you've got a problem. If I can't identify the speaker by the words they use, you've got a problem. These are indications that your characters suffer from similar voice. Rework their diction so that they sound distinct.
- » **Reconsider location.** Scenic location shouldn't be an arbitrary choice. A location affects the way a character speaks and behaves, as well as how the audience views that character's actions. Suppose that your character is incredibly crude. Imagine that character in a church or a library. Your scene suddenly becomes awkward or funny. If someone tells a character to grow up while standing in the middle of a kindergarten classroom, the scene is suddenly ironic. Make sure you've chosen all your locations for a reason and then double-check that they affect how the characters behave.

» **Consider intent and emotion.** Sometimes dialogue falters because the characters forget their goals. Characters generally speak because they want something from another person. Therefore, what they say involves tactics, which affect dialogue and behavior. Also, consider how your characters feel about the situation they are in. Those emotions might underscore the action. If your character is frightened, make sure that the rhythm of the scene (dialogue included) suggests this fear.



REMEMBER

The best writers aren't those who craft the finest first drafts. They're the writers who know what to revise. They've adapted an ear for awkward and an eye for excess. The more you write, the better you become at sensing which parts of your first draft require attention and how you might administer help. For now, consider the preceding revision tips as places to begin when you don't know where to begin.

Back in the Saddle Again: Rewrites

You've read through your script once, twice, perhaps many times over, and you have a list of things to fix. What's that? You have an entire scroll of things to fix? That's all right. Now you have an opportunity to make your script better. Yeah, that's it. It's an *opportunity*.

Rewrites are daunting — that's all there is to it. You have to be critical, you have to be cruel, and you have to memorize phrases like "It's for the good of the story," because the first thing you have to do is cut. If you have more than 120 pages of script, cut one-fourth of it. That means cutting 30 pages or so. If you have fewer than 120 pages, cut 10 percent. Be strict about this cutting; 30 pages is 30 pages. You can reach that goal by cutting lines here and there, or you can eliminate entire scenes. It's up to you. While your script should ultimately run between 90 and 120 pages, cutting these pages now forces you to discover what's truly important to your story and opens up space for new material. You can always reinstate material later, but cut it for now.

Cutting poorly written text is a breeze; you'll hum as you push Delete. However, you'll also encounter magnificent speeches, witty repartee, and dazzling images. And guess what? You're going to have to cut some of them, too, or put them aside for a future script. Good isn't the same as necessary.

How do you know what should stay and what should go? Ask yourself why you want to keep it. The following arguments are *not* convincing:

- » I like it.
- » It sounds good.
- » My friends like it.
- » It worked in that other film.

If any or all of these excuses serve as your only reasoning, the section should probably go. However, the next arguments may suggest otherwise:

- » It sets up crucial information.
- » It reveals character.
- » It supports another scene.
- » I know it's important; I just don't know why yet.

If these arguments apply to the section in question, consider before you hit Delete, especially the last phrase. Your first instinct on a rewrite is often correct. If you know that a section means something, don't cut it just because you can't verbalize what that something is. Live with it until you know.

After you cut, tackle the problems that you discovered in your first and second read-throughs. Generally, writers revise chronologically, so I include a final list of questions that can help guide you through those revisions scene by scene:

- » Where did the characters just come from? Where are they going next?
- » How much time has elapsed since the last scene? What's happened in that time, and how does an audience know?
- » What do your characters want in the scene? Is that goal clear?
- » What tactics do they use to achieve that goal?
- » What's the obstacle in the scene?
- » What is your character's relationship to other people in the scene?
- » Who's in control of the scene? When does that change?
- » Could this scene really occur this way?
- » What changes occur over the course of the scene?
- » What happens as a result of this scene?

- » If you had to cut one element, what would it be?
- » What's your argument for keeping that element in?
- » Can you combine this scene with another one and achieve the same effect?

Hopefully, these questions can help guide your process. You may discover that you have several scenes left to write. If you've cut the necessary pages prior to the revision, you'll have room to accommodate those new scenes. Rewrites have no time frame. Some writers locate all the problematic text and rewrite quickly thereafter. Others revise each scene as a unit before moving on to the next. How you work is up to you. Take the time that you need to get it right because the next step is out of your hands.

Recruiting a Reader

Some writers write with a specific reader in mind. This reader is your first target audience. You want that person to laugh, cry, or gasp in certain spots, so you craft scenes that (hopefully) elicit that response. This system is a smart one, and it tends to produce reliable drama because it keeps you focused on an audience. If you have such a person in mind, great. Hand them a copy of your script right now. If you don't, start searching for a reader.

Honesty is your top priority in this search. Your readers must care enough about you and/or your script to give you an honest critique. Therefore, try to avoid the following readers:

- » Anyone who's afraid of hurting your feelings
- » Anyone who believes that you can do no wrong
- » Anyone whom you consider to be direct competition
- » Anyone whom you indiscreetly based a character on or who has a personal connection to the story.

These people have a bias that may get in the way of an honest read. You can show it to them after you've polished the draft. The following people, however, make excellent second-draft readers:

- » **Someone who's supportive of your craft:** Family members and friends make strong readers if — and this is a big if — they are capable of mixing criticism with compliments. Also, family members are notorious for

recognizing themselves in the work. If you're even slightly worried that this may be the case, hand the script to someone else.

- » **Someone who's brutally honest:** The truth is often hard to take, but false praise is worse. Find someone who will tell you what they think about your script without ornamentation. Then, force yourself to listen.
- » **The perfect target audience:** Film companies poll their target audiences by screening the film prior to the final cut. If you find a reader who exemplifies your target audience, you can do the same thing in advance.
- » **The antithesis of your target audience:** Find someone who you think would never go see your film. Your instinct may be right; that person may hate it. But that person also may surprise you. And their commentary may prepare you for future reviews.
- » **A screenplay virgin:** People who know nothing about screenwriting are the best readers. They'll be the first to tell you when something doesn't make sense, and they'll pick up on details that distract them from the story. If you know someone like this, enlist them at all costs.
- » **A film buff:** Film aficionados are fun readers. They'll tell you if your film's already been made, and they're familiar with your lingo and your form. Better yet, they have high expectations. If your film doesn't match up, they'll be sure to tell you why.

As you can see, the credentials of these readers vary, and so, therefore, will their feedback. It's important to enlist several readers at once, so select your first victims — I mean readers — and send your story their way.

Capitalizing on Your Critique

The jury is back, and the verdict is in. As you listen to your reader's feedback, at some point, you'll want to scream. You may also want to run, crawl under the couch, or melt into the floor. Don't do any of these things. Nod and smile and listen. Remember, this critique hurts, but it will help you develop a critical tool — the writer's filter.

Every writer needs an internal filter to help sift through all the criticism that they receive. The filter catches criticism that seems to make sense for one reason or another, and it filters out the rest. How does it know which comments to take seriously? It uses the following criteria.

Your filter remembers

- » Any criticism that it hears more than once
- » Anything deemed confusing, offensive, or unclear
- » Anything that you suspected was problematic prior to the reading
- » Anything that elicited a surprising or unintentional response
- » Anything that supports your original intention
- » Any suggestion of how the reader felt at the end of the story

Your filter forgets

- » Anything deemed “bad” or “good” without explanation
- » Any comments that differ among the majority of readers
- » Pretty much everything else

The best criticism reflects the script back to you. Sometimes, the comments “I liked it” or “I hated it” are important, but they rarely help you revise. They tell you a lot more about the reader than about your story. You need to know what the reader saw, what they heard, what they took away from the script in as much detail as they can muster. Those comments help you determine what to nix and what to bolster. Remember that you’re the one sitting at a computer or a notebook every day. You live with these characters for hours at a stretch. You’re the only person who really knows the story and what it’s trying to achieve. Although criticism is usually given with the best intentions, that doesn’t mean it’s all worthwhile.

- » Securing the rights to an original story
- » Transferring a story from one medium to another
- » Adapting a film
- » Choosing a writing partner

Chapter **18**

Adaptation and Collaboration: Two Alternate Ways to Work

So you've found a story. It has well-developed characters, plot twists galore, style, wit, emotion, and a theme to pull them all together. You only have one problem: This story exists in a different form. It's a novel, a stage play, a poem, an article, a song, an amusement park ride; the point is, it's not *your* story. Not yet, anyway.

If you're at this crossroads, now is the time to consider *adaptation*. By adaptation, I mean transforming that story into a film. Some writers find this process exhilarating and infinitely simpler than crafting a script from the ground up. However, adaptation requires a knowledge of and a respect for many different kinds of writing, and this sensibility often takes years to develop. For this reason, many people choose to collaborate with a writing partner, dividing the tasks, sharing critiques, and bouncing ideas back and forth.

This chapter illustrates the challenges and advantages of the adaptation process and provides tips for how to proceed after you've found the story of your dreams. It also offers suggestions for writing with another artist, should the need or the desire arise.

Procuring Primary Material

Before you go to all the trouble of adapting any original material into a film, you'll want to secure the rights to it. Trust me, nothing is more heartbreaking than spending months writing a draft only to discover that you're not allowed to market the film because someone else owns the original story. And someone almost always owns or did own the original story. The following sections describe how you might garner permission to use it.

Knowing when you need a copyright

Copyrights protect original creations that exist in a tangible form, such as a recording or in print. If you want to use just one element of a story, you may not need a copyright. For example, the following items cannot be copyrighted:

- » An idea
- » A fact
- » Names, titles, short phrases, or expressions (though expressions associated with corporate branding, like Nike's slogan "Just Do It," can be trademarked)
- » Scientific or mathematical principles
- » Formulas or algorithms
- » Choreography or physical performances not fixed in some tangible form

This is why there are so many movies written about the same historical event or with the same conceit. *Antz* and *A Bug's Life*, for example, are both animated movies about a determined ant hellbent on saving the colony. *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* are both action films pitting earth against an asteroid. *Infamous* and *Capote* both chronicle the life of — you guessed it — Truman Capote. So if you're interested in an event or historical figure, you should be familiar with your competition, but you may not need a copyright. If you're obsessed with a story that someone else wrote or documented, then you probably will.

Comprehending copyrights

Even if you've never written anything to conclusion, my guess is you're familiar with copyrights. The © symbol appears in most literary works, and it means that property is owned by the author or the author's estate. Once you determine which work you want to adapt, that copyright date is the first thing to look for. The date is how you know whether the material is something you must purchase, or whether it's in the public domain.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The term *public domain* refers to materials with expired copyrights or those ineligible for copyrights. These materials, sometimes called *intellectual property*, aren't owned or controlled by anyone. Screenwriters can therefore adapt those stories in any way they see fit without fear of arbitration. Jane Austen and Charles Dickens are examples of writers whose work is in the public domain and are often adapted into film.

Generally speaking, if a work is published without a copyright or with the phrase "dedicated to the public domain," it is fair game. However, there are some exceptions and copyright laws change periodically, so it's always best to do some research of your own. As of 2021, the public domain dates for works published in the United States follow this logic:

- » **Works published prior to 1926:** These works are in the public domain.
- » **Works published between 1926 and 1978:** If the work contains no copyright notice, the work is in the public domain. If it does contain a copyright notice, the writers (or their estates) own these works for 95 years past the publication date. They may renew that copyright for up to 67 years, or the works fall into the public domain.
- » **Works published between 1978 and 1989:** If the work contains no copyright notice and the work was not registered, it is in the public domain. If there is no copyright notice but the work *was* registered, the writers (or their estates) own it for 70 years past the death of the author. If the work contains a copyright notice, the writers (or their estates) own these works for 95 years past the publication date.
- » **Works published after 1989:** The writers (or their estates) own these works while the writer is alive, and for 70 years thereafter.



TIP

To find out whether a copyright has been renewed, you'll need to run a record search at the U.S. Copyright Office. Often, you can do this search online at www.copyright.gov.

Procuring permission

Should the work you're after not fall into the public domain, you'll need to obtain the rights. Here are some things to consider before doing so:

- » How much of the primary material do you anticipate using?
- » How long do you think it will take you to adapt?
- » How much money are you willing to spend up front and in general?



REMEMBER

If you're simply inspired by an idea or plot point from the original work, you may not need rights at all. If you're planning on adapting the plot structure or the characters, however, you'll want to search the U.S. Copyright Office first at www.copyright.gov to ensure that the material is in their system and to see whether someone else has acquired the rights already. Thereafter, you should contact the owner of the material.



TIP

When seeking permission to use an existing original work, I suggest approaching the author first, if possible. Authors tend to fancy the idea of their work as a film, and they may be more open to contract terms and financing. You may find yourself negotiating with the author's agent, but it never hurts to try to get the author on your side. If it's not possible to approach the author, contact the publisher. Start by visiting the publisher's website. Some publishers provide online permission forms, which may give you a sense of what kind of negotiation you're in for.

The final steps include contracts and financing. If you have an agent, this sort of haggling is their job. If you don't have an agent, you should speak to a lawyer prior to negotiation. The general contract for rights acquisition is called a *Literary Property Agreement*. This contract delineates whether you're buying the material outright, in which case you pay one sum for control of the piece indefinitely, or whether you're *optioning* the material and for how long. It also includes details such as the percentage the author would get from future net profits and how they'd like to be credited.



TECHNICAL
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In an *optioning agreement*, a screenwriter purchases the right to consider the primary material for a specified amount of time. If you fail to pay the remaining fee in the time allotted, all rights revert back to the original owner of the material. This agreement is temporary; it allows you time to attempt an adaptation before final purchase, as well as time to raise enough money for the full rights. Using an optioning agreement is a little like putting a book on hold at the library, except you pay for the right to do so. Optioning agreements generally last from six months to two years.

There's no way to predict how much you'll be spending in either scenario, and acquiring rights can be a long and arduous process. However, adapting the material into a film may also be a long and arduous process, so the longer the optioning agreement lasts and the more opportunities you have to renew the agreement, the better.



TIP

Your primary concern when acquiring rights of any kind is to acquire them from the right person. Authors may not own the rights to their own stories or the film rights — sometimes those rights belong to the publisher. If the writer is no longer living, an estate may control that work. After you identify who owns the material, work with an attorney to draft a contract. That contract is the only legal way to be certain all the rights to the material are being turned over to you, temporarily or otherwise.

Assessing how much to adapt

Screenwriters rarely adapt their entire source material for the screen. Usually, they drop whole plotlines and condense characters. Sometimes all that remains of the source material when it reaches the screen is the mood it inspired in the writer. After you acquire rights, the work is yours to do with as you please. Consider which of the following types of adaptations you expect to pen:

- » **Based on:** This type is the most thorough. The film follows the original characters and most, if not all, of the original plot. The art of such an adaptation lies in converting the story into moving pictures. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Hidden Figures* are examples of films that are *based on* fiction. These scripts adhere closely to the original stories.
- » **Adapted from:** In this type of adaptation, the source material is recognizable, but liberties (sometimes grand ones) have been taken. *Cider House Rules*, for example, was adapted by John Irving who also wrote the novel. In translating that book to screen, Irving rearranged and dropped large sections of it, including the primary female role. *No Country For Old Men* was adapted from the Cormac McCarthy novel, and while the plot is recognizable, the film drops most of the dialogue and condenses the third-person narrative to a few lines here and there.
- » **Inspired by:** Films that are *inspired by* a source material are under little to no obligation to adhere to it. *There Will Be Blood*, for example, is a film inspired by the novel *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair. The pace and grim tone of the novel remain intact, but the characters and the pivotal events are mostly fabricated, and only one-third of the book proved truly useful. Both *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Psycho* were inspired by convicted murderer and body snatcher Ed Gein. However, Gein did not use a chainsaw nor did he run a hotel. The writer of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* lifted the location and description of Gein's house. The writers of *Psycho* lifted Gein's obsession with his dead mother. The rest of those films are entirely original.



TIP

A useful question to ask yourself when deciding how much material to adapt is “do I want audiences to know this is an adaptation?” Should the primary source be part of the allure or should it only be familiar to avid fans? *Lion King* riffs on Shakespeare’s tragedy, *Hamlet*, and *Clueless* is adapted from Jane Austen’s novel, *Emma*, but those inspirations aren’t readily apparent. The 2020 adaptation of *Emma* is clearly a film version of the novel and it capitalized on the Jane Austen fan club. Knowing how obvious you want the adaptation to be should determine how closely your script aligns with the primary source.

Again, unless it's so stipulated in your rights agreement, you're under no obligation to use the primary material if you don't want to. If you feel strongly about its content, then perhaps the first form of adaptation is for you. If you're struck by one image or storyline, perhaps the last form is what you're after. That material is simply there as a springboard for your film.

Navigating between Forms

I'm a firm believer that stories seek the form that best expresses their narrative content. In other words, if *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* had wanted to be a film first, it would've been a film first. It didn't. It wanted to be a stage play by August Wilson. Does that mean that crafting a screenplay from a work of fiction is wrong? No. It means that you'll have to change that work of fiction into a different kind of story, a kind of story that's best expressed cinematically. Let me repeat that first bit — you'll have to *change* the work.

Every literary form is structurally unique and has its own advantages and limitations. Fiction invites scenic description where plays and film invite physical action, for example. Poetry employs economy of image, and creative nonfiction highlights theme. In order to write the film version of a poem, then, you have to know what makes a poem structurally different from a film and change the story accordingly. (For details on the specific elements of different and artistic forms, refer to Chapter 2.) Consider how the structure of the original source might mold your eventual screenplay.

From fiction to film

Fiction is the medium most often adapted into film. *Nomadland*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Carol*, *Disobedience*, *Brooklyn*, *Call Me by Your Name*, *The Color Purple*, and every John Grisham novel are just a few examples of adapted fiction. Several writers have successfully converted short stories as well. The movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, for example, is based on a novella by Stephen King. *Brokeback Mountain* and *Arrival* are based on stories by Annie Proulx and Ted Chiang, respectively.

With such a long list, you may think that jumping between these forms is simple, and it can be. After all, characters, events, and dialogue are already in place for you to utilize. However, more often than not, the success of a film adaptation is a result of how the writer chooses to work around cinematically challenging aspects of the original form. The following sections offer elements specific to fiction followed by potential ways to approach them in film.

Description

Novelists describe everything in detail, from the location to the characters' physical conditions to their thoughts. Henry James spends more than 20 pages depicting Isabel Archer's daydream in *Portrait of a Lady*, for pity's sake. The sheer amount of physical and psychological detail can be both a benefit and a boon to the screenwriter, who must capture the essence of important description through image, dialogue, or action. Here are some of the pros and cons of fictional description:

Pros: Description clearly conveys

- » A detailed sense of location, atmosphere, and character
- » A complete *backstory* (everything that takes place prior to your story's first scene)
- » The composition of key images
- » Metaphors and allegories that link scenes together

Cons: Description may be challenging because

- » What occurs in a chapter can take seconds of screen time.
- » What fiction depicts in a sentence may require several scenes on-screen.
- » Details in abundance may quickly become overwhelming.
- » Exposition or backstory rarely feels natural when conveyed via dialogue.

Adapt description on-screen by

- » Condensing several characters into one
- » Condensing several events into one scene
- » Choosing one or two protagonists to follow, eliminating characters who don't support their journey
- » Suggesting metaphor and/or theme by revisiting an image several times
- » Revealing exposition through behavior or action whenever possible

Internal and external worlds

Novels move between physical and psychological action in a sentence or two. In other words, fiction takes place inside and outside a character's mind. Fiction writers call this technique *narrative movement*, and again, it can both help and hinder a screenwriter. Because cinema relies on what a writer can translate into image and action, narrative movement poses the following benefits and challenges:

Pros: Narrative movement provides

- » A psychological and physical profile of each character
- » Each character's opinion or point of view on what they witness
- » A sense of how, when, and why characters move into and out of thought

Cons: Narrative movement may be challenging because

- » Films primarily dwell in the external world of action.
- » The number of memories, internal thoughts, and daydreams may become overwhelming.
- » Characters usually harbor thoughts and beliefs that they wouldn't readily discuss with another character or the audience.

Adapt narrative movement on-screen by

- » Condensing and eliminating reveries
- » Creating active scenes that suggest a character's thoughts and fears
- » Dramatizing key moments in the backstory that explain or support what a character might be feeling in the present
- » Creating a pace between scenes that mimics the pace between internal and external worlds in the novel

Narrative voice

Fiction relies as much on the story's speaker as it does on the characters themselves. The narrator may or may not have a personal investment in the events. They may be omniscient or restricted to certain knowledge. They may be trustworthy or unreliable. The narrator sometimes changes from section to section, as different people tell the same story. Unless you allow a character to directly address the audience, as in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* or *Juno*, you'll need to find alternate ways to convey the narrative voice.

Pros: Narrative voice provides

- » An opinion or judgment of specific events
- » A suggestion of events in the future

- » A context and/or reason for telling the story
- » A style or tone that's hard to achieve in other ways

Cons: Narrative voice may be problematic because

- » The narrator's information may be difficult to dramatize.
- » Without a narrator, the tone of the piece may be lost.
- » The narrative voice provides texture that general scenes may not.

Adapt narrative voice on-screen by

- » Eliminating the narrator altogether
- » Distributing the voice among other characters
- » Creating a new character to embody that voice
- » Transferring the sense of the narrator to the film's style

From stage to screen

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, *Steel Magnolias*, *Pass Over*, *Doubt*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Moonlight*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are just a few stage plays to make it onto the big screen. In film adaptation, stage plays present their own set of benefits and complications. The following sections touch upon a few of each.

Dialogue

In the past, stage plays relied on dialogue to convey everything from backstory to character to mood. Nowadays, plays are becoming more physical in nature, but they still place great importance on language. Screenwriters may transfer some of the dialogue directly into their scripts, but many of the dramatist's words must become moving pictures. How do you know which words to keep and which to transform? Consider these suggestions.

Pros: Stage dialogue provides

- » Strong sense of character voice and motivation
- » Rhythm for each character and the piece overall
- » Suggested backstory and theme

Cons: Stage dialogue often

- » Impedes the screenwriter's ability to concentrate on action or image
- » Suggests too many or too few events to convey on film

Adapt stage dialogue by

- » Turning references of past events into visual scenes
- » Transferring the character's vocal pattern into a physical pattern
- » Restructuring events so that they take place in a new chronology
- » Crafting images hidden within the dialogue

Character and location limitations

Unlike film, which quickly jumps between any number of places and eras, most plays concentrate on a handful of locations, if not on one alone. The same rule applies to the number of characters in each medium. Films use extras to create the most realistic environment possible; plays rely on lights, sound, and their main characters to provide that environment. These limitations sometimes stem from budgetary concerns, but they have artistic reasons as well. In film, location is usually a backdrop. In theater, it's a competing force. And more characters in a play means less time spent on any one journey. While you'll need to condense the material in fiction, in stage plays you generally need to expand it. Consider the following suggestions when adapting locations from stage to screen:

Pros: Location and character restrictions provide

- » A strong sense of protagonist and the protagonist's journey
- » Clearly defined goals for all the characters involved
- » Enough time to detail an environment and a style

Cons: Location and character restrictions

- » Do not always suggest the realistic setting a screenwriter desires
- » Limit the number of settings, which can become static on-screen
- » Limit the drama to the scope of a few characters

Adapt these limitations to film by

- » Imagining other places and/or times for the scenes to occur
- » Considering all characters referenced in the play as possible characters to dramatize on-screen
- » Creating characters that aren't suggested but might exist in this world
- » Exploring locations referenced in a play but never shown — script scenes in all rooms of the main house, for example, or within the town the play's set in

From meter to movies

If poetry and music share anything in common with film, it's a fondness for image and mood. Poetry is condensed into several strong pictures that drive the entire piece and narrative poetry conveys a clear story. *The Green Knight*, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Brightstar*, and the Italian film *Il Postino* are a few films inspired by poetry. Music creates a sensual world through rhythm and melody, and while it rarely inspires an entire plot, it can easily affect a film's tone and style and inform a storyline or two. Movies like *Boogie Nights*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Boyz n the Hood*, and *Yesterday* are just a few examples. Cinematic strengths and weaknesses for these forms include the following:

Pros: Music and poetry provide

- » A set of clearly composed images to work from
- » Metaphors that may speak to a film's theme
- » A suggested rhythm and style for the eventual piece

Cons: Music and poetry are

- » Fleeting and repetitive in nature
- » Often highly allegorical and, therefore, subjective
- » Driven by emotion rather than event

Adapt music and poetry to film by

- » Finding possible narratives hidden within the piece and work from there
- » Uncovering the historical background of the piece and dramatizing it

- » Using the mood of the piece as a backdrop for a film
- » Using one or two choice phrases as a starting point for an entire film



REMEMBER

In any adaptation, you're searching for the essence of the original form. Remaining true to every aspect of the source is not necessary or your job. In fact, screenplays that try to maintain every aspect of a story tend to fail. Why? You're not re-creating a primary source — you're creating a film, which is a new story with a language of its own. What caught your fancy? What about the story is unique or uniquely personal to you? What aspects of the piece are vital to understanding the narrative? If you can answer those questions, you're ready to begin.

Mastering the Process of Adaptation

I often tell students that adapting a work is like a different kind of magic with roughly the same spell. You're creating an original piece — this one just happens to be based on something else. The work you're adapting may suggest a setting, characters, or a theme; it may give you a blueprint for the action. But it's still just a source.

How to approach an original work

With any adaptation, writers are scanning the original piece for two things: character and plot. Occasionally, a theme becomes the backbone of your film, but generally, the *who* and the *what* take precedence. You can move from one medium to another in three primary ways:

- » **Follow the form.** Take everything that you can from the original piece — character transformations, pivotal events, locations, tone, and more. Turn them into action or image and begin.
- » **Work from key scenes.** The scenes that strike your fancy may or may not be pivotal moments in the text. Pinpoint the moments that speak to you, rearrange them as necessary, and write what comes in between.
- » **Use one story element as a launching point.** Often, a single character, line, or event jumps out at you. Perhaps a moment from your own biography feels similar to a moment in the primary source. Choose the element that feels most important to you and spin your drama around it.

If you enjoy complete creative freedom, you'll probably choose the third method. If you crave structure, the first one will be a better match. However, don't be surprised if the original source suggests a way to work.



TIP

After you determine which method to follow, the creation process is similar to that of an original piece. I encourage you to continue dreaming and researching and demanding more of the work. Don't assume that the information you start with is all you need. It's really only a beginning.

Here's a basic set of steps to follow in order to proceed with your adaptation:

1. Read or view the original piece *at least* three times.

You first encounter a work in a state of naiveté. Everything is new; nothing is certain. You're left with a series of impressions and a general sense of the piece. You notice structure on the second encounter, and by the third, you should know what you'd like to keep and what you could do without. By the third pass, the original piece is in your bones.

2. Write an outline of pivotal scenes and actions.

Outline all key moments from the source, even if you're certain you won't use them. You're searching for a base structure from which to work. Pay particular attention to where this story begins and ends. You may want to transfer these scenes to index cards. This process allows you to quickly rearrange, add, or remove key events as you go.

3. Make a list of all the characters, their relationships to each other, and their primary personality traits.

Again, list all the characters, whether or not you intend to use them. You may need to layer their attributes onto someone else later on. Take special note of which characters are primary, secondary, and incidental. This process is particularly helpful when you want to condense several smaller characters into one larger role.

4. Reduce the story to a three- or four-line premise.

How would you pitch this story? What's the main storyline? What makes this piece exciting? If you can reduce the story to a nutshell description, you'll discover what the story is ultimately about or which parts you want to highlight.

5. Determine the question, concept, or point of view.

Why was this material created? What does it demand of an audience? Who was it created for? Asking these questions helps maintain the integrity of the original piece.

6. Find the holes.

What's not dramatized is often as important as what is dramatized. The story not told might be the one worth pursuing.

7. Choose several key moments, put them in order, and fill in the gaps.

Now's the time to choose which elements to use and arrange them in some chronology that makes sense to your film. After you have two or three key moments in place, build scenes that bridge them together.



REMEMBER

Films are primarily concerned with image, not dialogue. As you sift through your material and identify which moments to adapt, try to convert as many as possible into moving pictures. In other words, *show* viewers what's important instead of telling them.

By the time you start writing, the characters may seem different from the ones that you discovered in that first read. Your plot may hinge on events that were merely suggested in the first piece. If this is the case, congratulations. You've hit upon the balance between someone else's work and your own. Best of all, if you become frustrated along the way, you can always return to the source.

What to do when you're stuck

Adaptation is a challenging and often cumbersome process. You have to strike a balance between remaining true to a source and writing your own piece. If you find yourself struggling with the adaptation, try one or all of the following suggestions:

- » **Imagine the story in a different time period or location.** Sometimes, viewing the action out of context helps to clarify what the story is really about. What adjustments would you have to make if *Chocolat*, for example, took place in the contemporary Midwest instead of France in the 1950s?
- » **Imagine the work from a different point of view.** The original piece may clearly follow a main character, but what if you chose someone else to lead the story? What if the new protagonist was the rarely seen neighbor or the protagonist's rival? You see this technique used in Marvel spinoff films like *The Wolverine* or *Catwoman* all the time. Characters that are antagonists or sidekicks in one story can make fun and unexpected heroes in another.
- » **Eliminate flashbacks or memories.** Flashbacks aren't forward moving; they pause the action in order to recall an event. Fiction is riddled with flashbacks. If you find yourself unsure of how to include them, try reorganizing the plot sequence so that the events occur in sequence. You may also allude to them in a scene or eliminate them entirely.

- » **Condense and expand.** This may be your grandest challenge. If your original source is 500 pages, you're going to have to pick and choose your events, because you only have two to three hours of screen time in which to tell this story. Similarly, if you're taken with one paragraph, you'll have to imagine around it.
- » **Determine your main characters and their goals.** Primary source material often has more characters than you know what to do with. Choose one or two protagonists and give them very specific goals. The rest of the action should revolve around helping or hindering those people in achieving their goals. In order to do so, you may have to cut secondary characters or condense several smaller roles into one.

Studying the Art of Collaboration

Screenwriting, like playwriting, relies on collaboration. If you continue working in the field, you'll most likely collaborate with agents and managers who sell your work, producers who buy it, and directors and actors who give voice to it on the screen. Screenwriters collaborate with everyone, including other screenwriters. Collaboration is a marriage of discipline and imagination, and you should approach it with the seriousness that a marriage requires.

Writers collaborate for various reasons, but it usually begins when someone decides that it takes more than one person to write a particular story. That person then goes in search of another writer whose talents complement their own, whose knowledge and skill seem appropriate to the project, and whose schedule and connections will help the work to get made. Finding someone who fits this description is easier said than done, though.

What to look for in a writing partner

Searching for a writing partner is almost exactly like searching for a spouse. Here are a few things to look for:

- » **Someone responsible whom you can trust:** Both you and your partner have your work cut out for you. Find someone who will meet deadlines, pull their weight, and keep the project between the two of you.
- » **Someone who respects your work, and someone whose work you respect:** If you don't know what your partner has written, how will you know whether they are right for the project? Make sure that both of you are comfortable with the other one's interests, style, and vision.

- » **Someone who has a similar concept of the project, if different reasons for pursuing it:** Eventually, you and your partner will have to agree on a premise and a purpose for the work. Start that conversation now. If your visions differ greatly, you may end up with two films rather than one.
- » **Someone who complements your writing style and who brings different skills to the table:** It's important to share a concept of the project and to be equally invested in its creation, but you don't always have to agree. In fact, finding someone who will challenge your artistic opinions may be the best way to ensure a complex and well-developed script.



Discuss your hopes and intentions for your project with your potential partner early on and share your version of the “ideal working relationship.” You may feel bad if that person doesn't share your work ethic or creative vision, but you'll feel worse if you discover it halfway through the first draft.

How to approach collaboration

After you find someone to work with, the two of you need to have two discussions right off the bat. One involves the work itself, and the other involves the writing process. I also strongly advise you to create a written agreement before you begin writing. This agreement becomes your contract. It clarifies your individual roles in the process, but it can also be updated as you work.

Sharing the work: Part 1

Ask and answer the following questions with your partner: What interests you about the project? What does not? Who do you believe the script is about? What do those characters want? What is the general premise of the piece? Why does this piece have to be written?

This discussion forms the foundation upon which you craft the story. It's a mission statement of sorts, depicting what the project wants to achieve. Should egos arise later on — and they *will* arise later on — the writers have something to return to.

After you've spoken for a bit, take a stab at character biographies. Write them together or on your own and then compare. Do the same with an outline for the piece. The beginning, middle, and end may change as you write, but at least you're starting from a point of agreement. After an outline and a premise are in place, you're ready to discuss process.

Sharing the work: Part 2

You've spoken about the work as a story. Now talk about the work as work. In other words, discuss the division of labor. Within any writer's job are several

tasks: research, interviews, outlines, draft work, revision, the pitch, and so on. Who's going to take on what task? Be clear and divide the tasks according to your strengths and your interests. After you determine who's doing what and when, consider the following suggestions:

- » **Decide on a schedule.** When do you like to write? When will you write on your own, and when will you write as a team? Give yourselves assignments and goals for each meeting. Finding a schedule that works for both of you will take at least a week, maybe longer.
- » **Kill the ego.** This project is not about you. It's about the story. When you feel the ego taking over, when you or your partner become overly sensitive, return to that mission statement. What does the story need and how can you best achieve it?
- » **Divide the work evenly.** When one person takes the lead, bitterness and resentment often follow. If one person wants the dominant role, discuss what dominant entails and devise some kind of an agreement. Remember there was a reason you chose to collaborate in the first place. Allow your strengths to dictate which part of the project you lead.
- » **Discuss problems as they arise.** Most creative problems occur because one partner forgets to communicate with the other.

As with any process, story collaboration presents unique challenges. You and your partner *will* make mistakes. Acknowledge them and move on. You *will* become angry at each other. Talk about it and move on. You *will* reach a point where you'll want to write the script yourself. Return to your mission statement and move on. The key is to keep talking and keep working. The challenges don't stop, but the eventual rewards make it all worthwhile.

Learning collaboration from the pros

With all this talk about the challenges of finding the right collaborative partner, I thought you might like proof that it is possible to find one. The following two duos have been collaborating successfully for years. Hopefully, you'll find inspiration in their examples.

Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor

This creative pair has made a career adapting fiction to film, and there's no indication they'll stop anytime soon. While Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor admit they don't often know their scripts' conclusions in advance, they have a writing routine that helps keep them on track. A typical writing day begins at 10 or 11 a.m. and lasts six hours. They spend much of that time talking through scenes and

taking turns scripting them onto the page. They've coined the phrase "Who's driving" for the person doing the typing, and they're known for plugging two keyboards into one computer so that they can add to a scene as inspired.

Payne has said that their first drafts are generally three drafts: one draft to get all the ideas on the page, one draft to further develop those ideas, and one draft to edit and refine. Once you've written those three drafts, they maintain, you've actually completed your first. Their advice to screenwriters? Avoid writing the movie version of your story. Consider the circumstances you've set up for the characters, and then consider how a person would honestly react under those circumstances. Write from a place of what's true, not what's cinematic. Looking at their following body of work, it seems that may be good (and lucrative) advice:

- » ***Downsizing*** (2017)
- » ***I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry*** (2007)
- » ***Sideways*** (2004)
- » ***About Schmidt*** (2002)
- » ***Election*** (1999)
- » ***Citizen Ruth*** (1996)

Joel and Ethan Coen

Perhaps no two collaborators are as well known as the Coen brothers. Since their critically acclaimed film *Raising Arizona* in 1987, the Coens have produced one hit after another, their most recent success being *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, which picked up three Oscar nominations and was deemed one of the best films of the year.

The Coen brothers are actually much more than screenwriting partners — they're *cinematic auteurs*, which means they're partners in virtually every aspect of the film's production and direction as well. They've written original screenplays (*The Big Lebowski*), adapted contemporary fiction (*No Country for Old Men*), adapted classics like *The Odyssey* (*Oh Brother Where Art Thou?*), and adapted contemporary biographies (*Inside Llewyn Davis*). They produce and direct their pictures as well.

So what's their recipe for success? First, they suggest choosing challenging material, even material that seems too difficult at the onset. This challenge helps a writer avoid becoming complacent and overly predictable. They've also said it helps to take a break from one film by concentrating on another. Their film *Barton Fink* was written in just three weeks while the brothers were on creative hiatus from the plot-centric *Miller's Crossing*.

They've called their writing process fairly arbitrary and laid-back. They spend hours dreaming out loud while one person types those dreams onto the page. They often storyboard their films while writing, or upon completion of a first draft. This process helps them find the look of the film which, in turn, contributes to the language of it.

Finally, they've been known to envision actors for the roles as they write them. Perhaps this explains why they tend to work with the same people film after film. It certainly explains why their characters are so specifically rendered.

Film collaborations include

- » ***The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*** (2018)
- » ***Hail, Caesar!*** (2016)
- » ***Gambit*** (2012)
- » ***True Grit*** (2010)
- » ***A Serious Man*** (2009)
- » ***Burn After Reading*** (2008)
- » ***No Country for Old Men*** (2007)
- » ***The Ladykillers*** (2004)
- » ***The Man Who Wasn't There*** (2001)
- » ***Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*** (2000)
- » ***The Big Lebowski*** (1998)
- » ***Fargo*** (1996)
- » ***The Hudsucker Proxy*** (1994)
- » ***Barton Fink*** (1991)
- » ***Miller's Crossing*** (1990)
- » ***Raising Arizona*** (1987)

Lana and Lilly Wachowski

The Wachowskis, as they're collectively known, are film and television writers, directors, and producers. They're also trans women and, as you might have guessed, they're sisters. They specialize in the sci-fi genre and graphic novel adaptations, and they're best known for *The Matrix* franchise, *V for Vendetta*, *Speed Racer*, and the Netflix series *Sense8*. They also dabble in video games and comic books which, given their filmography, is not surprising.

Though the duo is notoriously tight-lipped about their process, they often talk about their penchant for science fiction stemming from a desire to create characters and worlds you don't often see on-screen. Their collaborators praise their collective intellect, describing idea sessions that quickly spiral into debates about philosophy, quantum mechanics, evolution, and free will, among other heady topics. Because they also direct most of their work, they admit to combining their director and writer brains when they craft a script. For films like *Cloud Atlas*, which includes many creative transitions from one scene to the next, they wove their editing ideas into the draft. As a result, the script reads with the pace and the dream-like style of the film itself. They are prep-driven artists, sometimes spending years pouring over primary source material before crafting it into a script. They spent two years analyzing *Cloud Atlas* before beginning a draft. They also believe it's important to leave room in the script for actor input. They encourage actors to improv or embellish a scene as they perform it, and they often revise the script to incorporate what's discovered in those moments.

The most pronounced element of their collaboration lies in their agreement early on about who the story is for and how it fulfills one of their core beliefs that making art is the way we understand our humanity. Lana has called it the way “we transcend our differences and are able to . . . imagine better worlds.” They constantly strive to defy convention in their work, from choosing stories that push against the traditional three-act format to casting well-known actors in against-type roles. They believe that many audiences are hungry for large-scale films that don't neatly fit into one category. They're adamant that a movie can't be defined by how it does at the box office, and they encourage artists in all mediums to pursue stories that complicate our assumptions about human behavior, human motivation, and creative forms.

Film and television collaborations include

- »» *Sense8* (2015–18)
- »» *Jupiter Ascending* (2015)
- »» *Cloud Atlas* (2012)
- »» *Speed Racer* (2008)
- »» *V for Vendetta* (2005)
- »» *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003)
- »» *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003)
- »» *The Matrix* (1999)
- »» *Bound* (1996)
- »» *Assassins* (1995)

4

Selling Your Script to Show Business

IN THIS PART . . .

Hail the Hollywood hierarchy, prepare your script for submission, use networking to your advantage, and protect your work.

Pitch your idea, package your screenplay, and consider seeking representation.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Recognizing Hollywood's main players
- » Keeping personal records
- » Understanding how networking works
- » Making the rounds and getting to know the industry
- » Preparing your script for submission
- » Protecting your work in advance

Chapter **19**

Before You Send It: Pre-Marketing Considerations

Completing a revised draft is cause for celebration. Take a vacation, do something mindless, and by all means, spend some time away from your desk. After all, your work is half done.

Wait a second, did I say, “half done”? But you’ve survived research, interviews, plot development, treatments, months of writing and revisions — is that really just *half* the journey? Possibly. If you wrote the script for yourself, to enjoy the craft for craft’s sake, you are finished now. However, if you wrote the screenplay for an audience, then yes, you are only half done. The second half of the journey involves getting your screenplay ready for that audience, be it reader, agent, or studio executive. The time’s come to consider the business.

Unlike creative work, which may begin haphazardly and lead you down several paths on your way to an idea, the next stage of the game involves organized and thorough preparation. One of the worst things that a writer can do — to their career, their script, and their self-esteem — is to enter the market prematurely. In Hollywood, time is always of the essence — meetings are brief, openings limited, and attention spans short. Show business is not a business to approach ill-equipped. This chapter helps make the marketing process less intimidating and arms you with information and organizational skills for the mercurial road ahead.

Understanding the “Biz” in Showbiz

You only have to glance at the credits of any film to appreciate the number of people that it takes to complete a project. You have literary agents and their assistants, directors and assistant directors, actors, producers, production companies, studios, designers, editors, illustrators, and composers, and that’s just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. How on earth will you navigate between all these roles? Well, you probably won’t until you know what each role is responsible for and what each requires. So for starters, familiarize yourself with the players.

Getting to know the players: The Hollywood hierarchy

Many people in Hollywood do various jobs at various times. Actors own production companies, writers and actors also direct, producers may be directors, and so on. That information changes on a monthly, if not weekly, basis, so keep your eye out for new developments. The following list is designed as an overview of the roles you’ll run into when marketing your script:

» **Producers — the boss:** Producers are among the first people connected to a project. They launch and manage the production elements of your work. They oversee everything from financing and budgeting, to marketing and publicity, to hiring a creative team, to finessing postproduction. Some producers fund the project themselves (executive producers); others (independent producers) look for an executive producer or a studio to finance the work once they have optioned it. Films often have more than one producer to accomplish all these tasks. Producers are looking for two things from a writer: the strength and marketability of your finished screenplay and your ability to write for other projects they have in mind.

» **Directors — the vision:** Directors manage all creative elements of the project. They bring the script to life on-screen and help actors and designers give it dimension. Directors make the script camera-ready, breaking each scene into specific shots with the aid of a cinematographer. They also work with the actors, sound designers, camera crew, and so on to create a unified vision for the piece. The draft of the script crafted by the director and cinematographer is called a *shooting script*. It includes storyboard notations and camera directions. Please note that these notations are the director's job, not the writer's job. If you're lucky enough to attach a director to your project, be prepared for them to give you notes and to expect revisions.

» **Actors — the true players:** These are obviously the people who embody your characters. However, many actors also own production companies and may seek out new work that fits their specific mission, often scripts with roles for them. Reese Witherspoon, for example, is the co-founder of the production company Hello Sunshine, which specializes in female-driven, uplifting content. Though showing an actor your work before it sells is often difficult, attaching an actor to your project is usually a good thing. At best, that actor pitches it for you, and it gets made; at worst, the script gains recognition.

» **Agents/managers — your ticket in:** These people represent new talent. They send scripts to artists and executives, seek writing assignments for their clients and arrange meetings on the writer's behalf. What's the difference? Agents handle many of the day-to-day logistics and work on a project-by-project basis. They send your work to executives, negotiate contracts and packaging considerations, and they step in if legal problems arise.

Managers are more concerned with your future career. They help with "big-picture" strategizing and relationship-building. They may provide notes on early drafts, advise you on potential partnerships, and pull together entire creative teams. Because of their studio connections, managers can often connect you to producers more easily, but only agents or lawyers can negotiate your contract. Both agents and managers are interested in writers who are passionate about their work, naturally collaborative, and who understand how to write for a target audience.

» **Studios — the wallet:** Studios, such as Warner Brothers, DreamWorks, Paramount, and so on, finance projects and provide production space and materials. In many cases, they attach producers and directors to projects they have purchased. They are interested in a worthwhile investment and scripts that fit current trends or speak to their target audience. They keep a close eye on the budget proposal and marketability of each film they consider.

This list extends far beyond the five roles that I mention here. To name just a few more, *cinematographers* help design and shoot each scene, *editors* cut the film for pace, and *sound designers* do exactly what their title suggests — design your sound.

But you won't meet these people until after the script has been purchased. People in the first five roles are the ones who may help get you in the door.



For young people new to Hollywood, getting work as an assistant can teach you a lot about the industry in a short period of time. That path could mean finding work as a production assistant on set, as an intern at a production company, or as an agent's assistant. This work is often challenging, requiring long hours, multi-tasking, and juggling several deadlines at once, but it's a crash course in how the business works and an efficient way to make connections.

Getting to know the buyers: The studio hierarchy

When you decide it's time to sell your screenplay, you will be courting studios and production companies. However, it's a good idea to learn how the studio system works and, in some cases, what sort of material they prefer.

There are currently five major film production companies in Hollywood, and between them, they own most of the smaller studios. While this list will, no doubt, change as the years go on, the following companies have been around long enough to merit citation:

- » **Paramount Motion Pictures:** Paramount is owned by the conglomerate ViacomCBS and has produced such recent films as *The Tomorrow War*, *The Quiet Place Part II*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Dora and the Lost City of Gold*, *Rocketman*, and *Wonder Park*. The following smaller studios fall under its domain:
 - Miramax (co-owned with beIN Media Group)
 - DreamWorks SKG (co-owned by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Brad Gray)
 - MTV Networks (which includes MTV Films, Nickelodeon Movies, VH1 Productions, and Comedy Central Films)
- » **Sony Pictures Entertainment:** Sony Pictures is owned by (who else?) Sony and has recently produced such films as *Fatherhood*, *Peter Rabbit*, *Little Women*, *Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse*, *Venom*, and *Baby Driver*. Sony Pictures also controls the following studios:
 - Columbia Pictures
 - TriStar Pictures
 - Sony Pictures Animation

- Destination Films
- Sony Pictures Classics
- Stage 6 Films

» **NBC Universal:** This studio is owned by Comcast. In recent years, it's produced *Us*, *Abominable*, *Cats*, *The Invisible Man*, *Trolls World Tour*, *Candyman*, and *Dear Evan Hansen*. It also owns the following studios:

- Universal Studios
- Focus Features
- DreamWorks Animation

» **Warner Media:** Also known as Warner Brothers Pictures, this studio is one of the largest, and the list of movies its known for extends for many pages. A few recent highlights include *The Suicide Squad*, *In The Heights*, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, *Wonder Woman 1985*, *Aquaman*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*. They also own the following smaller studios:

- Castle Rock Entertainment
- Warner Bros Animation
- New Line Cinema
- HBO/HBO Films
- Cartoon Network Films

» **Walt Disney Studios:** While this studio is perhaps best-known for its animation, it produces mainstream films as well. More recent examples include *Raya and the Last Dragon*, *Jungle Cruise*, *Cruella*, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, *Soul*, *Mary Poppins Returns*, and the *Frozen* franchise, to name just a few. The group also controls the following studios:

- Pixar Animation
- Walt Disney Animation
- 20th Century Studios
- Searchlight Pictures
- Marvel Studios
- Lucasfilm

It's impossible to say any one of these big studios specializes in any one sort of film. Yes, Disney is known for its animation, and Miramax often specializes in smaller budget films that sweep festivals like Sundance. However, the big studios are primarily interested in making money and garnering audiences from all demographics.



REMEMBER

It's worth noting that many A-list actors also own production companies, and they often seek content with a more specific mission. As mentioned, Reese Witherspoon's company, Hello Sunshine, produces uplifting female-driven content. Charlize Theron's company, Denver & Delilah Productions, also produces female-driven content (though of a darker nature) and many of their films include challenging roles for her. Maya Rudolph and Natasha Lyonne recently co-founded Animal Pictures, which has a particular interest in stories for and by artists of color. Again, the list of production companies changes all the time, but it behooves you to keep up with it. Part of your job is getting your material into the hands of people who will appreciate it.

So how can this information help you? My suggestion is that you look at the smaller companies on this list and watch for trends. See what films they're purchasing in any given year, and predict which company your screenplay seems to match. Learn which movies like your own have come out recently and how they were received. Again, trends change, but the more you know about this side of the business, the better equipped you'll be to sell your screenplay when the time comes.

Getting a “grip”: Hollywood jargon

Do you know what a *grip* is? How about a *super* or a *wipe* or a *pan*? It's okay if you don't; that's the biz talking. The credo “walk the walk and talk the talk” may hold true in Hollywood, but talking the talk is often more difficult than it sounds. Business jargon or *lingo* changes regularly, and it would be difficult to record every new phrase out there. So instead, I've compiled a list of terms that predominantly affect writers. Some you'll hear quite often, some are reserved for production, and some are just plain fun.

- » **ADR:** This term, which stands for *additional dialogue replacement*, refers to any material added to a film after production. It may be atmosphere additions, such as crowd noises or responses to action sequences, or it may be phrases that were simply replaced.
- » **Anti-hero:** A protagonist who lacks the traits of a traditional hero. They may be reluctant to take on the role, or they may possess personality defects or an ambiguous moral compass.
- » **Business:** This term refers to any activity actors perform that isn't the primary action of the scene itself. It may be the screenwriter's job to include it (“The clerk tries to hide behind the copy machine as the hero and villain face off”) or it may be something a director tells an actor to do to enhance or fill in the action of a scene.

- » **The buzz:** The “hype” around a project, or what people are saying about it. The buzz is usually a positive expression, signifying excitement over the work.
- » **Coverage:** The report that a professional reader gives a new screenplay is referred to as coverage. It includes the logline, a synopsis, and commentary on the work. It rates the strength of dialogue, characterization, plot structure, and so on. Coverage also provides a Pass, Consider, or Recommend rating so that the agent can quickly determine which scripts are worth a read. I cover coverage more thoroughly in the next few sections of this chapter.
- » **Cross-genre (or genre-hybrid):** A film that combines genres to (in theory) create a more complex and nuanced story. A dark fantasy combines horror and fantasy. Romantic comedies combine (you guessed it) romance and comedy. Mockumentaries combine satire and documentary. Some films unite more than two genres. For example, the film ***A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*** combines horror, western, and romance.
- » **Elevator pitch:** A 30-second synopsis of your concept.
- » **Establishing shot:** A long-distance shot that immediately suggests your location, generally placed at the beginning of a scene. If you want to convey that the setting is New York City, you might include a shot of the skyline. If you want to trap viewers on an island, you might give them an aerial view of that island before dropping them into the protagonist’s villa.
- » **High concept:** A high-concept movie is one that’s expected to have multi-demographic appeal because it sports an easy-to-grasp concept and a famous cast. High-concept movies can be easily pitched in three sentences or less, and they’re plot-driven instead of character-driven. High-concept films are also sometimes referred to as “big movies,” which has little to do with the scope of the story, and more to do with budget, star potential, and box-office appeal. ***Jurassic Park*, *Groundhog Day*, *Snakes on a Plane*, and *Inception*** are a few examples of high-concept films.
- » **The hook:** I’ve mentioned this one before, but it bears repeating. The hook is that unique aspect of your story that immediately grabs a reader’s attention. You use your hook with producers, agents, directors, and in marketing. It may be the major selling point of your story.
- » **Low concept:** A low-concept film focuses on everyday life and relationships. It’s driven by character instead of plot. It’s difficult to pitch a low-concept story in under three sentences because the story is often thematically, stylistically, or structurally complex. ***Pulp Fiction*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Manchester by the Sea*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*** are a few examples of low-concept films.
- » **Meet-cute:** A moment in romantic comedies when the protagonists meet for the first time, often in a surprising or awkward way.

- » **On-the-nose:** This phrase describes dialogue that too plainly reveals the characters' or the author's intentions. On-the-nose dialogue tells audiences what the story is about instead of allowing them to discover it.
- » **Pinks (also known as color pages):** Printing shooting-script changes on multicolored paper is a common practice. Those pages are traditionally pink, blue, and yellow — generally in that order. Pinks refers to those rewrites, as in “It was switched in the pinks.” You’ll probably hear them referred to as “the pinks” regardless of what color the rewrites really are. A “rainbow script” is a shooting script with many revised pages.
- » **The pitch:** The pitch is a concise story synopsis that you verbally sell to agents and producers. Like a movie trailer, it grabs attention, suggests a tone, and provides enough character and story information to indicate a feature film. Both a pitch and logline are used to sell your story, but a pitch is more involved and allows for time to describe the story and your reasonings for pursuing it, while a logline is a one-to-three-sentence description meant to grab a buyer’s attention. You might include your logline as part of your pitch. For more on how to pitch, see Chapter 20.
- » **The polish:** A highly revised draft of your script is called the polish. It’s been through several readers, workshops, and/or script analysts. It’s tight, efficient, and ready for you to send out.
- » **Script doctor:** A script doctor (also known as a script consultant) is a writer who is hired to revise part or all of an existing screenplay. These jobs often pay well, though you may not get credit for them. These writers are also commonly referred to as *ghost writers*, as their contribution generally goes unmentioned.
- » **Second-act curtain:** In a three-act screenplay, this is the moment of greatest conflict or the destruction of your protagonist’s plan. It generally precedes or becomes the script’s climax.
- » **A sleeper:** A sleeper is surprise box office success. No one expects it to do as well as it does, despite a strong story or interesting concept. ***Slumdog Millionaire*, *Juno*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *The Sixth Sense*** are examples of sleeper hits.
- » **Spec script:** This term refers to a script you write on your own, without being paid or commissioned by a studio — in other words, scripts you write on the hopeful speculation that someone will purchase them later. These scripts don’t include much scene description or technical commentary. Those details are reserved for a *shooting script*, which is composed by the director and cinematographer before production. The spec script is the script that sells you as a writer, although it may not go on to production.

- » **Unsolicited script:** A script you submit to a production company or industry executive before you are represented by an agent or a manager. For liability reasons, many companies don't accept unsolicited scripts, but contests, film festivals, and smaller studios often do.

Preparing Yourself for the Biz

Writing a screenplay involves concentrating all your efforts on the story. How do events transpire? Are you accurately depicting the characters? Is the situation plausible and clear? These questions consume countless days.

With all the attention on product, you might assume that the foremost goal in Hollywood is to sell that particular script. Luckily, that assumption's incorrect. Selling a screenplay is always an objective, but your first priority is selling yourself as a writer. You are the commodity here. The script may not sell for reasons that defy explanation — the story has too many characters, it's not the "right time" for a screwball comedy, another studio just purchased a talking donkey film. You can't control everything. But if executives like your work, they'll hire you for other projects. Because you're the commodity, you need to prepare yourself for the market now.

Putting on a happy face: The art of attitude

Regardless of how you behave in your private life, you'll need to sharpen your positive traits to get through the Hollywood maze. Here are a few characteristics to foster as you proceed:

- » **A professional air:** There's a fine line between confident and cocky. Master the art of presenting your work with poise and assurance while remaining open to critique. This doesn't mean you need to be formal. You need to be yourself in a respectful manner.
- » **Enthusiasm:** You love this project, and you love this profession. Even when it drives you insane, you love it. If this isn't the case, find a way to convince yourself that it is. Enthusiasm is contagious, and nothing's more enticing than someone who is passionate about their work. Find a way to communicate that zeal to others.
- » **Intelligence:** Knowledge is power. The more you know about your script, about the business, and about the world, the more eager people will be to hire you. You may be a novice in the industry, but you don't have to sound like one.

- » **Patience:** Every writer wants to be read and read now. It usually takes a long time to introduce your script, let alone your name, to Hollywood. Frustration is understandable, but don't let it affect the quality of your work or your work ethic.
- » **Persistence:** Rejection is a given in this profession. Accept it and keep working. Many mediocre writers are produced because of persistence. Screenwriters build up an immunity to rejection. Don't let it stop you. Eventually, you'll catch a break.



TIP

Producers are looking for team players. Before you approach them, make a list of your strengths as a writer and as a person. Be specific. If you write historical dramas, call yourself a historian and list which eras you are familiar with. If you are opinionated, find a positive way to phrase that. You have a unique vision of the world, for example. Don't underestimate punctuality and organization; studios appreciate both. And a sense of humor is necessary — in your work and in order to survive the rigors of the business.

You might think that maintaining a positive attitude is the easy part. However, after a dozen or so rejections, even the most confident people doubt their abilities. Should you experience this dejection, repeat the following facts diligently to yourself.

- » Every writer begins without an agent.
- » Every writer works for little or no pay at some point.
- » There's a lot of bad writing out there; there's a need for great material.
- » Only you can tell your stories.

Everything worth anything in life involves risk, fear, and struggle. Keep writing; success can strike at any time.

Organizing your records

Do you know which studios are looking for romantic comedies or which agents represent your favorite writers? Do you know how many thrillers were purchased last year, and, of those, how many made it into production? Do you know which companies strictly produce their own content and which collaborate with other studios? By the time you're through with this chapter, you should be keeping several lists. Those lists serve as your network in written form and as a marketing progress report, so keep the following records updated and close by.

Your contact list

Everyone in your life is a potential contact. Don't be picky when you begin this list. You never know when someone's expertise will prove invaluable. Think about who you already know. Record the person's name, their relationship to you, any details about their expertise, and their contact information. You can divide this list into two sections — those contacts who work in the film industry and those who do not. You'll consult the first section when you need help revising, marketing, or selling your script. Contacts in the second list may help you generate ideas or research a project.

The marketing list

This list includes companies, producers, directors, agents, managers, actors, the studios they work for, and what kind of movies they purchase or accept. When you discover who represents your favorite screenwriters, include that information here. When you learn about film festivals or prizes, include the submission information here. When producers switch studios, a new streaming service begins producing content, or actors launch their own companies, include that information here. Consider this list your screenwriter's sourcebook. Each new entry should include the following:

- » The person's name, position, and/or representation
- » The organization they work for or represent
- » Previous projects they have commissioned or purchased
- » The kind of work they have recently requested
- » Submission dates and details in the case of festivals or contests
- » The contact information (if you have it)



TIP

Everyone acquires marketing information in a variety of ways. There are currently any number of online resources to help writers from a craft and an industry perspective. I suggest you begin your journey with the *Writers Guild of America* (wga.org). The WGA is a union, and it's the place to go to protect your work. You can register your scripts, find contract templates, and learn about your rights as a screenwriter. The site also offers agency lists, professional forums, podcasts, and a section for industry news.

After you collect information for a while, patterns will emerge. You'll notice what sort of story sells quickly, which screenwriters generate interest, and which genre is ripe for revival. You'll also become savvier about how to get your work out into the world.

Meetings and phone calls

Your marketing list begins the moment that you start calling people for information help. Anyone whom you speak to regarding your story, in an official capacity or otherwise, should be logged in your records. This log can include

- » Anyone who helped you with initial research
- » Anyone whom you have interviewed as part of the process
- » Anyone reading and/or critiquing your work
- » Any calls you make or replies you send
- » Anyone in the business you meet with or speak to on the phone, and the outcome of that exchange

This log tracks your history with various creatives. It offers a summation of meetings, should you need to recall people quickly. It also reminds you to follow up with anyone kind enough to consider your work. The list should include the person's or agency's name, the date of the meeting or submission, a brief description of what transpired, and a notation of any impending exchange.

Transfer anyone on this record to your contact list as well.

Submissions and results

Some people include this information in the previous list, but I find it helpful to keep a separate record for submissions and results. After all, meeting with someone is a different process than submitting your work. You may wait months to hear from a studio or agency, and you'll want a place to keep rejections or positive feedback.

Writers usually send scripts to several places at once. It's not uncommon for a writer to circulate one script to several agencies, festivals, or contests at the same time, and if you have more than one script, you might market both simultaneously, albeit to different venues. Multiple submissions can become confusing. So when you submit a work, record the following:

- » The title of the script
- » The organization or person you sent it to
- » Their contact information
- » The date it was sent
- » A line about the nature of the submission — a request, a referral, something else

Leave room below each item to add follow-up reports later. You should *always* send a thank-you email to anyone interested in your work, so log that information below the submission date to make sure that you've sent one. This list ensures that you don't submit the same work to someone twice, and after a while, it reveals patterns:

- » If no one is interested in a script, the time may have come to launch a new one.
- » If a script generates curiosity but doesn't sell, a rewrite might be in order.
- » If the script sparks a meeting or a phone call, well, you have a whole other list for that info, don't you?

Reaching out to the right resources

When you first enter the business, your contact list may be short, your marketing list limited, and the other two records may be nonexistent. That's okay. Everyone starts somewhere. Luckily, a variety of resources are available to help expand your network.

The media

An array of publications report on the Hollywood marketing scene. The trade publications (also known simply as the *trades*) — which include *Daily Variety* (www.variety.com) and *The Hollywood Reporter* (www.hollywoodreporter.com) — announce which screenplays are bought and sold, what their premises are, who's doing the purchasing, when they are slated for production, and when to expect a release. Articles and weekly focus sections include studio progress reports, information on promotions and position shifts within organizations, and updates on television programming and acquisitions.

Other resources include *Script* (www.scriptmag.com), a magazine focusing on writing and marketing scripts of all kinds; *The Black List* (blacklist.com), a forum where screenwriters can upload scripts (for a fee) for industry professionals to view or receive script evaluation (again, for a fee); and *Backstage Magazine* (backstage.com), which provides information about submission opportunities, career advice, greenlit projects, industry trends, creative partnerships, and more.

Finally, if you like learning on the go, there are any number of useful Hollywood-centric podcasts to check out. By the time you read this, there will be at least three more, but a few worth mentioning are *Scriptnotes*, *On The Page*, *Write On*, and *The Selling Your Screenplay Podcast*. All of them specialize in craft advice for writers, but they also host interviews with industry executives, showrunners, and producers with information about TV as well as film.

Conferences and festivals

Conferences and festivals are worth attending even if you don't have a polished draft at the ready. They provide the rare opportunity to be in the same room with agents, producers, directors, actors, and writers all at the same time.

Costs vary depending on which package interests you and how long the forum lasts. Many are daylong or weekend events, but a few stretch into a week. What do these functions provide? Among other things, conferences offer

- » A panel of established writers, directors, and studio executives
- » Literary agents and script analysts
- » Marketing tips and strategies
- » Film competition opportunities
- » A sense of industry trends

Longer conferences may schedule workshops with writers or marketing gurus. Some may also have script analysts available to look over a treatment of your work (for a fee, of course). You can find complete listings of opportunities online, as well as through trade papers. Popular forums include Sundance Film Festival, South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival, ScreenCraft Writer's Summit, and Story Expo. Should one grab your attention, do some research to see who might be attending. Surrounding yourself with established or emerging artists may be the jumpstart you need. See Chapter 11, which covers several of the well-known film festivals in more detail.

Courses and contests

Writing classes, workshops, and contests are other great ways to network. If you live near a university or an institution that provides continuing education, inquire about creative-writing courses. You can also find information about workshops online, through trade publications, or even at your local library. Some courses require that you pay to reserve a space, but others allow you to sit in on a session before you join. There is now a plethora of online courses to pursue as well.



REMEMBER

Workshops certainly aren't for everyone. Some writers fear their ideas may be stolen by other participants or that the criticism might affect their work. However, in addition to constant feedback, workshops provide a community of writers who may succeed in the industry. You might learn the process through example, and any support group has its emotional advantages.

You can also research contests online. New competitions sprout up every day. If you're considering this route, pay attention to the following items:

- » **The submission request:** What kind of material do they want? Are they looking for full-length features, short films, or adaptations? Do they support work by any writer, or do they specialize in films written by minorities? In other words, do you fit the bill?
- » **The cost:** Most contests have a nonrefundable submission cost. They're often less than \$50, but watch out — some cost more.
- » **The deadline date:** Most contests are annual, but some are biannual and even monthly. Also, deadlines change every year, so make sure that your information is current.
- » **The award:** Some contests award cash prizes, some introduce you to Hollywood executives, and some offer winners a one-on-one meeting with agencies and script analysts. Know what you're getting into in advance.
- » **Past award winners:** Some contests publicize winners now working in the business. If the names are familiar, it may be a good contest to enter.

Make sure to submit your work in PDF form, *not* in a Word document or a Final-Draft file (unless requested). Also, be sure to double-check your formatting before you submit a draft. (For detailed information on how to format your work, see Chapter 15.) The competition is often steep, and you don't want to give judges a reason to discount your work.

Setting personal goals

Selling yourself as a writer is a commitment that requires an immense amount of preparation, especially at the beginning. You can easily become overwhelmed with the sheer number of calls, records, and follow-up letters that fill up your week. Keeping a weekly list of goals is one way to manage the madness.

A typical weekly plan might include the following information:

- » One primary goal for the week
- » At least three secondary goals
- » The amount of time you have available to tackle those goals
- » A list of ways that you might achieve those goals
- » A log of any phone calls, meetings, or follow-up responses

- » A log of any information that you discover during the week
- » A summation of what you accomplished, and what still needs to be done

Weekly plans clarify and prioritize tasks so that you can manage them with greater ease. Better yet, you're putting those commitments in writing, which makes them feel more official. You're making a silent but visible promise to continue forging ahead.

Polishing the Copy You Send

In Chapter 15, I mention the adage, "You never get another chance to make a first impression." If there was ever a time to take that phrase to heart, it's now, when you're considering sending work to producers and agents. Hollywood has thousands of writers, and many of them are newcomers. Organizations are looking for reasons to reject your script, and although a script's progress may not be hampered by one misspelling, why risk it?

Checking last-minute details

Agents and studios don't mind working with new writers, but they bolt at the thought of an amateur. If they see a clean, well-formatted script, they assume that the writing is strong. If the script looks messy and ill-prepared, they assume that the same holds true for the writer. The script's appearance is one thing that you have control over, so take the time you need to get it right.

Double-check these few things before you submit work:

- » **Spelling and grammatical errors:** If you're not strong in these areas, consider having a friend who is look over your script one last time. While it's a good idea to run your script through the computer spell-check, don't rely on it exclusively.
- » **Word usage:** Are you using the correct version of a word? For example, "you're" or "your," "tale" or "tail," "desert" or "dessert," "meat" or "meet," "it's" or "its," and so on.
- » **Margins:** Don't make margins smaller in an attempt to cram the story in. Keep the margins at the desired width (see Chapter 15).
- » **Dangling names:** Space the text so that a name never hangs at the bottom of a page while the ensuing dialogue floats at the top of the next. Scriptwriting software will automatically do this for you, but it's a good idea to double-check anyway.

- » **All your writing is meant to be seen:** Make sure that your script is free of editorials or personal reminders.
- » **Page numbers are accurate and in order:** Many producers give a script the *five-and-dime treatment*, meaning that they read the first five pages and the last ten to assess the story. They're primarily looking for scripts that are between 90 and 120 pages. If your page numbers are incorrect, they may assume that your story is longer or shorter than it really is.
- » **No quote marks around dialogue:** Dialogue is only quoted in your treatment, never in a script. It has its own placement on the page that makes quotes unnecessary. An exception to this rule is if the character is quoting someone within the dialogue. (See Chapter 15 for formatting details.)
- » **No camera angles:** Camera angles fall into the director and cinematographer's domains. They will include them in the shooting script, which is the production version of your screenplay. They also clutter up your page and distract readers from your story.
- » **Scenes are not numbered:** A director will number your scenes later, in a shooting draft of the script. This is your story draft; numbers and technical notations quickly become distracting.
- » **Font is 12-point Courier:** This is the standard screenwriting font utilized for timing purposes. In Courier, each page of script equates to around a minute of screen time.
- » **No treatments or synopsis included unless requested:** If they've requested your script, send your script. You want them reading the whole story if possible, so don't send a treatment or a synopsis, or they're likely to read that instead.
- » **Work is undated or recently dated (unless registered with a copyright office):** It's always a good idea to offer the illusion that your story is a new one. If executives see that your script was written ten years ago, they may assume that it has been rejected for ten years and will shy away from purchasing it themselves. So if you have a date on your cover page, make sure that it's a recent one.
- » **No use of bold print or italics:** Bold print tends to distract a reader, and italics are barely discernable in Courier. If you want to emphasize a certain line, write the scene that suggests that emphasis or direct the reader with a line of description. The only exception to this rule is if a character is quoting someone or singing lyrics to a song. In those cases, you can use italics or quotes around the material.



TIP

After you scan through the script twice yourself, I suggest handing it to at least two other people. One might read for form and spelling, the other for content. Paying a script analyst to read your work is another option. In addition to proof-reading, script analysts often provide commentary on the strength of your story and its components. Fees can range from \$75 to \$200 or more, but the feedback may be well worth the cost. However, make sure that the analyst you choose comes recommended from another writer or editor who you trust. The Writers Guild of America or a resource like The Black List can steer you in the right, direction if you are unsure.

Finessing your front page

Your script's appearance should scream that it's professional and direct, and nothing conveys that more clearly than the title page. The number-one rule here is no cover art, please. Draw attention to your ability as a writer, not an illustrator. The title page includes your working title, centered and spaced one-fourth of the way down. Some writers put the title in quotes. Just below that, include your name. Put your contact information in the bottom-right corner. Include your address, phone number, and email, if desired. Agencies should be able to reach you if they like your script. Date your work only if you've registered it with the copyright office and update that copyright as necessary. No agency wants to read a 7-year-old script, after all. You needn't include anything else on the title page. See Chapter 15 and the appendix for formatted examples.

Protecting Your Work

After the script's been through readers and revisions, you'll be ready to send it. The only thing left to do is to register it. Under current copyright law, you own your work as you write it, but it's not a bad idea to protect it in a more official manner. Bear in mind that you can't protect everything. Titles, names, short phrases, slogans, historical data, ideas, concepts, and anything within public domain are up for grabs. (See Chapter 18 for information about what can and cannot be copyrighted.) You can and should protect your polished draft, though. Here are two ways to do it, although one is far more official than the other.

Registering with the Writers Guild of America

Most established writers register their work with the Writers Guild of America (WGA). You can register your script, a treatment, or even a synopsis here. There

are two Guild offices, one on the East Coast and one on the West. Writers living east of the Mississippi River register with the New York office, and writers living west of the river register in Los Angeles. You can find all the information at wga.org.

The current registration fee is \$20 for the general public and \$10 for WGA members, and it protects your script for five years, after which you can renew. The WGA offers other services to nonmembers as well. In addition to holding your script for five years, the WGA will

- » Register treatments, outlines, and a synopsis
- » Provide a list of agencies that participate with the Guild
- » Provide a script library open for perusal
- » Arbitrate artistic disputes over credit and ownership
- » Provide standard contracts if your script is optioned by a studio or producer who participates with the Guild

I recommend registering your copyright this way, if possible. The contacts and aid that the Guild provides are helpful, especially for beginning writers in search of representation.

Pursuing the “poor-man’s copyright”

Writers have used this method as an initial protection against theft for decades. After you have a draft, print it out and mail it to yourself. When it arrives, don’t open it. The idea is that if you suspect that your work has been stolen, you have a script postmarked on the date that you completed the work. I don’t recommend this method as your primary protection, but it certainly doesn’t hurt. Because you officially copyright polished or published works, you might try this method with an earlier draft.



REMEMBER

Whatever you do, register your material in some fashion prior to sending it. Although most of Hollywood is more interested in purchasing your story than stealing it, you can never be too careful.

- » Creating the package deal
- » Pitching your script like a pro
- » Seeking representation
- » Approaching studio executives
- » Knowing what happens next
- » Navigating success

Chapter 20

Getting Your Screenplay Noticed

Congratulations, you're ready to launch yourself into the industry. You have a polished script (or more than one), a steadily growing contact log, and you're fairly market savvy. Now, all you need is what I call a "willing and able" — someone who's *willing* to read your script and *able* to generate interest in it. This person may be an agent, a manager, a producer, a director, or a star — you don't know yet. But you're about to find out.

Steel yourself for a bumpy but enlightening ride. This part of the process involves risk and rejection. Behind every "yes" lies at least ten "nos," and not every "yes" will land you a job. However, you're also armed with a positive attitude and an unflinching determination, right? Make the promise to yourself now: You will do what you can, and you won't give up.

This chapter helps you commercialize your product. It also guides you through the emails, calls, and meetings that stand between you and your "willing and able." Finally, this chapter touches upon what to expect when (not if) you get your foot in the door.

Designing Your Own Package

A film's package includes anything and everything that makes it commercially (which means financially) attractive to agents, producers, and the audience. Some of these elements include

- » A high-concept story with low-budget needs
- » Any director or actors already attached to the project
- » Star potential (Does the film have great roles for Olivia Coleman, Denzel Washington, Anthony Ramos, or Anya Taylor-Joy?)
- » Possible advertising spin-offs (What products might it inspire?)
- » Universal appeal
- » Current Hollywood interest (Is there a buzz on the project?)
- » A resemblance to other box-office hits

The producers usually assemble the package, but you should consider it as well. It will affect how you pitch your story to executives when you land a meeting, and if you can attach people to your project in advance, your story is more likely to sell right away. So consider whether you know of a specific director who might like the material or — if you wrote with certain actors in mind — would they appeal to a mass audience? Can you come up with at least two other films that yours resembles? Answer these questions now before executives surprise you with them later. Selling your story is about predicting what buyers are after and convincing them you can provide it. Knowing the package is a step in that direction.



TIP

Before you begin the process, you should be clear on what's sacred in your script. By *sacred*, I mean what components of your story do you hope to protect above all? The characters? The theme? The outcome? The style? Film is a collaborative medium, and during collaboration, your script will undoubtedly change. Directors will add shots as necessary, editors will condense sequences, and actors may request dialogue changes. The time may come, heaven forbid, when they hire another writer to tweak the script. You're going to lose something along the way.

However, you can certainly highlight elements you want to preserve in your pitch, in your correspondence, and in any material you hand in. So know what's sacred now and plan your marketing strategies accordingly.

Highlighting the universal

Agents, managers, and studio executives want the same thing — a writer with contemporary appeal and staying power. What does that mean? It means that your work will sell, preferably to a large audience, and that you — as an artist — will stand the test of time. Executives look for those qualities in your sales pitch and in your spec script, should they decide to read it. So glance through the script beforehand with the following thoughts in mind. Universal stories

- » Have a hero or heroes worth rooting for
- » Provide a goal or a dream for the hero to pursue
- » Evoke passions, such as fear, envy, joy, hatred, hope, lust, and so on
- » Include formidable obstacles and opponents
- » Offer something familiar: a location, a theme, character relationships. (This element is particularly effective if you're trying to market a web-series)
- » Suggest elements at risk or at stake

Pay particular attention to that last item. You'll likely to be asked what's at stake in your film, and your answer may be the selling point.

So what will be lost if your protagonist fails? It's most likely one or the following things:

- » Someone's life
- » Someone's reputation or integrity
- » Another character's love or admiration
- » A sense of order or harmony
- » Precious objects or information

Hopefully, your story combines several of these elements. They usually ensure you an audience larger than one socioeconomic group of people.

When you pinpoint the universal elements, you can then summarize them in a catchy phrase or two. This phrase may later become your pitch. Is your film

- » A coming-of-age story
- » A family reunion
- » A fight to preserve integrity, reputation, or personal freedom
- » A story of revenge or betrayal
- » A quest for redemption
- » A story of love in the face of hate
- » A triumph of human will and ingenuity
- » A “from rags to riches” adventure

If these phrases sound like clichés, it’s because they are. Most films fit into one of these categories, so they’re familiar to audiences. Yet each grouping includes hundreds of stories that differ in tone, content, and scope. *Billy Elliot* and *Hidden Figures* are both triumphs of the human spirit. *Selma* and *Life Is Beautiful* both champion love in the face of hate. Your film isn’t less unique if it falls into one of these groups; it’s marketable.

Gaining the competitive edge

In order to push ahead of the competition, you have to focus your efforts on the markets your work seems to match. Imagine the ideal audience for your script. How old are they? What stories excite them? Do they like small- or large-scale films? What haven’t they seen in a long time? Who have they never seen in a film?

At the same time you are choosing a market for your work, consider the competition. Other writers pitch to that market. What makes you unique? Is it your professional background? Former police officers and journalists intrigue studio executives, for example. These jobs require a person to track stories down, often from unlikely sources. So if you once held this kind of a position, executives assume you can do the same on the page. Perhaps it’s your cultural background. Maybe it’s who you know. Referrals are the number-one reason that emerging writers are read. Whatever it is, find something that distinguishes you from other writers in your market.



Another way to fine-tune your salesmanship is to imply both economical and emotional benefits. If your film has a strong female protagonist, make that a selling point. A great female role draws box-office revenue (an economical benefit for the company) and makes the film easier to market (an emotional benefit for the producer). The same strategy applies when courting representation. A positive attitude means you'll be more likely to work in the industry (an economical benefit for the agency), and you'll be easier to work with in general (an emotional benefit for the agent). If you advertise both qualities in yourself and the script, you're more likely to land the job.

Considering the reader

Few agents or producers actually read all the work that comes in. Most scripts are handed to professional readers who then type up a *coverage* (a brief synopsis and evaluation) of the story and pass that up for consideration. Coverage also includes a line for the reader to recommend your work or pass on it. If the story earns good coverage, the agent might read the first ten pages.

You can't control everything about how the reader receives your script. The reader may be in a bad mood at the time, may despise screwball comedies, or may be writing a script of their own based on a similar premise. You can't do anything about that. However, knowing what readers look for in a script can be helpful. If you know what might make good coverage, you can work on emphasizing those elements in advance. Figure 20-1 presents the first page of a standard coverage form.

Other examples vary in format, but they generally include the same information.

The reader follows the front page of the form that's shown in Figure 20-1 with a detailed synopsis of the story and a commentary on the overall content.

As a writer, your goal is to grab the reader's attention and give them a favorable impression of the story. In order to do that, your *logline* — that all-important one-line premise — should be exciting (or in this case gory), and the general elements of your story should be clear. You can see, though, that coverage forms are highly subjective. Readers are coached to put their personal preference aside, but that doesn't always happen. Nine times out of ten, the best and only defense is a strong script. The quality of the writing will impress a reader who might not otherwise favor the genre.

Success Films
Coverage Sheet

Title: The Coverage Sheet	Form: Spec
Author: Jane Doe	Page: 110
Time: 1965	Draft/ Date: 1-11-01
Location: Rhode Island	Represented by:
	Submitted by:
Genre: Drama/Coming-of-age	Submitted to: John Doe
	Date Received: 2-2-02
	Date Covered: 3-3-02

Log Line: a young and rather high-strung screenwriter rises to stardom by slaughtering the competition, literally.

Comment Summary: An edge-of-your-seat thriller with a surprising turn of events. There might be a story here if the writer spends more time on character and less on gory detail.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Concept				
Characterization				
Dialogue				
Cinematic Structure				
Story Line				
Setting/ Prod Values				

Pass for Features _____ Consider for Features X

FIGURE 20-1:
The first page
of a standard
coverage form.

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Preparing to Pitch

Pitching a script is an art form, and although it can be stressful, it's something every writer has to perfect before approaching executives or agents. So what is pitching exactly?

A *pitch* is an animated summation of a script with emphasis on the main characters, the conflict, and the genre. When pitching a script, you use this summation to persuade industry professionals to *option* the work (purchase it for consideration). You are either pitching your idea to an agent or manager in the hopes that they'll pass it to producers, or you are pitching directly to producers. If you have written a web series, you either pitch that series as a full television show, or you use that pitch as a springboard when discussing other projects or ideas.

Pitches come in two forms: the two-minute pitch, also known as the *teaser*, and the *story pitch*, which is traditionally 15 to 30 minutes in length, though, the shorter the better. You should have both types of pitches prepared *before* you contact industry personnel. You never know when you'll be called upon to sell your story or how you'll be asked to sell it.

Perfecting the teaser pitch

The *teaser pitch*, also known as an *elevator pitch*, is a short pitch, and when I say short, I mean *short*. Traditionally, you get three sentences to hook listeners into the premise, the genre, and the scope of your film. When crafting this pitch, pay particular attention to what you think they might be listening for. Producers probably want to know the following details:

- » What's the core concept? (See Chapter 13 for more info on concept)
- » How might the film be cast?
- » How much will it cost to make?
- » How will they market it?
- » What films does it resemble?
- » What sort of audience has it already garnered and how might you expand on the current material? (In the case of a web series)

With those elements in mind, your first sentence introduces the concept, the next sentence illustrates the protagonist and their conflict, and the final sentence leaves listeners wanting more. The concept generally suggests the film's budget, and the conflict generally suggests genre, but if not, consider alluding to those somewhere as well.

Here are some examples:

Europe, 1912. Jack Dawson and Rose DeWitt Bukater enjoy a secret and passionate romance after they meet on a ship chartered toward New York. Unfortunately, that ship's the *Titanic*.

Dangerous creatures triggered by sound have slaughtered most of the world, and the remaining population lives silent and alone. Can one family survive this threat, let alone combat it? (*A Quiet Place*)

Northern England, 1984. Young Billy Elliot, the son of a poor local miner, decides to start training for the career he was born for. Ballet. (*Billy Elliot*)

These examples hint at more complex, nuanced stories, and they're intriguing enough to (hopefully) entice listeners into asking for a more detailed description. Practice your teaser pitch at home with a stopwatch. Never exceed a minute — try to do it in 30 seconds, if you can. If you maintain the three-sentence limitation, timing shouldn't be a problem. If executives want to know more, they'll ask. Be animated, enthusiastic, and concise. Movie trailers are good examples of this kind of pitch, as are loglines.



TIP

Some writers craft a teaser pitch for stories they haven't written yet, in case they're asked what other material they're working on, so it never hurts to have two or three teasers on hand.

Selling the story pitch

The story pitch, or the standard pitch, is much longer than the teaser, but try to keep it under 30 minutes, if possible. People in the industry keep long and frantic hours, which affects their attention spans. If you ramble on or get off-track, they're likely to start planning their next meeting before you're done. Some writers use note cards to help them through this pitch. That's perfectly acceptable, but don't rely on them. Reference the notes occasionally, but keep your focus on your listeners. If you practice pitching your story several times before the session, you should know it well enough to make it sound conversational.

The story pitch follows the basic pattern of a *treatment* (see Chapter 19), with a few exceptions:

- » It's helpful to start with an indication of why you were drawn to this idea or moved to write this story. This introduction helps people get a sense of who you are and what you care about.
- » You then highlight your hook or your logline and provide a detailed synopsis of the rest of the story. That synopsis should provide a sense of tone, genre (if applicable), special effects or other design elements, and the target audience.
- » Include a section that spotlights your characters, their motivations, their strengths and weaknesses, and so on. It's important to suggest how they change in the story, either in the section dedicated to character or throughout the pitch. If you envision certain actors in these roles, tailor your character descriptions to suggest them, but don't mention the exact actor you're envisioning

- » Be sure to illustrate any pivotal events or emotional turning points, or any moment of surprise or revelation before revealing the final battle and the resolution. It helps to preface those details with phrases like “Suddenly,” or “In a strange turn of events,” or “In a moment that no one saw coming,” and so on.
- » It’s often useful to end with a sense of why this story should be made now or what impact you hope it will have on audiences.



REMEMBER

These elements are still true if you are pitching your web series that already exists online. You simply describe the characters and storylines that resonated with audiences and suggest how they can be expanded into a full television show.

Because you are giving a longer pitch, you have more chances to go astray. Here are a few things to avoid right away:

- » Use comparison sparingly. It used to be common practice to depict a script through a mash-up of two existing films. (It’s *When Harry Met Sally* in *The Matrix* or it’s *Goonies* meets *Field of Dreams*.) It’s far more important to convey the tone or the genre of the film, so know what your film shares with others, but keep the comparisons brief.
- » Don’t ever compare your script to box-office disasters. No one wants to make another *John Carter*.
- » Avoid listing each plot point in order. Tell them a story instead.
- » Avoid depicting too many subplots or details. Concentrate on two or three characters and pivotal events, or the pitch will become convoluted.
- » Don’t keep pitching if they express disinterest, and (on the bright side) don’t keep pitching after they agree to consider it.
- » Never lie about yourself or the screenplay’s hype. Producers discover false information quickly.



REMEMBER

As with any sale, personality is paramount. If you’re enthusiastic, they will be, too. If you’re charming and witty, they’ll remember you even if they don’t accept the script. And never express desperation. There’s always some other way to generate interest. Pitching scares some writers to death. If you’re one of those artists, do something about it. Acting classes are a great way to build confidence, as are courses in public speaking. Or practice in front of friends and family. See whether they’d want to purchase the script based on your description. While pitching is nerve-racking, it’s a necessary part of the business, so start honing your skills right away.

After you’ve crafted both pitches and are comfortable delivering them, you’re ready to search for an agent, manager, and/or a producer.

Finding a Manager or Agent

You've heard the contradiction: You can't find work without an agent, and you can't find an agent until you've worked. There's a grain of truth here. Unsolicited writers do have a hard time finding managers and agents and it is usually easier to find work once you have an agent or manager. It takes careful planning, meticulous organization, and luck — lots and lots of luck.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

An *unsolicited* writer is one who doesn't yet have representation. Many studios refuse to look at unsolicited work, fearing that it hasn't been through an initial screening process. As soon as you sell a script or find an agent, this dubious title disappears.

Most often, a good agent will find you, once you or your work has garnered some attention. This is one reason writing a web series has become a popular route into the industry. It helps to know which agents or managers you might like to work with in advance, for when that time comes.

So how do you go about finding an agent or manager? The following list gives several good ways to track agencies down:

- » **Your personal contacts:** Call anyone on your contact list who works in the business. Tell them about the script (maybe use that teaser pitch?) and ask whether they're willing to read it or whether they know any agents who might. If they enjoy the piece, they might refer to it themselves. At the very least, you can use that person's name to help pave the way at whatever agency they recommend. Never underestimate the power of a referral.
- » **The WGA:** For a nominal fee, the Writers Guild of America (wga.org) can provide a list of agencies that work with them. It can also tell you who represents writers you admire. So make a list of movies you adore, identify those writers, and find out who's representing them. If your work is similar, that agent might be more apt to consider you.
- » **Trade publications:** If a deal's being made, *Variety* or *The Hollywood Reporter* will announce it. They usually highlight the script that was bought, who wrote it, and who picked it up. They might name the agent, but if not, you have the writer's name, so find out who represents them and see if they're accepting scripts.
- » **Screenwriting conferences and festivals:** I highlight some popular conferences and festivals in Chapter 19, and attending one of these events (or better yet, showcasing work in one) is a great way to make connections. Managers, agents, directors, and studio executives attend these, so it's a fun and informal way to mingle. You might have an opportunity to practice your pitch at some of these events, which is a fast and informative way to launch ideas.

- » **Screenwriting competitions:** In recent years, competitions and awards have been a popular way to find representation. As a result, many people submit work each year, so be prepared for rejection. However, executives and agents take notice of the finalists for the more prominent competitions, which means they're more likely to read your unsolicited script. Be careful of entry fees though, and do your research. Not every competition or award is legit.
- » **An arts attorney:** Arts attorneys will sometimes write a cover letter on your behalf, which can open up more submission opportunities. This approach helps you appear more legitimate than the average emerging writer. This technique doesn't usually work long-term, because lawyers don't carry the same industry appeal as agents or managers, and they don't have as many relationships with producers. That said, if someone likes what you submit, representation often follows.
- » **Become "relevant":** Social media is one of the fastest ways to launch your work and/or garner attention. Do you have short sketches or films that you can post on Instagram or YouTube? If so, curate your platform of choice, self-produce that material, and get it out there. Even if you don't have material to post, you should have a social media presence, if possible, especially if you're trying to break into comedy. I focus on this topic when I discuss writing a web series in Chapter 11, but even if writing a web series doesn't interest you, the tips on becoming web-savvy might.

Once you feel confident with your contact list, highlight any agency or manager that represents artists you admire, any you've heard good things about, and a few boutique agencies as well. It's fine to prioritize that list, but writers never contact just one agent at a time; they'd be 90 years old before they made a sale. You're going to approach them all at once.

Approaching an Agent or Manager

Before sending emails or picking up the phone, you should know the difference between an agent and a manager and you should know what they are looking for in a client.

As I mention in Chapter 19, an agent is someone legally allowed to negotiate contracts on your behalf. As a result, they're primarily concerned with making you (and them) money, so they tend to be project-focused. That said, they also don't want to sign a one-hit wonder, so they may ask to read multiple projects before they sign you. They probably won't provide feedback on that material, unless a studio executive asks for revisions prior to optioning, but it helps to have several scripts ready to send their way. Once they trust you're committed to the work, agents mostly concentrate on negotiating your career *right now*.

A manager, on the other hand, is concerned with your *future*. They can't negotiate contracts, but they read your work and provide feedback, they take your skills and your point of view seriously, they're more accessible and as a result they know more about the kinds of projects you crave. If you work in more than one medium (film, TV, comedy), you'll have more than one agent eventually, and managers can help navigate between them.

Agents and managers both set up meetings for you, but managers often have a more clear sense of your schedule and which industry personnel would best match your skills. Writers used to seek agents first and then managers, but that trend has shifted. These days they often work hand in hand, and good agents will recommend managers to their clients and vice versa. If you pursue a manager instead of an agent, a lawyer will negotiate any contracts.

Regardless of which representation you approach first, agents and managers both want the people they represent to be

- » **Someone whose work they can sell.** Typically, representation makes 10 to 15 percent of whatever sale or option they negotiate. If your work seems particularly marketable, they'll be more likely to take you on.
- » **Someone who understands the business.** Yes, an agent's job is to find work for you. However, your work won't end when an agent accepts you. Most writers continue to pursue opportunities for themselves even after they find representation. So, if you're willing to work, your agent will be, too.
- » **Someone pursuing a career.** Agents know that markets are fickle and that selling a script sometimes takes a long time. They need writers to keep producing despite dry spells. They need writers who are passionate about the craft and determined to sustain a career.
- » **Someone who won't make their job more difficult.** Attitude is everything. If you seem like a high-maintenance writer who requires daily attention and support, agents may pass on your work regardless of its potential.

Consider these attributes as silent requests from each agent you approach. Try to be an agent's ideal writer. Doing so can separate you from hundreds of other less savvy petitioners.

On the flip side, here's what you should look for in representation:

- » **Someone who enjoys your work.** An agent needn't understand your work to recognize its selling potential. If they are willing to take you on for that reason, so be it. However, you may find it difficult to accept criticism from someone who's vague on what you produce. Also, an agent's enthusiasm over a piece

will wear off on whomever they call about it, so it helps if they either enjoy you or what you write (ideally, they love both.)

» **Someone influential.** It helps immensely if your agent has connections in all aspects of the business. If they can't reach producers directly, they should know someone who *can*. Don't shy away from small agencies because you fear that they lack contacts. New agents have often worked for the most powerful people in the business. These days, most agencies cross between TV and film regularly, but it never hurts to verify that fact if you're interested in both.

» **Someone committed.** You want an agent dedicated to getting you work or selling your scripts. It helps if this commitment arises from interest in your writing and not simply financial gain, but really, either one will do. This doesn't mean they'll always get back to you immediately, but it should be clear that they want to work for you.

» **Someone professional.** If you gain representation, you should expect to hear from your agent fairly regularly. Often they contact you when they have news or are setting up a meeting, so you'll hear from them more often while trying to land a project. A good agent will return your calls though and follow up with you after any meetings or pitch sessions. It's perfectly acceptable to ask an agent how often you can expect to hear from them so you're clear in advance.

You often connect with managers more often than with agents. You should be updated on what's being done to further your career and what the response has been so far. They should return your phone calls within 48 hours or have an assistant tell you when to expect a call. They should, at the very least, respond to you in an email. If your agent doesn't provide this service, you may need to look for more professional representation.



REMEMBER

Let me reiterate that you don't need to have an agent to sell a script. There are at least three other ways to get your script through the Hollywood maze, and I detail those options later in this chapter. So don't despair if finding an agent doesn't work out in the first round.

Sending a query

Most writers approach agents through a query email. You can also call an agency or management company, and because that's a less common approach, it works for some people. That said, I don't recommend calling. It can be awkward for both you and the agent (if you even get that far), and you'll be saying pretty much the same thing you say in an email.

A *query* is a pitch in email form. It's your attempt to convince a producer, agent, or star to take a look at your work or meet you in person.



WARNING

Never submit a script without a request to do so. Agents will ignore it, so send a query first.

Queries usually consist of three paragraphs. The first one will change depending on who you're writing to; the second and third remain the same. In the first paragraph, introduce yourself and mention why you're writing. You should include any of the following information:

- » A personal reference, professional mentor, or mutual friend
- » Writing programs or educational institutions you're affiliated with
- » Previous work as a writer or as a reporter, on television, in comedy, and so on.
- » Any festivals or contests you've placed in or writing awards you've received
- » A compliment on one of the agent's deals or on a writer they represent (only include one if it's sincere)

The second paragraph introduces the title of the screenplay you're pitching and your teaser. Be sure to emphasize the hook, your protagonists, the conflict, and the genre in this section.

The third paragraph lets the person know how they can contact you. If you don't live near the West Coast, you might tell the agent that you're interested in assignments and would be happy to travel as necessary. Then thank them for their consideration.

You may rearrange the order in which you provide this information, but I suggest starting with the three-paragraph method. It organizes your pitch and naturally restricts the length of correspondence.



TIP

It's important to pitch the strongest points of your package in a query. If your script has a great concept or hook, begin with that. If you were referred by someone with clout, by all means, say that up front. Agents are interested in any detail that suggests you'd be someone they could generate work for. Give them what they want.

A sample query

Here's a generic version of what you might send to an agency. *Don't* send a script or an outline with this email. Wait for someone to express interest.

Dear Ms. Agent,

I am currently seeking representation for my original film script, ***Luck of the Draw***. The script won the New Screenplay Contest in Grandstand, New York, last year, and it has received two awards since then. The story originated during my stint as a journalist for the *Grandstand Times*.

In ***Luck of the Draw***, energetic young reporter Ace Dobson finds evidence linking a prominent New Yorker to a string of bank robberies. It's a first-time journalist's dream come true, except for one minor detail. The thief in question happens to be his father. ***Luck of the Draw*** is a compelling look at one man's struggle to choose between family loyalty and justice.

I'd love to send the complete script for your review. I also have a treatment, if you prefer. I can be reached at this email or by phone at (123) 456-7890. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

(your signature here)

Jane Doe

Query aftermath: What to expect

The best reply you can get is a “Yes, send me a copy of the screenplay.” If that occurs, send a brief email thanking the agent for that response, and attach your script. Wait at least a month to follow up. You'll have other projects to keep you busy in the interim. Remember to protect your work before you send out a query, either by registering it with the Writers Guild of America or by mailing a copy to yourself so there's a postmark of your draft. For more information about protecting your work, see Chapter 19.

At the beginning, you're likely to receive two responses:

- » The query is rejected.
- » You receive no correspondence at all.

As disheartening as these reactions are, try not to let them affect your work or your determination to succeed. Every writer goes through this at one point in their career.

Using rejection to your advantage

It's a sad but true fact that some writers pursue agents for years to no avail. For every 10 queries you send, you should be prepared to receive 8 or 9 rejections (or non-responses). If you receive 10 rejections, you may feel like throwing in the towel. However, bear in mind two things:

- » Most established writers have experienced rejection at some point.
- » Rejection can point the way to future success.

That last point may seem far-fetched, but when you get a rejection, consider the agent's response. Rejection comes in three tiers, and all of them can be useful to you in some way:

- » **The standard rejection:** The first tier, and most common, is a simple email that thanks you for sending your work but says the agent can't represent you at this time. The key words here are "at this time." If you receive this response, note the agency in your records, note when the rejection was sent, follow up with a simple thank you, and be sure to send another query when you have another script, or when you receive some industry attention.
- » **The informed rejection:** This second tier of rejection is more personal. This response occurs after an agent has agreed to read your work. It's a response that indicates someone has read your script all the way through, and it includes details from your story or your characters that the reader responded to. If you're lucky, it will also suggest what the reader did *not* respond to. The latter information is often more important because it suggests possible revision and/or reader preference. Either way, send an immediate thank you and perhaps inquire if you might send them more work in the future.
- » **The personal rejection:** This response will be from the agent. It usually suggests that the agent enjoyed the read and will tell you directly why they can't accept you as a client at this time. In the best scenarios, the agent will ask you to send other work their way. Again, follow up with a thank you, pitch another script if you have one, or promise to send further work as it comes. This agent should be the first person to send to on the next go-around.



REMEMBER

Rejection never feels good. However, look at it as part of the learning curve. Rejections help direct you toward necessary revisions in your script; they suggest which agencies respond to which genre of work; and they should, if you are in the proper mindset, spur you toward perfecting your script and trying again. And remember that using agents isn't the only way to sell a script in Hollywood. There are other paths to the same end.

Pitching Your Script without an Agent

Waiting to hear from an agent doesn't mean that your career is on hold. Many scripts are sold without representation, so you should also be pursuing at least one of the following options:

- » **Independent producers (indies):** Independent producers run small companies of their own, work for larger studios on a project-by-project basis, or find financial backers for projects that they option.

- » **Actors or directors:** These individuals may read a script and shop it around for you, or they may have production companies of their own.
- » **Private attorneys:** Many companies will accept an attorney cover letter in place of an agent's. Legal representation suggests that you're serious about the script's success, and you know the business better than some. Often, you pay the attorney up front for this service, but some attorneys will negotiate a larger fee later should the script be purchased as a result of their help.
- » **Private financiers:** This group includes grant committees, state commission departments, film festivals, and wealthy individuals who are willing to finance a film.
- » **Crowdfunding sources:** If you are interested and able to produce a short sample of your work, or produce short sketches or films, you can often finance them via crowdfunding. This system works best if you're creating short content you care about that's meant to generate interest in you as a screenwriter. After you generate that interest, you can leverage it into a producer meeting and pitch your full-length scripts. You can also mention that online success in your query emails. I talk more about crowdfunding in Chapter 11.
- » **Online audience engagement:** If you have written a short film or a web series, this is a good time to build your audience and market your work online. The easier it is for producers to find you, the better, and online appeal draws industry interest fairly quickly these days. If you are interested in writing a web series, that information can also be found in Chapter 11.

The first four groups on this list are more likely to consider unsolicited scripts, though referrals never hurt. The primary difference between them lies in what they are after. Producers are looking for films to boost their production companies or writers who match projects that they have in mind. Actors and directors want scripts that will boost their careers. Private financiers are looking for worthwhile projects and sound investments. Heed these different needs in advance and plan your marketing strategies accordingly.

Here's what you need to pitch on your own:

- » At least one polished feature-length script, preferably two or three, or a web series with clear audience appeal and ideas on how to expand it into a television show.
- » A teaser or story pitch for any script you have.
- » Your nutshell synopsis (see Chapter 5) and a detailed treatment (see Chapter 19). You may be asked to submit them in place of a script.

- » A query email tailored to the individual buyer. Mention other work the production company has done, and make sure that actors or directors know that you believe the project is well suited to their talents. This technique may feel phony, but you're approaching them for a reason. Let them know what it is.
- » A standard release form that you feel comfortable signing.

What's a *release form*? Industry executives are wary of unsolicited material, in part, because they fear lawsuits. If you submit material and their company produces something later with a similar theme, you could sue them for theft. A release form, or a *submission agreement*, absolves them of responsibility should such a scenario occur. It's not the best agreement for a writer. If you sign an agreement and they do steal your work, there may be little you can do. However, few studios will even look at your work without a release, so more often than not, you'll have to comply. Most executives will accept a standard form that you draw up with an entertainment lawyer, or they'll send you a copy of the release form they've drafted with theirs.



WARNING

Avoid signing anything that asks you to agree on a selling price before they purchase the script. In fact, avoid signing anything without consulting an entertainment attorney. Some release forms ask you to agree not to sue them should an identical script crop up in this process. The pain it may save you later is well worth the cost of consultation.

After your paperwork's in order, you approach these backers in the same way that you approach an agent:

- » Call or send a query email.
- » Send the script, outline, or synopsis if they request it.
- » Wait a month and call for a progress report.
- » Thank anyone who agrees to read your work.

Your script will probably go to a reader for coverage. If the backers want to meet you, you'll receive a call. If they can't use your material at the moment, you may not receive word back. Remember to continue writing during this process. Writing helps the wait and produces more material to shop around. Don't let rejection affect your work.

What to Do When They Say Yes

If you're persistent enough, or if you garner attention vial social media or through the festival/ award circuit, you'll eventually land a meeting with someone. Arrange a time with that person's assistant, thank them again, and celebrate. You are one

step closer to a career in film. Meetings with agents vary slightly from meetings with executives. After all, these individuals want different things. Luckily, you'll be prepared for both.

Meeting with an agent

If an agent agrees to meet with you, they are already interested in something. It may be your current script, it may be your writing potential, or it may be something in your query. In any case, they'll need more information before signing you up. Be prepared to discuss the following items:

- » **What else you're working on.** You should have one or two more pitches ready when this comes up.
- » **What genres or markets interest you the most.** Are you drawn to thrillers or romantic comedies? Would you be interested in writing for television? Is there anything you're uncomfortable working on?
- » **Your willingness to relocate.** You certainly don't have to move to L.A. to write, but an agent will ask. If you're willing to relocate for the perfect job, tell them that. If not, make sure that they know you'd be happy to commute.
- » **Your career potential.** Why are you writing? How long have you been at it? What are your personal career goals and why? Who else do you know, and what is your business experience thus far?
- » **How well you pitch.** You probably demonstrated this ability already, but you may be asked to do it again.
- » **Your willingness to accept writing assignments.** Agents want to make money just like everybody else. One way they do that is by finding writing assignments for you while you're working on your own projects. They'll want to know if you're willing to accept outside jobs.

If you're lucky, the agent will also mention a contract. Most agents receive 10 percent of any sale they negotiate, and contracts are usually binding for at least 90 days. Managers sometimes receive a little more. If your agent doesn't find you anything after 90 days, you can leave, although you'll probably want to give them more time at the beginning. If your agent is affiliated with the WGA (the Writers Guild of America), you'll receive a standard contract of some sort. If not, it never hurts to run the contract by an attorney.

Even though the desire to secure representation is overwhelming, never feel that you *have* to sign with an agency. You should make inquiries during this meeting as well. Two things that you might ask are

- » Who else does the agent represent? What projects are they most proud of?
- » What does the agent think of your work? (Don't be alarmed if they offer constructive criticism. They might be right.)

Always be honest. If your script has not generated any interest, that's fine. Tell the agent that you've just begun shopping it around. Let them know where you've submitted the work. Doing so saves them the embarrassment of pitching it to a studio that's rejected it in the past. The agent will understand if you are unable to relocate or if you are hesitant about certain projects, although don't emphasize the negative. You are looking for someone you are comfortable with. The agent's looking for an enthusiastic and prolific new writer. Make sure that you both win in the deal.

Meeting with executives

You might find yourself pitching to studio executives for three reasons:

- » Someone read your work and recommended a meeting.
- » The query or script teaser caught their attention. They may or may not want to discuss the script, but something interests them about you or your work.
- » Your agent submitted a spec script, and though they rejected the piece, they're interested in you as a rising talent. These meetings are called "generals" because they're looking to put a face to the material, but they don't have a specific project in mind.

These meetings are nerve-wracking, especially because more than one person is often involved. Dress comfortably, but look professional.

Arrive a little early and sign in with the assistant. Let them know you have an appointment, but it's not for another ten minutes or so (in other words, let them know you're early). Be kind to whomever you meet out front; these people work hard and are often executives in training. Eventually, someone will lead you into the room.

The first portion of the meeting will most likely involve informal chitchat. Keep your energy up and try to relax. Inquire after a project you know they're working on. If they ask you about yourself, be careful. They are not looking for your

biography or even a short summation of your work thus far. They're just breaking the ice. Tell them something interesting, possibly make a tasteful joke, and keep whatever you say concise.

Eventually, they'll ask what projects you're working on. Here's where your story pitch comes in. If they've expressed an interest in one of your scripts, expand on what they already know and articulate why that story's important right now. If it's an informal meeting, pitch an idea; if possible, pitch two or three. If they like one of these ideas, they may offer you a deal to develop material. If not, they're most likely interested in your creative ability.

Ask whether they're looking for any kinds of projects in particular and listen carefully to what they suggest. They probably have a writing assignment open. They may ask you to come up with a pitch for one of their ideas. Be aware that you're not the only writer they've asked. Eventually, they'll choose one writer for the project. However, the fact that they've extended a request is a step in the right direction.



TIP

Sometimes, studio executives will offer revision suggestions in a pitch meeting and request a second draft. This is a good sign! It means they're familiar enough with your work to make suggestions, and it implies a second meeting. Take note, though, that their top priority may be marketability, not quality. It helps to listen for the "note behind the note," or the question or confusion that leads them to a marketability note. If they want you to change the genre, for instance, maybe your current genre or style is inconsistent or unclear. If they want you to make a character more "universal," maybe their conflict needs to feel more dire, or their motivation needs clarification. You don't need to take every note you're given, but you should consider *why* they've requested the change.

When the meeting is over, they'll thank you and say that they'll be in touch. Maybe you've landed a job, maybe not. Either way, send a thank-you email and congratulate yourself. You're moving up.

Looking Ahead: Upon Achieving Success

Success always has two parts — the financial and the personal. Your financial success will be based on acquiring one of the following deals:

- » **The sale of a spec script.** This deal is rare, but fantastic when it occurs. If you have an agent, they'll contact as many potential buyers as they can. The ensuing auction may mean a six-figure check, more if your script is produced. Again, this event is rare, but you can always dream!

- » **A development deal.** This deal occurs when a studio or producer likes a pitch and hires you to develop it. It might be a pitch you brought in or one they asked you to design. You agree on a purchase price and are paid in installments.
- » **An option.** Here, the producer or studio options the rights to a script for a smaller sum and maintains them for a specified length of time. During that time, the producer or studio attempts to attach talent to the project and generate a buzz. At the end of the time, they'll either purchase the script or pass on the deal altogether.
- » **A staff position.** This option is for writers interested in television. If a producer likes your work, they may add you to a writer's room for a show currently in or slated for production. This is steady pay, but the hours are long, and you may have to relocate to L.A. If writing a web series is what launches your career, or if that format is exciting to you, then a staff position is a natural next step. Many screenwriters work in TV these days and vice versa.

Should you be offered any of these deals, your agent will handle the contract negotiations. If you don't have an agent at the time, you can use the interest in your script to secure one. Otherwise, negotiate the contract through an entertainment attorney.



REMEMBER

The Hollywood market is all about highs and lows, ups and downs. One moment, you'll be in a meeting, pitching like a pro; the next minute, you're back to sending queries and collecting rejections. Yet throughout the roller coaster ride, one thing remains constant: You're still writing, which leads me to the second definition of success — *artistic success*. Because I consider your artistic success more important than financial success, I've crafted it into a final note to send you off.

A Final Note

If I have one final message for you, it's this: Writing is an ancient art form and a noble profession. When people ask what you do for a living, practice saying, "I'm an artist" or "I'm a writer," and leave it at that. Take pride in what you do. Write for reasons unconnected with development deals, options, or beach-front property. Write because you love the process. Write because there are things that you want to know. Write because you can't imagine life without writing. If you maintain this passion for the craft, the rest will fall into place.

5

The Part of Tens

IN THIS PART . . .

Consider different approaches to screenwriting, based on successful writers in various genres.

Learn to debunk common screenwriting myths that can get in your way.

- » Looking at different views on the craft
- » Studying the masters in the field
- » Following separate paths to success

Chapter **21**

Ten Screenwriters You Should Know

So who has been or is currently generating the most dynamic stories for Hollywood? That's a good question — and one that's rarely asked outside the confines of studios. By the time a film comes out, the all-star cast is usually what's drawing crowds, or perhaps the director's reputation or the film's premise is causing a stir. Yet, ask moviegoers who came up with that premise, and they're likely to cite the director or simply shake their heads and admit defeat. You can't really fault them for not knowing who wrote the epic adventure, piercing drama, or romantic comedy they're about to enjoy. Most writers spend their whole careers in relative anonymity. And yet, without writers, where would we be?

This chapter celebrates ten artists and the work they've brought to the screen. They are by no means the only writers you should be familiar with, and only a few are among the most prolific, but together, they present an eclectic and diverse body of work. Some of them adapt fiction while others churn out original content; some favor one genre, while others defy categorization; and many of them work in television as well as film. I also chose writers who arrived in Hollywood via different paths. Some began in comedy, others began onstage, and several are famous for acting in the work they create. Finally, there's a breadth of experience in this list. Some of these writers worked in the industry for years, and some are newer to the scene. So here's the question: You've probably seen their work, but do you know their names?

Sofia Coppola

Occupations: screenwriter, actress, director. Industry credits:

- » ***New York Stories*** (segment ***Life without Zoe***) (1989)
- » ***The Virgin Suicides*** (1999)
- » ***Lost in Translation*** (2003)
- » ***Marie Antoinette*** (2006)
- » ***Somewhere*** (2010)
- » ***The Beguiled*** (2017)
- » ***On The Rocks*** (2020)

Among others . . .

Sofia Coppola was never a newcomer to Hollywood. Sofia is the daughter of director Francis Ford Coppola and the cousin of actors Jason Schwartzman and Nicolas Cage. She's worked as an actress for many years and, in fact, made her film debut in *The Godfather*. (She played a baby boy.) She's also the first American woman to be nominated for Best Director, for the movie *Lost in Translation*, which earned her the Oscar for best original screenplay instead.

As a writer, Coppola is known for creating characters who share a sense of disconnection from their environments. Characters in her screenplays share intimate information with strangers because it's easier than sharing it with friends. In *The Virgin Suicides*, a group of men become obsessed with five sisters who have been sequestered away from society by their parents. In *Lost in Translation*, Bill Murray plays a faltering actor who comes to Tokyo on business and strikes up an intimate friendship with an unsatisfied housewife, played by Scarlett Johansson.

Coppola has said it's those relationships that interest her the most — the people you've just met who feel as if they're longtime friends, the small, surprising connections between strangers that remind us we're not alone. She admits she initially feared that *Lost in Translation* would seem self-indulgent, but it's immediate success proved otherwise. Her advice to new screenwriters, therefore, is that if a subject compels you, it will probably compel somebody else. Coppola's scripts are also poetically spare. Actors say she provides just enough visual information to allow them to comfortably improvise. They also say she is a fervent believer of trying to write something before you know what that something really is. It's a risky formula that seems to be paying off in full.

Nora Ephron

Occupations: screenwriter, director, producer, novelist. Industry credits:

- » *Silkwood* (1983)
- » *Heartburn* (1986)
- » *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)
- » *This Is My Life* (1992)
- » *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)
- » *Michael* (1997)
- » *You've Got Mail* (1998)
- » *Hanging Up* (2000)
- » *Bewitched* (2005)
- » *Julie & Julia* (2009)

Among others . . .

Nora Ephron's professional resume scrolls well past the page that most screenwriters are encouraged to maintain. Film credits aside, Ephron was also a successful novelist and essay writer, who penned *Heartburn*, *Crazy Salad*, and *Scribble Scribble* prior to becoming a successful screenwriter. Her prolific bent makes sense, however, when you consider her upbringing. Ephron was the child of screenwriting team Phoebe and Henry Ephron, noted for scripts like *There's No Business Like Show Business* and *Desk Set*. Her childhood included many bouts of verbal repartee, and one of her sisters compared family dinners to "the Algonquin Round Table."

Ephron quickly decided to become a writer, though she originally sought work as a reporter. After graduating from Wellesley with a journalism degree, she went on to write for the *New York Post*, *Esquire*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. So when did the screenwriting bug kick in? Her first movie assignment was *Silkwood*. It was nominated for an Oscar, and the rest, as they say, is history — or herstory as the case may be. With a career spanning from the mid-70s until her death in 2012, Ephron was one of the few women *always* working in Hollywood. In several interviews, she spoke candidly about the industry. She noted that good books are generally published, but much of what is written in Hollywood goes unproduced. Her advice? Keep writing. Don't worry about the final product or if there's even going to be one. Just keep writing.

William Goldman

Occupations: screenwriter, novelist. Industry credits:

- » ***Masquerade*** (1965)
- » ***Harper*** (1966)
- » ***Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*** (1969)
- » ***The Hot Rock*** (1972)
- » ***The Stepford Wives*** (1975)
- » ***The Great Waldo Pepper*** (1975)
- » ***All the President's Men*** (1976)
- » ***The Princess Bride*** (1987)
- » ***Misery*** (1990)
- » ***Chaplin*** (1992)
- » ***Maverick*** (1994)
- » ***The General's Daughter*** (1999)
- » ***Hearts in Atlantis*** (2001)

Among others . . .

William Goldman was an icon in the screenwriting world, and most of his films have stood the test of time. Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1931, he spent much of his childhood watching movies in the Alcyon. This theater and his experiences therein may well have sparked his interest in storytelling. He started writing novels after the war. He adapted his second novel into a screenplay (*Soldier in the Rain*). Shortly thereafter, he wrote *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which won him an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and a WGA screen award. It also launched his career in film.

Goldman worked steadily with various studios and stars until his death in 2018. He was known for his gift of dialogue, his tendency to approach difficult subjects with humor and humorous subjects with depth, and for his ability to craft multifaceted characters in fast-paced plots. He grew increasingly excited by the advances in film technology toward the end of his life. He believed that the finished product more often matched the one in a screenwriter's mind. He also encouraged new writers to study his craft. In his book *Adventures in the Screen*

Trade, Goldman mused that all people want is a well-told story, but there are fewer and fewer storytellers around. He suspected that many new writers become frustrated too easily, and he disabused them of the notion that professional screenwriters have some secret stash of information or techniques. “They don’t,” he said. “We’re all just tearing our hair out together.”

Charlie Kaufman

Occupations: writer, director, producer.

Television credits:

- » *The Edge* (1992)
- » *Ned and Stacy* (1996)
- » *The Dana Carvey Show* (1996)
- » *IQ 83* (TBD)

Film credits:

- » *Being John Malkovich* (1999)
- » *Human Nature* (2001)
- » *Adaptation* (2002)
- » *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002)
- » *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)
- » *Synecdoche, New York* (2008)
- » *Anomalisa* (2015)
- » *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020)
- » *Memory Police* (TBD)

Among others . . .

Charlie Kaufman is one of the best-known screenwriters in Hollywood, perhaps because his films are simultaneously funny and upsetting. His popularity also may be because his subplots rival the main plot in complexity, and his stories demand

that audiences question their definition of reality. It may also be because he tends to write himself into his screenplays — directly as in *Adaptation*, or indirectly as in *Being John Malkovich* or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The quirky main characters in these films are both self-deprecating and self-involved, and all seem to exist in a constant state of emotional crisis. Most of these characters also narrate their experience as they have it. As a result, audiences walk away feeling like they know the characters in the story but also the writer behind them.

While Kaufman admits he's not a highly disciplined writer, he does tend to concentrate on the characters first and allow them to lead him to a story. His final step is to flesh out the dynamics between characters, their logic for behaving as they do, and so on, and this stage of the process requires the most time.

His advice for young screenwriters is both practical and thematic. First, he says, find a good agent. Kaufman was without one for the first ten years of his career, and he says hiring a good agent made all the difference. Also, write stories that seem true to you. If they cease to feel true as you're writing, scrap what you've done and go back to the beginning. Finally, when you're stuck, try writing your personal anxieties into the film. After all, he says, you can only use that anxiety once, as it happens, so it tends to result in an authentic voice.

While Kaufman is private about his career, he has said that he rarely worries about critical acclaim or reviews. Making movies is about collaboration, and that collaboration is what matters at the end of the day.

Spike Lee

Occupations: director, writer, producer, professor.

Television credits:

» *NYC Epicenters 9/11—2021 ½* (2021)

» *She's Gotta Have It* (2020)

Film credits:

» *She's Gotta Have It* (1986)

» *School Daze* (1988)

» *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

- » ***Mo' Better Blues*** (1990)
- » ***Jungle Fever*** (1991)
- » ***Malcolm X*** (1992)
- » ***Crooklyn*** (1994)
- » ***Clockers*** (1995)
- » ***4 Little Girls*** (1997)
- » ***He Got Game*** (1998)
- » ***Summer of Sam*** (1999)
- » ***Bamboozled*** (2000)
- » ***A Huey P. Newton Story*** (2001)
- » ***When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*** (2006)
- » ***If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise*** (2010)
- » ***Chi-Raq*** (2015)
- » ***BlackKkKlansman*** (2018)
- » ***Da Five Bloods*** (2020)

Among others . . .

In many ways, Spike Lee's extensive (I mean look at it) body of work is a creative master class on race relations in American history. His films tackle racial inequity, class warfare, gang culture, and politics, and tend to feature young people of color struggling to succeed in a violent, racist world. His work is provocative, topical, and often really, *really*, funny. It has also been called uncompromising, perhaps because he writes, directs, and often produces his own films to ensure a unity of vision that's uncommon in the industry. His production company, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, launches much of his work as well as films that match his vision. It's not surprising, given his point of view, that Lee's made a name for himself directing documentaries as well. *The Original Kings of Comedy*, *4 Little Girls*, *When the Levees Broke*, and *NYC Epicenters 9/11→2021 1/2* are just a few projects he's helmed recently, tackling black stand-up comics, a 1963 Alabama Baptist church bombing, the government response to Hurricane Katrina, and 9/11, respectively.

Lee was born in pre-civil rights Georgia before moving to Brooklyn, New York. His father was a jazz musician and his mother was a teacher, and those influences clearly impact his films with their memorable soundtracks and their focus on stories rarely told on-screen. His family often participates directly as well — his

father contributing music, his brother acting as a still photographer, and his sister as a performer. In his long and varied career, he's garnered Oscar nominations for *Do the Right Thing* and *4 Little Girls*, a Peabody Award for *A Huey P. Newton Story*, and an Emmy award for *When the Levees Broke*. Many screenwriters also work in TV these days and vice versa. He won his first Oscar for *BlacKkKlansman* in 2019.

His is the sort of cinematic legacy that would satisfy most artists, but Lee's other passion is creating opportunities for the next generation of artists of color. Despite recent efforts, Hollywood remains a predominantly white industry, and Spike Lee is at the forefront of the fight for change. His efforts to create space for emerging artists are evident in his interviews, in his production company, and in his mentorship. In 2002, Lee became the Artistic Director at the NYU/ Tisch Graduate Film Program, and his mission is to encourage young artists to get their stories into the world. His advice for those artists? "I hope they're doing it because they love it, not because they want to be rich or famous . . . The main reason, the focus is, 'This is what I want to do for the rest of my life and I love it.' Not to say that you don't want to make money, but the passion should be driven by your love for that particular thing that you're doing."

John Logan

Occupations: screenwriter, playwright, executive producer.

Television credits:

- » *Penny Dreadful* (2014)
- » *Penny Dreadful: City of Angels* (2020)

Film credits:

- » *Tornado* (1996)
- » *RKO 281* (1999)
- » *Bats* (1999)
- » *Any Given Sunday* (2000)
- » *Gladiator* (2001)

- » ***Time Machine*** (2002)
- » ***Star Trek: Nemesis*** (2002)
- » ***The Last Samurai*** (2003)
- » ***The Aviator*** (2004)
- » ***Sweeney Todd*** (2007)
- » ***Coriolanus*** (2011)
- » ***Rango*** (2011)
- » ***Hugo*** (2011)
- » ***Skyfall*** (2012)
- » ***Spectre*** (2015)
- » ***Alien: Covenant*** (2017)

Among others . . .

John Logan didn't always live in Hollywood; he spent much of his early career in Chicago. Although he entered Northwestern University to pursue acting, he left school a writer. While at NU, his play *Never the Sinner* won the Agnes Nixon Playwriting Festival and later received a production in Chicago. He stuck with that script, rewriting and removing characters between other projects, and 13 years later, it went on to win the New York Outer Critics Circle award for an off-Broadway play. That same dogged determination won him an Oscar nomination for the HBO film *RKO 281*, the story of the making of *Citizen Kane*. Its release was the result of seven years of research on Logan's part. He received his second Oscar nod for *Gladiator*, a film that he wrote with David Franzoni and William Nicholson, and his third Oscar nod for *The Aviator*, which he wrote by himself.

One of John Logan's most inspiring qualities is his unwavering passion for his craft. He advocates a fierce regimen of reading, writing, and being "multi-tentacled" (as he puts it), or knowing something about as many subjects as possible. His writing routine includes rising at 6 a.m. and working well through the day. When crafting a first draft, Logan commits to "total immersion." He researches the era, reads literature, and listens to music of the time; he looks at the story from every angle. He tends to juggle several projects at once, although each one is in a different stage of development, and without fail, he finds something to celebrate in each one. It's difficult, if not impossible, to speak with John Logan and leave uninspired. He's the perfect salesman for the screenwriting craft — because he means what he says.

Jordan Peele

Occupations: director, actor, writer, producer.

Television credits:

- » ***Mad TV*** (2003)
- » ***Key & Peele*** (2012)
- » ***The Last O.G.*** (2018)
- » ***The Twilight Zone*** (2020)

Film credits:

- » ***Keanu*** (2016)
- » ***Get Out*** (2017)
- » ***Us*** (2019)
- » ***Candyman*** (2021)
- » ***Wendell and Wild*** (2022)

Among others . . .

Many people were introduced to Jordan Peele's work when his hit horror film *Get Out* launched in 2017, but comedy fans know that his career began long before that, as a writer and performer on the sketch comedy show *Mad TV*. It was there he met Keegan-Michael Key, and a longtime friendship and collaboration was born. The two went on to co-write and star in the popular sketch show *Key & Peele* and the movie *Keanu*. Thereafter, industry professionals expected Peele to continue his work in the comedy circuit, but he had other plans in mind. A self-proclaimed fear fanatic, he had wanted to direct a horror film since the age of 13. He believes comedy and horror are arenas where people feel safe to expel fear and discomfort, and where shocking an audience is a clear objective. Noting how films like *The Stepford Wives* tackle gender, Peele used those examples as a template for the way he approached race in *Get Out*. The audience response was immediate and far exceeded box office expectations.

Made for less than \$5 million, *Get Out* grossed \$250 million worldwide and amassed Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, and Best Screenplay, which he won. His approach to *Get Out* influenced the way he uses

horror as a vehicle for social and political critique in his follow-up projects. Both his film *Us*, which grossed \$255 million worldwide, and his recent re-imagining of *Candyman* tackle questions about which outside forces control our image and which people get to play hero or villain in contemporary America.

Peele has said he pursues these projects out of obsession for the genre but also to prove that black films, which have historically been marginalized in the industry, can break box office records as mainstream fare. He recently furthered that mission by becoming a budding media mogul. He launched his company, Monkeypaw Productions (named after a short horror story) in 2012, and his success with *Get Out* helped him move into the producer's role on projects like Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* and HBO's hit series *Lovecraft Country*. If you're familiar with these projects, it should be clear that regardless of which role he dons, his focus as an artist remains on finding ways to reveal the dark side of human beings, despite their best intentions. He believes that if you're not baring part of your soul in the creative process, you're not doing it right, and horror has become the genre in which he bares his. In his Oscar acceptance speech and several follow-up interviews, Peele admits he stopped writing *Get Out* at least 20 times because he thought it was impossible to produce. I'm certainly not alone in being grateful he persevered.

Issa Rae

Occupations: actress, writer, producer.

Web series credits:

- » *Dorm Diaries* (2007)
- » *Fly Guys Present the "F" Word* (2009)
- » *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (2012)

Television credits:

- » *The Choir* (2013)
- » *Insecure* (2016)
- » *Rap Sh*t* (TBD)

Among others . . .

You might notice that Issa Rae’s credits don’t include any screenplays (at the date of this publication). So why is she being featured in a book called *Screenwriting For Dummies*? My reasoning is three-fold. For one thing, if you read even a few chapters of this book, you’ll notice an emphasis on producing your own content as a way to break into the industry. Issa Rae’s career is the perfect example of how powerful short-form media, like web series, comedy sketches, or short films can be and how quickly they can garner you attention. Issa Rae launched her career with three web series which she produced, starred in, and curated via YouTube. The most recent series — *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* — led to a job writing and starring in the popular HBO comedy show *Insecure*. Rae turned that job into a \$40 million deal with WarnerMedia that gives them exclusive rights to her TV work for five years and Rae a first-look film deal with Warner Bros. Pictures, New Line Cinema, and HBO Max. That’s an impressive feat for someone as young as Rae, which leads me to my second reason for including her in this list. She’s one of the hardest working, collaborative, and visionary writers of her generation, and her impact on the industry is already palpable.

One of Issa Rae’s primary artistic missions is to create opportunities for young artists of color, as writers, directors, and performers on her shows, but also as agents, managers, and studio executives. She’s remained loyal to the people she came up with in the industry, and she’s on record saying she wants to help other artists find their collaborative teams as well. Rae’s team recently launched Hoorae (pronounced “hooray”) Media, a production company partnering with HBO to produce film, TV, and digital content as a way to support stories by, for, and about people of color.

If you feel like there aren’t enough hours in a day to accomplish your own work, much less make space for others to do the same, you’re not alone, but somehow Rae is making time to do just that. Which leads me to my third and final reason to include her on this list — there are clearly film deals in her future. In the past decade, she’s won a Shorty for best new web show, garnered multiple Emmy and Golden Globe nominations for her work on *Insecure*, her memoir was an instant *New York Times* bestseller, and she was recently named one of *Time Magazine*’s 100 most influential people in the world. If she can do all that in just 10 years, imagine what she can do with more.

Taika Waititi

Occupations: writer, producer, actor.

Television credits:

- » ***Flight of the Conchords*** (2007)
- » ***Wellington Paranormal*** (2018)
- » ***What We Do in the Shadows*** (2019)
- » ***Reservation Dogs*** (2021)
- » ***Time Bandits*** (TBD)

Film credits:

- » ***Eagle vs. Shark*** (2007)
- » ***Boy*** (2010)
- » ***What We Do in the Shadows*** (2014)
- » ***Hunt for the Wilderpeople*** (2016)
- » ***Jojo Rabbit*** (2019)
- » ***Thor: Love and Thunder*** (2022)
- » ***Flash Gordon*** (TBD)

Among others . . .

Like Spike Lee, Taika Waititi often directs and acts in the films he writes. Though he worked steadily in the industry for over a decade and developed a cult following for his earlier New Zealand–based films, his career skyrocketed into global prominence in 2017 when he directed *Thor: Ragnarok*. In part, it’s because the action film is imbued with the offbeat comedy Waititi’s known for, but it also contains a warning about empires that try to erase their exploitative past.

Striking a balance between political content and lighthearted comedy has become a staple of Waititi’s work, as has his reputation for being one of the nicest artists in the business. *Jojo Rabbit* is a comedy about the unlikely friendship between a Hitler youth and a Jewish girl hiding in his attic. *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* is a comedy about the foster system. *Boy* is a comedy about a young boy who idolizes his deeply flawed absentee father. Waititi is candid about his point of view. Comedy is how he delivers challenging subject matter to an audience who loves the former and craves the latter. It feels like he’s “wrapping an arm around you while stepping on your foot,” as the adage goes. Another staple of Waititi’s work is

highlighting the funniest aspects of the most mundane parts of his characters' lives. As a result, his protagonists are affable, unsteady, and instantly endearing, and their journeys are as surprising to them as they are to us.

While Waititi emphasizes process over product, his playful and energetic style has paid off at the box office in recent years. In New Zealand, *Boy* broke records for its opening-weekend revenue. *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* and *What We Do in the Shadows* received critical acclaim and surpassed financial expectations. *Jojo Rabbit* won the 2019 Oscar for best adapted screenplay, making Waititi the first person of Maori descent to win an Academy Award. It was also named one of the best films of the year by the American Film Institute and the National Board of Review.

More recently, his comedy series *Reservation Dogs*, which features almost entirely indigenous creative and production teams, has been named one of the best new TV shows of 2021. When asked why his projects are of such different genre and scope, Waititi has indicated that it's by design. Early in his career, he feared Hollywood would only send him scripts like the ones already done, so he purposefully sought out projects that were entirely different from each another. He encourages artists to challenge industry expectations whenever possible, so any creative limitations are of their own choosing.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge

Occupations: actress, writer, producer.

Television credits:

- » *Drifters* (2014)
- » *Crashing* (2016)
- » *Fleabag* (2016)
- » *Killing Eve* (2019)

Film credits:

- » *No Time to Die* (2021)

Among others . . .

Like Issa Rae, Phoebe Waller-Bridge is a relative newcomer to writing screenplays, but she's responsible for some of the most transgressive and audacious moments in recent television history, and her film career is on the rise. In fact, she recently signed a \$20 million deal with Amazon Prime, promising future TV and film collaborations for at least five years.

Born and raised in London, Waller-Bridge launched her career as an actress and a playwright. Her hit television show, *Fleabag*, began as a one-woman play written for Waller-Bridge to perform. On first glance, the show's premise doesn't seem like traditional Hollywood fare. Yet the sometimes-dissociative woman known only as "Fleabag," who poorly navigates life and love in the wake of her best friend's death, struck a chord with audiences and tossed Waller-Bridge into the public eye. That show, like its predecessor *Crashing*, showcases Waller-Bridge's signature style — raw emotion delivered with biting and often shocking humor. One of her missions seems to be making everything she writes feel like a wild and deeply personal ride, slamming you into a poignant moment mid-laugh or undercutting sentiment with a raunchy joke. She's also exceptional at penning sexy, defiant women who succeed in spite of (or because of) the messy way they barrel through life. Her hit show *Killing Eve* features the growing obsession between a whip-smart, albeit clumsy, security operative and a sexy, mercurial assassin. Yet, while complicated women are her forte, she also affords her male characters opportunities to be vulnerable and naive, which is rare on-screen. In both cases, she uses comedy to disarm her audience moments before she punches them in the gut.

When asked about her craft, Waller-Bridge says there should be at least three things happening at all times in each scene — the character's objective, the relationship forming to whomever they're with, and the element of surprise — a stifling sweater that won't come off, a horrendous and distracting smell, an itch in an embarrassing place, and so on. In this way, characters who are unsavory on the outside are showcased in vulnerable positions, and no situation goes as planned. You might not like all her protagonists, but you'll empathize with them, nonetheless. Given the trajectory of her career so far, it seems fitting that her first big film project is the next James Bond thriller, making her only the second woman in history credited on the franchise.

- » Debunking common myths
- » Making it in the business

Chapter 22

Ten Screenwriting Myths

Any profession that's been around long enough, or as my grandfather would say "any profession worth its salt," is riddled with myths or unhelpful assumptions. Screenwriting is no exception. This chapter challenges ten of those myths — the top offenders, if you will. I encourage you to begin trouncing them now so that they don't hinder your progress later.

I Have to Live in Los Angeles to Write Screenplays

"No, you don't" is the fastest and most complete response for this myth, especially for anybody writing a first screenplay. Producers and agents don't care where you live. If you can write a strong story and email them a draft, they're satisfied. If your screenplays are produced, you'll probably spend concentrated time in California or other parts of the country. The more films you sell, the more traveling you'll do, but with the advent of electronic communication and priority mail, you should be able to write from virtually anywhere. Remember also that film companies are cropping up all over the country. New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Austin, and Miami are now on the list of cinematically thriving cities, and smaller production companies are launching new work all the time. Is it easier to take meetings with industry professionals if you live in or around Los Angeles? Yes. It is, and you may want to consider relocating once your screenwriting career

takes off. That said, you can always schedule trips to Los Angeles in which you take a number of meetings all at once. Many emerging writers opt to try this approach before committing to the West Coast.



TIP

“Do I want to live in Los Angeles?” is really the question to ask. How immediately connected would you like to be with the Hollywood scene? If you thrive on hustle and bustle, if you’re an inherent salesman and your own best agent, you might love LA life. However, don’t think that you’ll miss out if you live in the opposite direction. Many writers feel that life outside LA keeps them grounded and focused on the work instead of on time spent cultivating connections. In addition, writers who spend years living in LA sometimes run out of material that doesn’t revolve around the industry, and their work ceases to have universal appeal. Your story is the key. Write a great story, and the world will come to you.

I Have to Go to Grad School to Learn How to Write

If this myth were true, half of today’s screenwriters wouldn’t be writing. If your aim is to teach screenwriting, then yes, a degree in writing or film will help. If your aim is purely artistic, your career depends on your ability to tell a story. If the script is exciting, innovative, and marketable, it’s going to generate interest. If the story is flat or cliché-ridden, a degree from the best film school on the planet can’t help you.

A writer should be curious, passionate, alert, and determined. In many ways, determination gets you further than raw talent can. You may dream up the next *Casablanca* or *Okja*, but if you don’t sit down every day and pound it out, who will know? This tenet is especially true if you want to write a web series or work in television (or both). Much of that job is learned “in the trenches,” either from hours spent launching your own series online or from more seasoned staff writers in a writer’s room. Screenwriting is a difficult job. It requires hours of writing, a capacity to meet deadlines, a mind that can juggle many tasks at once, and constant collaboration. Getting through all that is more than half the battle.

Will a film school or a creative-writing program help you? It depends on what you’re looking for. Educational settings offer perks that may be worth investigating:

» **A network:** The students, mentors, and visiting artists you meet may turn out to be invaluable when you’re trying to sell your work later.

- » **A workshop:** Film schools and writing departments generally provide a critical forum for your work. You'll have to bounce your work between readers later on — why not do it here?
- » **Deadlines:** Schools require you to write at least two screenplays during your stint, sometimes three or four. You may generate an entire portfolio by the time you leave.
- » **Classes, classes, classes:** Everything that you learn strengthens your writing. Universities provide an array of subjects for you to explore. They also provide an array of mediums to explore, so if you want a more diverse portfolio that includes a web series, TV pilots, and screenplays, then film school might be for you.



TIP

If you want some of these perks but would rather not commit to an entire program, see whether the educational institutions near you offer writing courses or seminars. Colleges, libraries, and community centers tend to schedule creative-writing classes or workshops after school hours, at night, and in the summer. Also, screenwriting expos are held all over the country, but in Los Angeles in particular. I encourage you to consider the educational route, but don't place undue importance on it. In order to write, you must have a story and a will to write. If you have those things, a diploma is just icing.

If I Can Write for Film, I Can Write for TV

This is a “maybe myth.” If you can write a compelling screenplay, you *might* be well-suited to crafting a television series. After all, both require a strong work ethic, a narrative plan, and active storylines fueled by motivated characters in struggle of some sort. However, screenwriting and television writing are vastly different mediums, with different structures, schedules, and goals. As a result, they require different capabilities.

For instance, a full-length screenplay runs between 100 and 120 pages and follows a few central storylines through conflict to conclusion. The variation in scripts often involves how events are organized and what genre they are being written in. Screenplays can rely more on image than on dialogue, as there's more time for events to unfold. Teleplays, on the other hand, are shorter, dialogue-driven, and they come in any number of forms. Is it a 60-minute drama for a 12-episode show? A 30-minute comedy for a long-running sitcom? An hour and fifteen-minute thriller for a six-episode mini-series? A five-minute short for a ten-episode web series? These are a just few of the many possible templates. In addition, while screenplays have clear beginnings, middles, and ends (though not always in that order), TV shows are episodic. Each season may track one central conflict, but each

character will have multiple journeys along the way; each episode will have its own beginning, middle, and end, and most conflicts don't resolve right away.

A screenwriter's lifestyle is also vastly different from that of someone writing for TV. Unless you write with a partner, screenwriters live a somewhat solitary life. They spend months (if not years) crafting scripts to sell or leverage into a work assignment. Once on assignment, they get notes on drafts and revise them. While they endure cycles of meetings and commune with their agent periodically, it's often just them and a blank page. Their projects vary in duration and can arrive at any time of the year.

Television writers also draft scripts that they try to sell or leverage, but once they land an assignment, their lives are far more social. They enter a writer's room full of peers where they brainstorm and outline an entire season, and they may write part of the show, or they may simply develop it. Television writers aren't in charge of their schedule. They work 9 to 5 days, meeting with their team regularly, if not daily, to go over what needs to happen before deadline. They don't receive credit for their work unless they write an episode, but the income is steady throughout the process. They're often writing characters who have existed for a season or two, so they need to adjust their ideas for consistency's sake. Once that season is complete, it's on to the next job. Staffing for most shows happens in April and May, so the calendar for this work is more rigid as well, though with the rise in streaming platforms that's shifting a bit. If you are writing a web series, you also become a producer, a fundraiser, and a marketing whiz all at once.

So you see why I call this a "maybe myth." It's absolutely possible to move between these mediums, and that fusion can keep your career exciting and your craft sharp. You just need to be clear on what each form requires and honest with yourself about whether both paths speak to your abilities and your time. The good news is that, at their best, both art forms raise questions, challenge traditions, inspire action, spark debate, and expand audience empathy. How many professions do all that?

I Haven't Written Before and It's Too Late to Start

It's never too late to start writing. The older you are, the more stories you have encountered, the more wisdom you can impart, and (hopefully) the more questions you have to ask. Toni Morrison published her first book, *Bluest Eye*, at 39, after working in the book industry for years and raising two kids. She published the *Beloved* trilogy when she was 45, and the film adaptation launched 11 years later. Frank McCourt wrote his first novel, *Angela's Ashes*, when he was 66. It was

a bestseller and also won a Pulitzer. Ray Krok founded McDonald's in his 50s, and Grandma Moses began painting at 78; the list goes on and on. If you don't start writing now, the only regret you'll have in five years is that you didn't start writing five years ago. As a student of mine once said, "You're going to be 72 anyway. Why not be 72 and a writer?"

Writing Is a Lonely Profession

I'm not going to lie to you: Writing involves a lot of time alone. When crafting a first draft, you will (hopefully) spend three or four hours a day, four to five times a week, in a room with your computer, your characters, and your plot, which is really just another way of saying "by yourself."

On the flip side, screenwriting is a highly social profession. A screenplay, like a stage play, isn't really complete until you've handed it to a production team. You craft the story, and they transform it into a three-dimensional piece. Want a metaphor for that relationship? You build the sailboat, and the production team provides the wind. Research for each project will undoubtedly require interaction of all sorts, as will revisions. Frankly, you can't do this job without collaborating at least 60 percent of the time. You may become *more* social as a result of the craft.

Screenwriting also differs from many professions in that the kind of work you do varies in form. Working means spending time alone, but it also means taking long walks, conversing with collaborators, or cooking dinner for friends. Writers work everywhere. So keep writing or start writing. When cabin fever sets in, and it will set in, go work somewhere else.

Hollywood Has No Ethics; It'll Ruin the Integrity of My Script

I think that the underlining question here is "Can I work in Hollywood and remain an artist?" The answer is yes, you can. Commercial success doesn't negate artistry. As in any profession, you have to know what you're getting into, and you have to be savvy. Do your research. Know the answers to the following questions:

- » What movies are current box-office hits?
- » What are the major production companies, and what kind of work are they producing? (See Chapter 19.)

- »» What are the smaller production companies, and what kind of work are they producing? (See Chapter 19.)
- »» Who's writing scripts you enjoy? Who represents them?
- »» Which artists are changing the way the industry makes art (while penning great work of their own)?
- »» What are the artistic strengths of your piece? The commercial strengths? (See Chapter 20.)
- »» What parts of your piece are you the most interested in protecting? What parts of your piece are you willing to negotiate?
- »» How can you sell someone on *your* story? (See Chapter 20.)

Answering these questions in advance enables you to plan an appropriate marketing campaign. You'll know which studios and executives are more likely to champion your story and keep it intact. If you prioritize the elements of your story prior to meeting with those executives, you'll also know how to respond should they propose changes. You'll know what elements you want to safeguard at all costs, and you can entertain suggestions on the rest. This strategy allows you to be both protective and flexible.

Hollywood generates a lot of money and, like any business, a lot of people are interested in that money. Hollywood also has many champions of strong work. Finding them may take a while but they're there. If you go into the profession with your eyes open, if you know your story backward and forward, if you know the market in advance — those supporters will eventually find you.

It's Not What I Know; It's Who I Know That Matters

I'm going to address this myth in two parts. First, does it help to know someone in Hollywood? Probably. Approaching the business isn't unlike going to a new school or your first day on a job; if you know people in advance, the transition is less jarring. A Hollywood contact can do the following:

- »» Introduce you to agents, producers, directors, actors, and other industry professionals
- »» Help you find temporary work that may further your career

- » Show you the town
- » Pass your work on to readers
- » Fill you in on what kind of work various companies are doing

Knowing someone in LA also considerably cuts down on the fear factor and, if you move to the West Coast, on the loneliness.

However, is it who you know that really matters? No, the story is what matters. If your story is compelling, it will make the introductions for you. If you are passionate about what you know, someone will respond. So to the beginning screenwriter I say, get out there. Screenwriting is a social profession, so meet as many people as you can. But focus on your script first. In the end, everything comes back to the story.

I Have Too Many Obligations to Be a Writer

The first thing to do when you encounter this myth is to list those obligations — all of them. That list might start with any or all of the following: a family to support, a job (or two or three), classes to take, social functions to run, and a household to maintain.

Think about it for a while. Jot down anything that takes time out of your day. If you're responsible for walking the dog or looking after the neighbor's flowers, include those tasks on the list, and when you're through, add one more item. At the bottom of the page, write "Work on screenplay." Now writing is on your list of obligations.

If you want to write a screenplay, you need concentrated chunks of time, at least an hour for each session, and most schedules can be managed. Anton Chekhov wrote his short stories between seeing medical patients and supporting a family. Octavia Butler woke up at 3 a.m. to write before trudging off to several day jobs. Radha Blank decided to reinvigorate her writing career at 40 by turning to rap, despite juggling work as a public-school acting teacher. You have time if you *make* time. Face it, any one of the top items on the obligation list can take up your whole week, if you allow that to happen. You simply can't allow that to happen.

I'm Only as Successful as the Last Screenplay I Sold

What if you've never sold a screenplay? Does that mean that you're not successful? What if your screenplay was purchased but never produced? Or if it was produced but it bombed at the box office? Or if it was commercially successful and critically panned? Or if it was critically successful and socially panned? Are you successful then?

The real questions to ask are "Why am I writing?" and "How do I define success?" If you're writing to make money, you're writing for the wrong reason. You may never make money. If you're writing to seek critical acclaim, you're writing for the wrong reason. Think of all the artists who died prior to achieving that goal. In order to write continually, you have to love the process, writer's block and all. You have to love finding an idea and developing it into a story. You have to love pounding away at a computer all day, even when you hate it. You have to love words, people, images, and action.

More importantly, you have to redefine success. Know what you're trying to achieve in each script and push yourself to accomplish that task. If your purpose is to write a piece that sells, so be it. Do the research, watch the market, and sell the script. If your purpose is to ask a question, ask it in every scene. If you write because you love the process, you'll be far better off when you approach the industry. Your scripts aren't always going to sell; those that sell won't always make money. If you love the process more than the product, you'll write regardless of how your last script fared.

I'm Not Talented Enough to Be a Writer

This myth is so common that it borders on an affliction. Every writer harbors an internal critic, otherwise known as the "little voice," and "I'm not talented enough to be a writer" is the voice's favorite quip. It is, of course, a false notion. You have talent. Anyone who has made it through adolescence has a story to tell and the experience with which to tell it. The real issue here is whether you have something to say. Do you have a question that you want to explore on the page? Has something made you angry, confused, exhilarated, or curious? If you answer yes to these questions, you should be writing.



REMEMBER

Fear is a funny thing. It can be your best friend; it can force you to do research and prepare for a project in ways that you wouldn't have attempted in a more relaxed state. It can also completely shut you down. If you're worried about your own talent, remember this: If you choose to honor the fear, it will weaken your work. If you choose to honor the work, it will weaken your fear.

Sample Scenes and Online Resources

Because screenplay format follows such specific guidelines, it takes practice to catch the style, tone, and pace of any given moment on the page. One of the best ways to learn how to write a great screenplay is to read as many scripts as possible, from as many writers as you can track down. The ultimate goal is to build a bridge from your imagination to the reader's. You want them to see the film in their mind as they read your work.

This appendix includes reminders about technical concerns like spacing, font, and margins. Thereafter, you'll find examples of traditional screenplay format and two ways to approach songs in a movie musical.

The final section is a list of helpful websites where you can find screenplays and teleplays to read for free or for a small fee. With new work being uploaded every day, I'm certain you'll find any number of templates to bring your story to life on the page.

Formatting: A Crash Course

I discuss screenplay format in far greater detail in Chapter 15, but here's a reminder about how margins and spacing should work:

Your Font:	12 Point Courier
Left Margin:	1½ inches
Right Margin:	1 inch
Top Margin:	1 inch
Bottom Margin:	1 inch

Scene Headings (or Slug lines): Always capitalized. Begin at the left margin and run the length of the page.

Action (or Description): Begins at the left margin and runs the length of the page.

Character names: 3.7 inches from the left-hand side of the page (2.2 inches from the left margin)

Dialogue: Begins 2 ½ inches from the left-hand side of the page (1 ½ from the left margin) and ends at 6 ½ inches from the left-hand side of the page (5 inches from the left margin)

Parentheticals: 3.1 inches from the left-hand side of the page (1.6 inches from the left margin)

Page numbers: Flush to the right margin, ½ inch from the top of the page, should be followed by a period.

Transitional directions: Always capitalized.

Spacing rules

Single space:

- » All description
- » All lines of dialogue
- » All parentheticals
- » All camera directions, sound cues, and visual effects
- » Between the character name and the ensuing dialogue
- » Between the character name and an ensuing parenthetical

Double space:

- » Between the slug line and the action
- » Between paragraphs of lengthy description or action
- » Between the end of one character's dialogue and a new character's name
- » Between the end of one character's dialogue and a new line of action

Triple space:

- » Before starting a new scene

Traditional Format: Examples

In the excerpt in Figure A-1, take note of these details:

- » The first time a character appears, their name is capitalized in the description. Thereafter it's not.
- » Incidental characters (like STORE CLERK, GARDENER, SOLDIER) are identified by the role they play, not by name.
- » Character descriptions are active, meaning a performer can convey them in scene, and they're concise.
- » Cinematic description is conveyed in paragraphs of three sentences or less.
- » Parentheticals depict how a line of dialogue should be delivered, not an action taking place in the scene.
- » Sound or special effects are capitalized.
- » There are no specific camera effects or angles mentioned. Those are usually added into the shooting script later by the director or cinematographer. Any close-up is indicated by capitalizing the image you want to emphasize.
- » Voice-over is indicated by V.O. next to the character's name, above the dialogue.

Voice-Over Examples

V.O. (or VO) is short for voice-over, which is used when you want an off-screen character to narrate over a scene. It is sometimes scripted as O.C. (or OC) for “off-screen.” Figures A-1 and A-2 show two examples of effective voice-over. In the first, from the introductory moments of *The Breakfast Club*, we hear Brian's voice narrate us into the story. Note that in one brief monologue, we are given the key plot details — the date, location, and the backdrop of high school detention. This voice-over underscores images of the school.

The second example in Figure A-2 is far more detailed, which seems fitting for the opening sequence of the epic trilogy *Lord of the Rings*. Here, voice-over is used to introduce the legend of the ring, racing us through time into the present-day world of the hobbit, Frodo. This excerpt is also a *montage*, which is a quick succession of scenes that efficiently jump us through large spans of time.

BLANK SCREEN:

Against Black, TITLE CARD:

"...and these children that you spit on, as they try to change their worlds are immune to your consultations. They're quite aware of what they're going through...

- David Bowie" The
Blank Screen and Title Card SHATTER to reveal...

1. EXT. SHERMER HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

During Brian's monologue, we see various views of things inside the school including Bender's locker.

BRIAN (VO)

Saturday...March 24, 1984. Shermer High School, Shermer, Illinois. 60062. Dear Mr. Vernon...we accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was that we did wrong, what we did was wrong. But we think you're crazy to make us write this essay telling you who we think we are, what do you care? You see us as you want to see us...in the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed...

FIGURE A-1:
Voice-over
example from
The Breakfast Club.

©John Hughes, Universal Pictures, 1985

BLACK SCREEN

ELVISH SINGING....A WOMAN'S VOICE IS whispering, tinged with SADNESS and REGRET:

GALADRIEL (V.O.)

(Elvish: subtitled)

"I amar prestar sen: han mathon ne nen,
han mathon ne chae...a han noston ned
wilith."

(English:)

The world is changed: I feel it in the
water, I feel it in the earth, I smell it
in the air...Much that once was is lost,
for none now live who remember it.

SUPER: THE LORD OF THE RINGS

EXT. PROLOGUE -- DAY

IMAGE: FLICKERING FIRELIGHT. The NOLDORIN FORGE in EREGION.
MOLTEN GOLD POURS from the lip of an IRON LADLE.

GALADRIEL (V.O.)

It began with the forging of the Great
Rings.

IMAGE: THREE RINGS, each set with a single GEM, are received
by the HIGH ELVES-GALADRIEL, GIL-GALAD and CIRDAN.

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Three were given to the Elves, immortal,
wisest...fairest of all beings.

IMAGE: SEVEN RINGS held aloft in triumph by the DWARF LORDS.

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Seven to the Dwarf Lords, great miners
and craftsmen of the mountain halls.

IMAGE: NINE RINGS clutched tightly by the KINGS OF MEN...as
if holding-close a precious secret.

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

And Nine...nine rings were gifted to the
race of Men who, above all else, desire
power. For within these rings was bound the
strength and will to govern each race.

FADE TO BLACK

(MORE)

FIGURE A-2:
Voice-over
example from
Lord of the Rings.

©J.R.R. Tolkien, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001

(CONTINUED)

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But they were all of them deceived.

FADE UP: An ancient PARCHMENT MAP of MIDDLE EARTH...moving slowly across the MAP as if drawn by an unseen force the CAMERA closes in on a PLACE NAME...MORDOR.

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

...for another ring was made.

TEASING SHOTS: SAURON forging the ONE RING in the CHAMBERS of SAMMATH NAUR.

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

In the land of Mordor, in the fires of Mount Doom, the Dark Lord Sauron forged in secret a Master Ring to control all others.

IMAGE: The ONE RING reflecting FIERY LAVA! FIRE WRITING emerges on the plain BAND OF GOLD.

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

...and into this Ring he poured his cruelty, his malice and his will to dominate all life.

IMAGE: THE ONE RING falls through SPACE and into flames...

GALADRIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

One Ring to rule them all...

FIGURE A-2:
(Continued)

Series of Shots Examples

A montage and a series of shots are both techniques used to showcase time passing quickly, often without dialogue. The only difference between the two techniques is that a series of shots spans a shorter amount of time than montage, which can span centuries. *The Lord of the Rings* opening in Figure A-2 is a clear example of a montage. Although the writers don't actually type the word "montage" into the script, they are still launching viewers through space and time quickly.

Figures A-3 and A-4 show two examples of a series of shots. Figure A-3, also from *The Breakfast Club*, offers readers a quick sense of what each student is doing while stuck in detention on the first day. This same technique is used throughout the film to track what happens when friendships form.

We see the clock, it reads a quarter to eight.
We see Bender, lighting his shoe on fire and lighting a cigarette with his shoe.
We see Claire thinking.
We see Brian playing with his balls.
We see Andrew playing with his sweatshirt.
We see Allison pulling a string around her finger and making it turn purple.
We see Bender put the flames on his shoe out. He then plays air guitar.
We see Allison drawing.
We see Andrew playing paper football. He cheers silently.
Allison shakes dandruff from her hair onto her picture.
We see everyone fall asleep.

CUT TO:

13. INT. LIBRARY - DAY

Later.
Vernon is standing there staring at the sleeping kids.

VERNON

Wake up! Who has to go to the lavatory?

Everyone raises their hands.

FIGURE A-3:
Series of shots
example from
The Breakfast Club.

©John Hughes, Universal Pictures, 1985

The example in Figure A-4 is taken from the iconic boxing film *Rocky*. In this excerpt, we see Rocky's renewed morning training routine. While there are many locations highlighted here, notice that only an hour and a half of his day passes. If we were witnessing months of training (as we do later in the film), it would require a montage.

INT. ROCKY'S APARTMENT - PRE-DAWN

The following morning, Rocky's ALARM CLOCK GOES OFF at exactly four A.M. Not accustomed to rising this early, with great difficulty Rocky staggers to his feet and wavers to the bathroom. He turns the light on and roaches scatter.

At the top of the mirror hang the telegrams. Rocky fills the basin and submerges his face in cold water.

Rocky sways to the icebox and removes a dozen eggs. He cracks five raw eggs into a glass and downs it in one swill... his body quivers.

EXT. STREET OF ROCKY'S APARTMENT - PRE-DAWN

Rocky steps outside. He is dressed in a well-worn sweat suit with a hood, gloves and sneakers. It is pitch dark and his steaming breath attests to the cold.

He begins running down the center of the deserted street. He can only be clearly SEEN as his form passes beneath the street lamps.

Two garbage men stop hoisting cans to watch him pass.

EXT. ART MUSEUM STAIRS - DAWN

Rocky stands at the base of an overwhelmingly steep flight of stairs. He stares up at the stairs that nearly disappear into the morning gray. Taking a deep breath, he starts up.

From the start, he looks out of shape and halfway up his legs give way. Standing, he brushes off and descends the stairs.

EXT. CITY HALL - DAWN

Rocky passes City Hall and veers to the river. He pauses, heaving great gusts of exhausted breaths. He throws several lazy jabs in the air and walks awhile with hands on his aching sides. Men delivering the morning papers observe with amusement.

Rocky forces himself to begin running again.

EXT. ELEVATED TRAIN STATION - DAWN

Heading along Spring Garden Street, Rocky passes beneath an elevated train station. The ROARING TRAIN overhead seems to blend perfectly with his muscular running style.

EXT. DOCKS - DAWN

The sky is beginning to lighten. The fighter now runs along the piers and past anchored freighters.

FIGURE A-4:
Series of shots
example from
Rocky.

©Sylvester Stallone, United Artists, 1976

FIGURE A-4:
(Continued)

EXT. EASTERN PACKING COMPANY - DAWN

It is five-thirty and Rocky approaches the loading platform belonging to Eastern Packing Company. Alongside the loading platform come several boxcars.

Rocky mounts the ramp and knocks on the metal door. It soon opens and Paulie guides him inside. Paulie is drunk.

Split Screen Example

A split screen is used when a writer wants to showcase two scenes simultaneously. The filmmaker Quentin Tarantino uses it in many of his movies to highlight his high-octane style. The excerpt in Figure A-5 is taken from his western-martial arts hybrid, *Kill Bill, Vol. 1*.

EXT. EL PASO GENERAL HOSPITAL - NIGHT

The rain pisses down in buckets in front of the hospital...

WHEN...

The wheel to an Alfa Romeo rolls into FRAME and stops.

The car door opens and two yellow galoshes step out into the wet night.

OVERHEAD SHOT

A red umbrella opens as rain falls down.

CU the back of a head wearing a yellow rainslicker hood, framed by the red umbrella above it, which water cascades down and beats a rhythm against.

The figure in the yellow rainslicker with the red umbrella (who we can guess is female) starts walking towards the hospital.

WE GO TO SPLIT SCREEN

Left Side

CU The Bride's unblinking
comatose sleep.

CU The Bride in her coma

CU The BRIDE
in her coma

Right Side

The back of the yellow
slicker - walking in the
rain towards the hospital's
entrance.

CU her yellow galoshes
slapping against the wet
asphalt, and splashing
through puddles.

CU the hospital's
electrical doors -
WOOSH - OPEN.

We follow behind the
woman in the raincoat as
she walks from
outside into the hospital down
the hall, and into the ladies
room door.

EX CU OF A WHITE
WOMAN'S SHAPELY BAREFOOT
ANKLE AND LEG
stepping into a sheer,
white stocking.

FIGURE A-5:
Split screen
example from
Kill Bill, Vol 1.

©Quentin Tarantino, Miramax Films, 2003

INSERT: OF THOSE LONG,
WHITE LEGS STEPPING INTO A
WHITE NURSE'S UNIFORM.

INSERT: OF THE ZIPPERIN
THE BACK ZIPPING UPWARDS.

INSERT: OF WHITE, SHEER
STOCKING FEET STEPPING INTO
WHITE NURSE'S ORTHOPEDIC
SHOES.

INSERT: OF A SYRINGE
NEEDLE STUCK IN A VIAL
The liquid is drawn up into
the syringe.

SOME WRITTEN TEXT
APPEARS BELOW IMAGE THAT
READS:

"A lethal cocktail of
Bill's own concoction. He
calls it, 'Goodbye
forever'."

INSERT: THE DEADLY
SYRINGE IS PLACED ON A
NURSE'S TRAY

INSERT: A LITTLE WHITE
NURSE'S CAP IS PLACED
ON TOP OF THE WOMAN'S
BLONDE HEAD.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - NIGHT

The door marked "ladies" is opened, and a beautiful 6-foot blonde in a white nurse's uniform, with a matching white eye patch over her left eye, steps out, carrying the nurse's tray with the "Goodbye forever"-filled syringe on it. She walks down the corridor towards the sleeping Bride's room.

SUBTITLE UNDERNEATH BLONDE NURSE:
"ELLE DRIVER

Member of
The DEADLY VIPER ASSASSINATION SQUAD
codename:
CALIFORNIA MOUNTAIN SNAKE"
END OF SPLIT SCREEN

FIGURE A-5:
(Continued)

Point of View Example

Point of view, or POV, implies that we're seeing action from one character's perspective. Writers first specify whose perspective the scene is being viewed from, and then tell us what that character sees. Often, a writer toggles between points of view for comedic effect, as they do in the excerpt in Figure A-6, from the romantic comedy, *There's Something About Mary*.

FIGURE A-6:
Split screen
example from
*There's
Something About
Mary*.

```
INT. BATHROOM - TWILIGHT

Ted dabs his head with a tissue, then moves to the toilet. As he
TAKES A LEAK he glances out the window to his left.

TED'S POV - two LOVEBIRDS are perched on a branch.

Ted smiles...

...at the SOUND of these beautiful tweeties singing their love
song for themselves, for the spring, for Ted and Mary, and
suddenly they fly away and we...

SNAP FOCUS

...to reveal Mary in the bedroom window DIRECTLY BEHIND WHERE
THE BIRDS WERE, in just a bra and panties, and just then her
mother glances Ted's way and MAKES EYE-CONTACT with what she can
only presume to be a leering Peeping Tom.

ON TED...

...he loses the smile and ducks his head back into the bathroom,
HORRIFIED.

PANICKING NOW, he hastily zips up his fly and

                                TED
YEEEEOOOOOWWWWWW!!!!!!!!!!!!
```

©Ed Decter, John J. Strauss, Peter Farrelly, Bobby Farrelly, 1998

Intercut Example

The intercut is similar to a split scene in that it indicates action is taking place in two or more locations simultaneously. However, while a split scene shows you all action at the same time, an intercut moves between them. The excerpt in Figure A-7 is one of the most famous intercut examples. It's from *The Godfather*, and it juxtaposes the bloody violence of mafia murder with the serenity and spirituality of a baptism.

EXT DAY: MOTEL BALCONY

LAMPONE on the motel balcony spots a Cadillac pulling up. It parks. A young, pretty GIRL gets out. Quickly, he returns into the room.

INT DAY: HOTEL STAIRS (1955)

CLEMENZA is climbing the back stairs of a large hotel. He rounds the corner, puffs a little, and then continues upward.

INT DAY: CHURCH

The Church. Close on the PRIEST's fingers as he gently applies oil to the infant's ears and nostrils.

PRIEST
Ephetha...be opened...So you may
perceive the fragrance of God's
sweetness.

EXT DAY: ROCKEFELLER CENTER (1955)

The DRIVER of the limousine in front of Rockefeller Center is arguing with NERI.

Now the DRIVER looks up.

WHAT HE SEES:

TWO MEN in topcoats exit the building, through the revolving glass doors.

NERI opens up fire, trapping BARZINI in the shattering glass doors. The doors still rotate, moving the dead body of BARZINI within them.

INT DAY: CHURCH

In the Church--the VIEW on MICHAEL. The PRIEST hands him the infant.

PRIEST
Do you renounce Satan.

MICHAEL
I do renounce him.

PRIEST
And all his works?

FIGURE A-7:
Intercut example
from *The*
Godfather.

©Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount
Pictures, 1972

MICHAEL
I do renounce them.

INT DAY: MOTEL MURDER (1955)

LAMPONE, backed up by two other MEN in his regime, runs down the iron-rail steps, and kicks in the door on Room 7F. PHILIP TATTAGLIA, old and wizened and naked, leaps up; a semi-nude young GIRL leans up.

They are riddled with gunfire.

INT DAY: HOTEL STAIRS (1955)

CLEMENZA, huffing and puffing, climbs the back stairs, with his package.

INT DAY: CHURCH

The PRIEST pours water over the forehead of the infant MICHAEL holds.

PRIEST
Do you wish to be baptized?

MICHAEL
I do wish to be baptized.

INT DAY: HOTEL ELEVATOR MURDER (1955)

CLEMENZA, out of breath, climbs the final few steps.

He walks through some glass doors, and moves to an ornate elevator waiting shaft.

The lights indicate the elevator has arrived.

The doors open, and we see a surprised CUNEO standing with the dapper MOE GREENE.

CLEMENZA fires into the small elevator with a shotgun.

The PRIEST hands a lighted candle to MICHAEL.

PRIEST
I christen you Michael Francis Rizzi.

Flash bulbs go off. Everyone is smiles, and crowds around MICHAEL, KAY, CONNIE...and CARLO.

FIGURE A-7:
(Continued)

Movie Musical Examples

Movie musicals and non-musical screenplays are formatted in the same way, with one exception — the addition of songs! Traditionally, songs are simply formatted as if they are dialogue, with a (sung) or (singing) parenthetical just above. Sometimes the songs are placed in italics, to differentiate them from spoken dialogue. The example shown in Figure A-8, from *A Star Is Born*, does both.

Most musicals follow the formatting of *A Star Is Born*, but there are other ways to convey the pace and style of a musical number. *La La Land*, for example, ignores songs entirely, choosing to describe each musical number instead. As a result, we get the sense that musical numbers can happen at any moment and be sparked by something as simple as the whirl of construction or the frenzy of a morning commute.

In the excerpt in Figure A-9, note that the musical numbers are depicted in italics to separate them from the non-musical action of the scenes.

OVER BLACK

We hear: A distant crowd becoming restless. A guitar being tuned. Buying time...

The crowd's cheers morph into "JACKSON... JACKSON... JACKSON."

FADE IN:

INT. DOME TENT - BACKSTAGE - DUSK

SILHOUETTE OF A MAN IN A HAT, head down. Spits... Then --

EMERGING FROM THE DARKNESS: JACKSON (JACK) MAINE (early 40s) pulls out a PRESCRIPTION PILL BOTTLE, dumps a FEW PILLS into his hand -- knocks them back -- drinks deeply from a GIN ON THE ROCKS, the alcohol spilling down his beard... the awaiting crowd just off in the b.g... A MALEROADIE slaps him on the back.

JACK
All right, let's do it.

He walks onto --

INT. DOME TENT - MAIN STAGE - CONTINUOUS ACTION

The crowd erupting. With a wave, he flings off his hat and wields his guitar, his RHYTHM GUITARIST now opposite him...

And at once in tandem they unleash dueling guitars with the sheer force of rock 'n' roll -- an explosion of sound as the speakers scream his latest hit, "BLACK EYES" --

JACK
(singing)
*'Black eyes open wide,
It's time to testify,
There's no room for
lies,
And everyone's waitin' for
you, And I'm gone,
Sittin' by the
phone, And I'm all
alone, By the
wayside,'*

The stage lights blaze from above as the song reaches its fever pitch... He may be a little drunk, but this is Jackson Maine in his element, a singer-songwriter with a mean guitar. He doesn't just play, it's an all-out attack.

FIGURE A-8:
Excerpt from
A Star Is Born.

©Eric Roth, Bradley Cooper, Will Fetters, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018

FADE IN...

A sun-blasted sky. We HEAR radios -- one piece of music after another...

We're --

EXT. 101 FREEWAY - DAY

Cars are at a standstill. It's a horrific traffic jam.

Morning rush hour. Sun beating down, asphalt shimmering in the heat. The blown-out downtown L.A. skyline hovers in the distance.

We DRIFT past more CARS. Hear one snippet of audio after another...

One driver taps his steering wheel to PROG ROCK. Another sings to OPERA. A third raps along to a HIP-HOP track. We move from a RADIO INTERVIEW to a FRENCH BALLAD to TECHNO, until finally we begin to hear...

...a new, original piece of music...

We settle on the CAR from which this new tune is playing. The driver is a YOUNG WOMAN. She hums along to the riff on her radio -- then starts SINGING.

Then -- she EXITS her car. Then -- she starts MOVING down the lane.

One by one, more DRIVERS join her -- SINGING and DANCING along. Without a single cut, we've found ourselves in a FULL-FLEDGED MUSICAL NUMBER...

Drivers leap on car-tops, dance Jerome Robbins-style, making use of the road and the hot gleam of the automobiles. Arms swaying, feet banging, dancers darting, as the MUSIC blasts. We WEAVE and SWIRL and DART between and around the cars... taking the magic in...

Finally -- all the drivers swing back into their vehicles -- and the song comes to a dramatic stop.

FIGURE A-9:
Excerpt from ***La***
La Land.

©Damien Chazelle, Lionsgate, 2016

Additional Online Resources

Hopefully, these examples are enough to kick-start your formatting process into action. Once you've settled on a story, it also helps to read entire screenplays in that genre or style. Luckily, it's possible to do that for free these days, or for a small fee. These websites offer screenplays and teleplays for viewing purposes only:

- » **The Daily Script** (www.dailyscript.com): This site hosts screenplays as well as television scripts. Its website is rudimentary, but the listings are impressive.
- » **Simply Scripts** (www.simplyscripts.com/movie.html): Simply Scripts' database includes plays as well as screenplays. It also has a healthy listing of non-English scripts.
- » **IMSDB** (<https://imsdb.com/>): While most people visit IMSDB (short for Internet Movie Script Data Base) seeking cast and crew information for films, you can also find screenplays to read there as well. This website is often confused with IMDb (Internet Movie Database), which focuses on cast and crew information as well as trivia and movie reviews.
- » **The Script Lab** (<https://thescriptlab.com/>): If you're after more recent screenplays, The Script Lab is a good place to start.
- » **Screenplays for You** (<https://sfy.ru/>): The title of this website says it all. This site hosts movie scripts listed in alphabetical order. They don't specialize in the most recent scripts, but most critically acclaimed movies can be found in this collection.
- » **Movie Scripts and Screenplays** (www.moviescriptsandscreenplays.com/): Although the title of this website is redundant, it's also true. The database is similar to Screenplays For You, but it specializes in shooting drafts, which means the scripts are formatted in the way they looked during production, not in the original draft form.

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About the Author

Laura Schellhardt holds an MFA in Literary Arts from Brown University and degrees in Theatre and Creative Writing from Northwestern University in Chicago. Her scripts have been produced in New York, Seattle, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Louisville, Washington, D.C., Providence, Minneapolis, North Carolina, and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Original works include *Ever in the Glades*, *Digging Up Dessa*, *Auctioning the Ainsleys*, *The Game and the Change*, *The Comparables*, *Upright Grand*, *The Handbook*, *Light Years Away*, *The K of D*, *Courting Vampires*, *Shapeshifter*, *The Apothecary's Girl*, *Inheritance*, and *Je Ne Sais Quoi*. Adaptations include *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, *The Outfit* (Jeff Award Nominee), and *Creole Folktales*.

Laura is a recipient of the AATE Distinguished Play Award, The New Frontiers Commission, The TCG National Playwriting Residency, The NYC Fringe Festival New Play Award, Theatre Communications Group Playwriting Residency, the New Play Award from ACT in Seattle, and a Dramatist Guild Playwriting Fellowship. She has participated in the SoHo Rep. Writer/Director Lab, The Kennedy Center New Voices, New Visions Festival, The Bonderman Symposium, The Goodman Theatre Playwright's Unit, The Women Playwrights Festival at SRT, The Ojai Playwrights Conference, The Bay Area Theatre Festival, and the O'Neill National Playwright's Festival. Laura has assisted in the development of new work at The Goodman, Steppenwolf Theatre, Northlight Theatre, and Trinity Repertory Company. She is a former Victory Gardens Resident Writer and a current member of the MC-10 Playwrights Collective. She has studied writing with the likes of Paula Vogel, Maria Irene Fornes, and Erin Cressida Wilson and has taught alongside Oscar nominated John Logan of *Aviator* and *Sweeney Todd* fame.

Laura oversees the undergraduate playwriting program at Northwestern University and teaches workshops across the country.

Dedication

To John Logan — for a beginning

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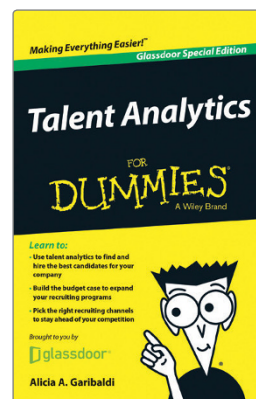
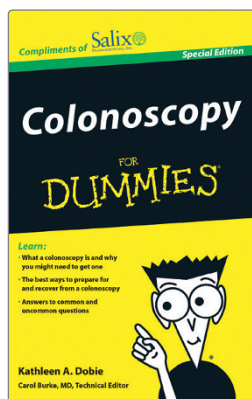
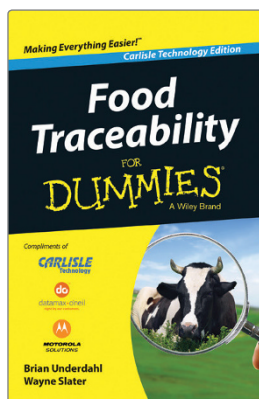
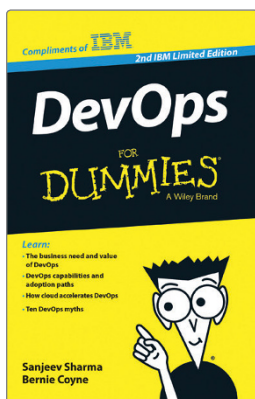
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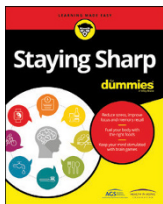
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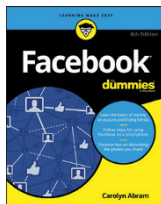
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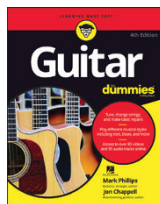
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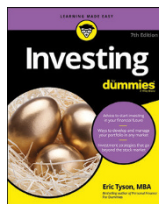
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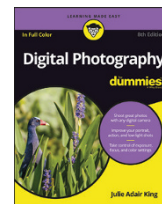
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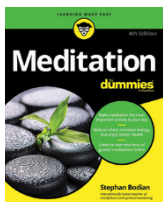
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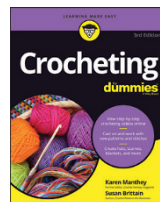
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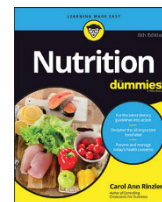
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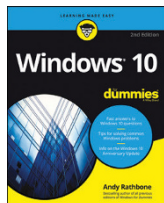


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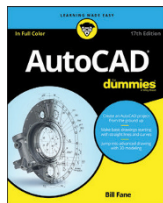


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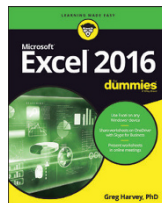
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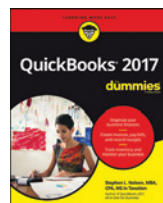
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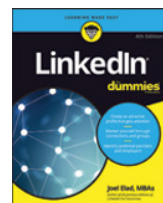
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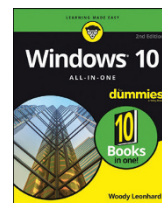
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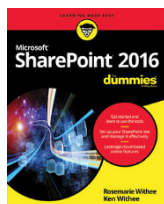
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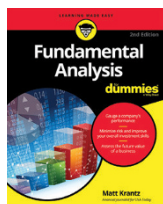
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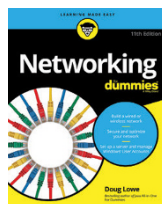
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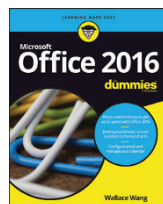
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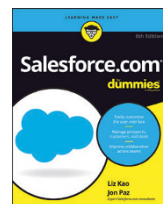
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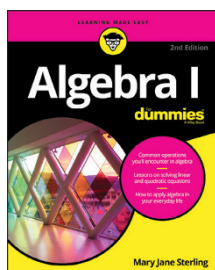


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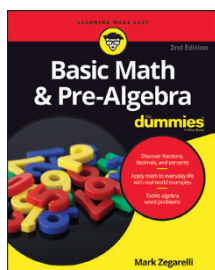
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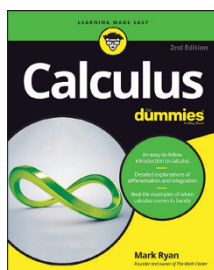
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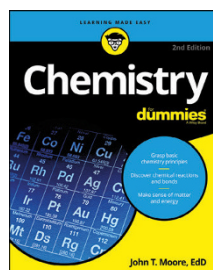
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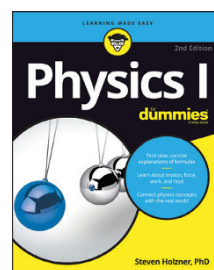
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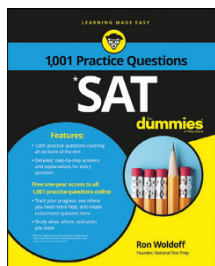
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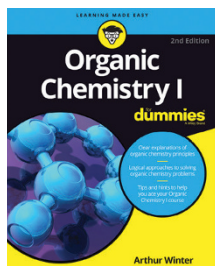
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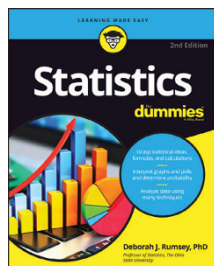
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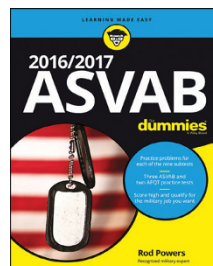
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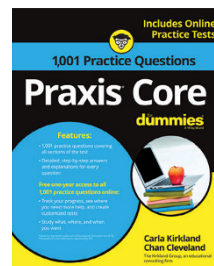
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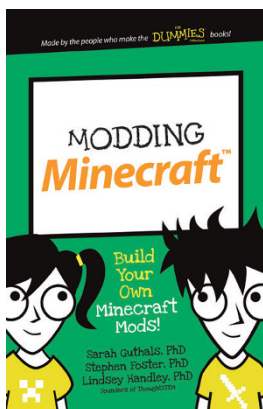
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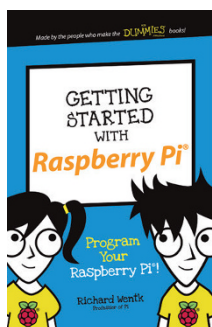
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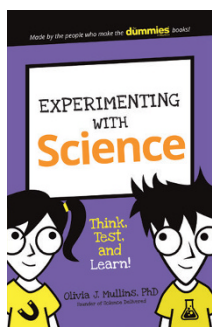
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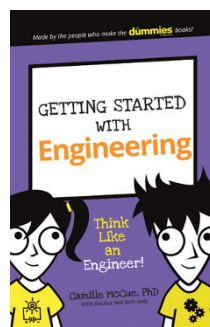
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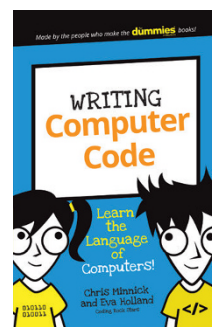
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