

How To Begin Writing A Screenplay

Assignment One: Writing Your Short Synopsis

OK, this article is for those writers who aren't sure how or where to begin writing a screenplay. We're going to start from the very beginning. Let me start off by saying that every writer is unique therefore each writer has a preferred writing method. Only you can explore the different methods and choose what works best for you. I simply bring you my experience and best advice. There are few things you are going to need to help you get started.

- Something to write on
- Something to write with

I know, you just spent \$300.00 on the best super duper screenwriting software on the market and I just told you all you are going to need are a pen and paper. Trust me, you're going to need the software and as a writer that's the single best investment you ever made. You just don't need it right now. Be patient. You'll get there.

The basis of every good screenplay is a good story. The first thing you need to figure out before you start typing is what your story is. Yes, you can put pen to blank paper and begin writing dialogue scattered with great scenes and characters but that all means nothing unless you're telling a good story. Some screenwriters tape their story to a corkboard or even their computer monitors so they never forget why they sat down to write in the first place.

You should be able to tell us what your story is in just a few sentences. You can do this by writing what we call a short synopsis. This is where your pen and paper come in. Before you write down the short synopsis to your own film make sure you know what one is. Here is an example of one from a well known film.

EXERCISE ONE

Below are a list of popular films. With your pen and paper write down what you think the basic story (synopsis) is. Trust

me, it's not as easy as it looks. Even if you think you know it in your head write it down. This will get your brain thinking in terms of story and that's exactly what you want. Once you have finished writing the synopses for that film click on the film's title and a synopsis for the film will appear. Your synopsis will never match word for word but hopefully you've captured the basic story.

Stand By Me

The Shawshank Redemption

True Lies

EXERCISE TWO

Now that you know what a short synopsis is, it's time to write your own. On a new sheet of paper write a short synopsis for the screenplay you are planning on writing. It should only be a few sentences long. Once you've written down the story you would like to tell, take that piece of paper and hide it. Don't look at it for one or two weeks. Then read it again and see if it's the same story you want to tell. Writing a screenplay takes months if not years and if you're already bored with your story after one week, then it's not the story you should consider writing. If the idea still strikes you as exciting then you now have your story for your screenplay.

Spend at least two weeks on this assignment then check back to see what we'll be working on next.

CONCEPT

Conjure up an exceptional concept, premise, or theme for your movie considering: autobiography/biography, big vs. small, chick flicks, imagination, impact on writer, metaphor, originality, and universality.

concept

- a general idea derived or inferred from specific instances or occurrences.
- something formed in the mind; a thought or notion.

motif

- recurrent thematic element in an artistic or literary work.
- in literature and the fine arts, a salient feature or element of a composition or work; esp., the theme, or central or dominant feature; specif. (music), a motive.

premise

- a proposition upon which an argument is based or from which a conclusion is drawn.
- v.t. set forth beforehand, or as introductory to the main subject; to offer previously, as something to explain or aid in understanding what follows; especially, to lay down premises or first propositions, on which rest the subsequent reasonings.

Theme

- a unifying idea that is a recurrent element in a literary or artistic work; "it was the usual 'boy gets girl' theme"

AUTOBIOGRAPHY/BIOGRAPHY

Stories best suited for cinema have strong dramatic structure. Such stories are often difficult to pull out of biographies as these tend to be chronologically linear and difficult to encapsulate in a launch-story-climax design. Strong cinematic life stories do indeed tell such a story, carefully extracted by a skillful writer, but the challenge might best be saved for later scripts. Where no cinematic story can be extracted from a life or true story--e.g., a romance, another relationship, a challenge or series of similar challenges--generating a theme might serve

a similar function. Otherwise the personality of the subject needs to be fascinating enough to make readers and audience members want to follow an episodic rendition of life events.



Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir

Autobiographies suffer the same difficulties and more:

- fixation on what happened
- lack of perspective
- belief others want to see your life story

The truth provides a good basis for a story, but in film one must be truer to the cinematic story than the actual events. Those who sit around learning about proper screenplay format so they can turn their lives into movies aren't the ones living movies anyone else wants to see. The true cinematic heroes are too busy achieving greatness--or having it thrust upon them--to study screenwriting. Given the inherent difficulties of crafting an autobiographical script, and the inherent desire to do just that, it's best to save the personal life story until a few scripts into one's writing career.



How to Write the Story of Your Life

BIG VS. SMALL

Big stories are generally more marketable and compelling than small. A bigger-than-life subject, life and death stakes, a universal theme, etc. generally characterizes a big story. Small stories--one character's approach to his life's challenges--can be powerful, too, but the writer must work harder to make it pertinent to the rest of us. Small stories can be made big through universal truths and metaphors.

CHICK FLICKS

Any mother will tell you that her daughter will go see "boy films" but her son will not go to see "girl films", so she ends up taking them both to see "boy films" or loses half of her audience. The same holds true into adulthood: either make films that appeal to guys or cut out fifty percent of your market. Though the woman still picks the film, she wants the guy to come along (and often wants him to pay for it). It might be said the whole movie industry depends on this interrelationship. While most women don't see the use in "shoot 'em ups", guys avoid "chick flicks" like the plague. One crossover seems to be horror films, which the gals seem to enjoy even more than the guys, but this is a pretty specific genre not beloved by all writers.

Vive la différence.

feminine	masculine
internal	external
compassion	fairness
agenda	mission
people	things
feelings	actions
family	tribe
social	political
"no"	"yes"
blame	no excuses
security	risk
complain	fix
etiquette	respect
relationships	alliances

emotions anger
manipulate command
love protection
form function
mystical mechanical
glamour valor
practical philosophical
earth sky
intuitive logical
verbal mathematical
indirect direct
mean tough
home abroad
shopping cars
victimhood fuggedaboutit

The two most popular movies of all time, in terms of box office sales, operate on two levels, one tending to appeal most to women and the other to men. GONE WITH THE WIND posed a torrid love affair against the backdrop of war, the bloodiest in U.S. history. Who's to say men don't enjoy love stories, too, but need to hide their interest behind the more "acceptable" martial battles? Love stories appeal more to women, war appeals more to men. Overlapping the two can make a powerful combination at the box office. The longest-running top grossing film of all time, TITANIC works a similar compromise when it poses a love affair against the backdrop of an engineering marvel, a massive steel ship, and its ultimate destruction, with all the adventure and blood that entails. It became the only movie ever to outsell GONE WITH THE WIND (in real dollars). Appealing to young and old audiences equally helped, too.

See what women say about chick flicks in "More Movies Should Be About Being Moved" by Donna Britt in the June 7, 2002 Washington Post; and . . . "Women Hanging Together: How Long Must We Watch?" by Alex Kuczynski in the June 9, 2002 New York Times . . . "reprinted" here.

Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory, and the Question of Genders

CULTURE

Much of life, much of what drives good dramatic stories, is human behavior. And human behavior extends largely from culture. Culture is the prism through which natural impulses and urges are bent on their way to external comportment, "acceptable behavior" in a group or region. Even universal truths and eternal verities attain a flavor from the ambient culture. Female culture is distinct from male, young from old, black from white, European from American, Asian from African. Individual organizations have cultures all their own, to which people adapt, and adapt quickly, or find themselves bounced out. Small regions--neighborhoods, say--have distinct, readable cultures. Much dramatic success stems from nailing the depth and breadth of a given culture, and then clashing it with another. The fun arises from the inherent humor of such a clash, self-awareness gained, but also the potential cross-adaptation to make a situation work, the reciprocal character changes. The good dramatic writer will also tend to be a good amateur anthropologist with a critical and perceptive eye for making such things real and resonant. Boomers, Xers and Other Strangers

IMAGINATION

A few things have debunked the old saw "Write what you know!":

- E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982)
- STAR WARS (1977)
- RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (1981)
- the other Top Grossing Movies of All Time

The authors were aliens? Space warriors? Archeologists? Superheros? No, but they were able to pen the greatest money spinners in history. "Write what you imagine!" is a better guideline to follow, as Lajos Egri might well say. So much of good writing is about the life of the imagination, imagination that can be fueled by actual events, real life experiences, books, dreams and all manner of other things. Writers create new, unexplored imaginary worlds no one, including themselves, has ever beheld. Encountering these imaginary worlds offers moviegoers escape from humdrum existence, a big reason they frequent dark cinemas to begin with.

"Don't write about what you know, write about what you didn't know you knew." ARTHUR KOPIT



The Writer's Block: 786 Ideas to Jump-Start Your Imagination

IMPACT ON WRITER

Project concepts are best selected based on their ability to:

- expand the writer's consciousness
- help the writer to grow intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually
- enhance the writer's life
- advance writing skills
- enhance the writer's enjoyment of life

Such concepts:

- yield the best material
- inspire marketing efforts
- make the whole effort worthwhile for the writer even if no one buys the script
- help the writer improve dimensionally with each project

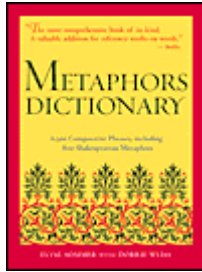


The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity

METAPHOR

A story that is a metaphor--or "a model of some aspect of human behavior" (see Chris Vogler on concept)--fulfills the extraordinary power of cinema, makes itself more universal by definition, and raises itself above the ordinary Hollywood fare. Done properly, this metaphor is woven so well into the story

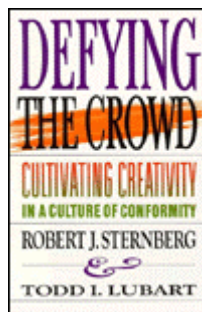
and images that people "get" it subconsciously--or because they went to film school, a crowd we enjoy impressing.



Metaphors Dictionary

ORIGINALITY

Fresh, non-derivative ideas--that's what Hollywood says it craves. The most often heard complaint from producers is "I've seen that movie before!" Before you write your movie, has anyone seen it before? Have you seen it before? There is something to be said for stories that are close enough to other popular stories that comparisons can be made. This can facilitate pitching--"it's a kind of KING KONG meets CINEMA PARADISO"--and ensure producers that the idea isn't too "out there". One writer has even suggested developing movie concepts in the way he heard a writer of great popular songs did--start with a hit movie and alter one note at a time until it's yours.



Defying the Crowd: Cultivating Creativity in a Culture of Conformity

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS/VICTIMHOOD

The era of Political Correctness will likely be looked upon one day as among the most ridiculous in human history, not to mention scariest. Here we have fascist tactics combined with communist objectives and results. The culture of victimhood,

power through victimhood, wholesale language changes, male bashing, zero tolerance, labelling, the personal made political . . . the movement amounts to a collective Thought Police.



New Thought Police: Inside the Left's Assault on Free Speech and Free Minds

Any writer in the English language who cares about the art of writing, should note the attack on our tongue by the forces of Political Correctness . . .

- "Congresspeople": the word "congressmen" already means "the people in Congress" with no implication of gender one way or another.
- "Actor" applied to female thespians: what was wrong with "actress" to begin with? An actress is a very different creature than a male actor and needs to be designated as such.
- "Chair": has always referred to the piece of furniture. To refer to someone as a piece of wood when he's actually a person is an insult. "Chairman" sufficed to begin with (see above).
- "Businesspeople" . . .

Such linguistic abominations require no further discussion. What would such people do in countries where the language spoken uses concordance, i.e., most words have a gender inflection?



Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook

But writing a ridiculous screenplay, that might one day be made into a ridiculous movie, is the least of the problems for a screenwriter dabbling in the cult of victimhood. Perhaps we should all be so lucky. A major problem is that we all want to see strong central characters at the movies, not weaklings who are victimized. Pitiabile characters don't make good cinematic fodder. In fact generating pity tends to be death in the performing arts. Even worse is that victimhood is a fallacy, a fiction in and of itself. We are but victims of our own behavior, especially in these United States, so to make victimhood work in a movie much must be manufactured out of unreality. See the Jennifer Lopez movie ENOUGH (2002) for proof of this. Remember who buys the tickets. You want them to feel like they've been clubbed to death on their night out on the town? How about the people who read your script trying to decide if they want to make it into a movie?



Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women

Better for a screenwriter to turn all this on its head, writing a story with characters that celebrate the fallacy and lunacy of it. Or to seek his own "truth" on these matters, and in so doing find something new. Best of all: avoid "political correctness" altogether. It's fallacious, hateful, and destructive, and the world turned for many thousands of years without it, spinning many timelessly classic stories that had nothing to do with victimhood. If they had they would not have become timeless classics.

UNIVERSALITY

A story with a universal theme--one that touches a "universal truth that goes beyond culture, race, age, or geographic location" (see Syd Field on concept)--will reach more people, making it more likely to get produced. Political stories, stories

with an overt message, stories based in victimhood that beat up one audience group or another--white males being the popular one of late--just don't make good sense. This goes to for stories about diseases and medical conditions.

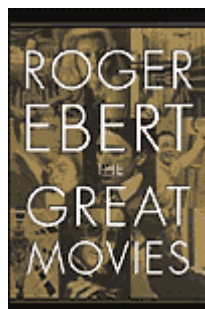
Your powerful message won't get through if presented overtly because: · Nobody likes to be preached to. Thus . . . oNo one will want to produce your movie. o No one will want to see your movie. o Those who do see your movie won't speak highly of it to others.

People go to movies to enjoy themselves watching strong characters go out into the world and make things happen. A message is best sent woven into the fabric of the story, carried through strong characters who face the world bravely each day. Reading the enduring stories, especially the classics, acquaints us with universal themes and truths, and shows us how to relay them without the audience realizing that's what we're doing.

THE TEN BEST MOVIES OF ALL TIME

1. CITIZEN KANE Orson Welles U.S. 1941
2. VERTIGO Alfred Hitchcock (English) U.S. 1958
3. LA REGLE DU JEU Jean Renoir France 1939
4. THE GODFATHER/THE GODFATHER: Part II Francis Ford Coppola U.S. 1972/4
5. TOKYO STORY Yasujiro Ozu Japan 1953
6. 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY Stanley Kubrick U.S. 1968
7. BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN Sergei Eisenstein Soviet Union 1925
8. SUNRISE F. W. Murnau (German) U.S. 1927
9. 8 1/2 Frederico Fellini Italy 1963
10. SINGIN' IN THE RAIN Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly U.S. 1952

Critics Top Ten Poll 2002 from British Film Institute's "Sight and Sound"



Great Movies