
SCREENWRITING 101

THE ESSENTIAL CRAFT OF FEATURE FILM WRITING

BY

NEILL D. HICKS

SCREENWRITING 101

BY NEILL D. HICKS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	xi
1. DRAMA IS CONFLICT	1
DRAMA MAKES SENSE	3
THE SCREENPLAY PREMISE	6
2. SATISFYING THE AUDIENCE	9
ATTRACTION	11
ANTICIPATION	12
SATISFACTION	12
3. THE ELEMENTS OF SCREEN STORY	15
4. SCREEN CHARACTERS	29
WHO IS YOUR MAIN CHARACTER?	34
CHARACTER'S MINIMUM ACTION	37
THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE	40
CONFLICT FOCUS	42
WHAT DOES THE MAIN CHARACTER WANT?	47
THE HIERARCHY OF BASIC NEEDS	50
WHAT'S STOPPING THE MAIN CHARACTER FROM REACHING THE GOAL?	54
PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR DISCOVERING CHARACTER	59
SAMPLE CHARACTER STUDY	64
5. SCREEN CONTEXT	75
COSMOS OF CREDIBILITY	75
RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION	81
WHAT <i>ARE</i> YOU DOING?	82
ELEMENTS OF CONTEXT	83
6. SCREEN GENRES	89
EXPECTATIONS OF FORM	89

7. SCREENWRITING STYLE	101
THE PRACTICAL — GUIDING THE READER'S EYE	103
THE AESTHETIC — GUIDING THE READER'S HEART	122
SCENE DESCRIPTIONS — LESS IS MORE	124
DIALOGUE — “SPIRITS FROM THE VASTY DEEP”	136
SUBTEXT	137
ENERGY	138
EXPECTATION	139
8. GETTING DOWN TO IT — WRITING YOUR SCREENPLAY	143
THE WRITER'S LIFE	150
9. THE BUSINESS OF SCREENWRITING	157
THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS	157
THE SCREENPLAY MARKET	160
BIG INDUSTRY, SMALL BUSINESS	165
THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA	168
THEY STOLE MY IDEA!	170
TRUE-LIFE MEMOIRS	172
U.S. COPYRIGHT	173
YOUR TEAM	174
GETTING YOUR OWN AGENT	176
ENTERTAINMENT ATTORNEYS	179
PERSONAL MANAGERS	180
THE PITCH	181
COVERAGE	185
MAKING DEALS	186
THE OPTION AGREEMENT — DEAL MEMO	187
GOING TO THE BANK	189
SCREEN CREDIT	190
CREATIVE RIGHTS	193
HOW MUCH?	195
BREAKING INTO THE BUSINESS	199
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	201
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	203
INDEX	205

INTRODUCTION

“The stuff that dreams are made of”

— Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*

The horror film producer has rejected more than a dozen ideas presented by the screenwriter sitting on the opposite side of his desk, and now he decides he's going to tell the writer what kind of story he wants for a movie. Naturally, when a producer speaks, a screenwriter listens eagerly.

The mogul pauses for a moment, leans back in his chair, watches his cigar smoke stream toward the ceiling, and drifts into the patented, self-absorbed Hollywood producer reverie: Two couples go to spend a weekend in their mountain cabin, where they are promptly snowed in by a surprise blizzard. Trapped without enough food and with no way down the mountain, one of the men decides to brave the elements for help. Unfortunately, that's the last the remaining three people see of him. After another day of going hungry and cold, the second husband resolves to get down the mountain for help. Leaving the two women alone, he staggers off through the snowdrifts into oblivion.

Meanwhile, the two women are getting pretty hungry. In desperation they trap a chicken (*in the blizzard!*) and decide to eat it raw. One of the women with enough nerve slices open the bird — and discovers her husband's severed finger inside!

The proud producer crams the cigar back into his mouth, throws the writer a knowing look, and waits for the inevitable awestruck response. “Uh, well,” I have the temerity to ask, “how did the finger get into the chicken?”

Instantly the producer lurches forward, throws himself across the desk, jabs the cigar into my face and yells, “Hell, *I* don't know. *You're* the writer!”

It was my first prophetic Hollywood experience—the screenwriter has to stuff the finger in the chicken. It is the screenwriter's job to make the story *work*.

Of all the people on the moviemaking team, the screenwriter is the only true, originating creative force, the sleight-of-hand artist who makes sense out of a chaotic world for the audience.

This book is about *satisfying* the theatrical feature film audience. It is not the unified theory of film criticism. It is not a fill-in-the-blanks, five-easy-steps to a successful screenplay. There are no formulas, no magical incantations, and no previously unrevealed secrets. Instead, there are techniques for trying out your ideas, devices for approaching the elements of screen drama, and ways of learning to think like a screenwriter.

The book is about screenwriting by a screenwriter, and all of the suggestions offered in these pages come from the perspective of more than twenty years of making my living as a writer, not as a critic or an analyst. Additionally, I have taught screenwriting as a guest instructor at numerous universities and institutes throughout the world, and those experiences have allowed me to investigate how the craft of screenwriting can be communicated to other people.

Naturally, you will be able to find an abundance of exceptions to the advice and examples offered in these pages if you choose to look for them. But exceptions don't invalidate the advice, nor does the advice contained here negate the work of other writers. We simply differ in our approach to the craft. You will ultimately choose how you write as well as what you write about. All this book can do is offer you the best guidance I know of based on my years behind a pencil. None of the techniques I want to share with you are meant to be dogmatic truth—no matter how adamantly I may defend my particular point of view. As Rudyard Kipling said, “There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, And every single one of them is right.” That’s the kind of paradox that makes Hollywood interesting as well as crazy-making. Take what’s valuable for you right now, and leave the rest for another time. After some years of writing experience, you’ll begin to pull the

recommendations, admonitions, and instructions together into your own philosophy of what screenwriting is all about.

Keep a pencil in your hand as you read this book. Make notes in the margins. Doodle your reactions and thoughts as you read, right here in the book. In fact, there are *Scribble Exercises* built in every few pages, specific activities and questions to stir your reactions. For the most part, these *Scribble Exercises* call for immediate, intuitive responses, so you will continually go back to erase and revise your notes as you read.

Go ahead, make a mess of it.

It's that kind of book.

All right, grab a pencil, turn the page, and let's see what the screenwriter has to do in order to satisfy the audience.

DRAMA IS CONFLICT

“The plot must be so structured, even without benefit of any visual effect, that the one who is hearing the events unroll shudders with fear and feels pity at what happens.”

— Aristotle, *Poetics*

Humankind has told stories for thousands of years. We have squatted around innumerable campfires to hear the tribal yarn spinner weave the magic of words into a fabric of cultural expectation and mythical archives. And somewhere in the development of our nascent entertainment culture we developed a taste for more engaging stories in the form of drama. But, long before Aristotle and Shakespeare refined the dramatic form and codified it into the comedies and tragedies we know today, the earliest forms of drama were probably sporting contests, ritualized combats between two opponents who wrestled against each other for the same goal—the glory of winning.

Two oiled and naked young men face each other in the sandy ring. They are both vigorous and skilled, the best their culture has to offer. They are both worthy; each of them represents the highest values of strength and courage that the society considers to be important. The only unknown is which of these young men will triumph, so the audience roots for one favorite homeboy or the other until the test of strength and skill is complete.

These ancient contests were not very different from the college and professional basketball or football games we watch today. We choose a side in the conflict based on some imagined or generated loyalty such as the city the team claims as home or the unity we feel with our alma mater. But while these sporting contests may be exciting, they are not wholly satisfying because there is no value in question that will force a change for either the participants or the audience. No matter which side wins, our lives are likely to go on in pretty much the same way they did two hours earlier.

Likewise, for our epic wrestlers, equally matched and equally deserving though they may be, the two chums gyrating in the dirt already share *precisely the same values*. Simply by entering into the match, each of the contestants has exhibited the values of the culture—youth, strength, courage, skill—and no matter which of them wins the battle, they will probably go out after the match to knock back a few ambrosias together and share their consolidated glory. And while the individual audience members may have cheered for their neighborhood favorite, or even had a drachma or two wagered on the side, the fact is that nothing has been gained or lost in the contest beyond bragging rights. There is no *moral valence* attached to winning or losing.

Imagine, however, there is a *good* guy and a *bad* guy who are wrestling. Each of the contestants represents a system of values. One system we'll call *good*, because we in the audience share those values; and one system we'll call *bad*, because it is a set of rules and behaviors that we do not agree with and that cannot coexist with our system of rules and behaviors. If the wrestlers are fighting in our stead, that is, if we will be bound by the result of the fight, then our lives will be irrevocably changed by the outcome. If the bad guy wins, our lives will be adversely transformed. If the good guy wins, our lives will be enhanced. In these circumstances we are far more invested in the *change* that will result as a consequence of the battle. Something is at stake in our lives. Now we have *drama*.

Drama is conflict. It is about somebody who acts against somebody else. Yet, it is more than mere opposition because drama is about conflict that results in a *significant transition* in the lives of the participants—it alters both the characters and their surrounding society.

DRAMA MAKES SENSE

But drama is more than just a list of events where *this happens and then that happens and then something else happens*. Drama tells a *story*, a *this happens and because of it, that happens*. Drama provides a cause-and-effect structure that gives us a paradigm for making sense of life.

Drama is not life. Life is ordinary. You get up in the morning, brush your teeth, eat breakfast, go to work, have a flat tire, take the dog to the vet, etc. The events of daily life are a catalogue of occurrences that are largely with-

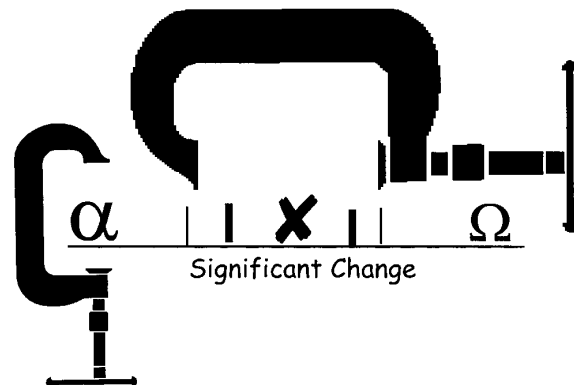
out clear, satisfying resolution. There may be highs and lows, sensational moments, excitement and disappointment, but for the most part, life is an episodic roster of everyday affairs which have more or less equal significance.

Drama, however, is encapsulated life, life condensed to its essences and raised to its heights. It is a linear, narrative arrangement of events in which someone acts against someone else—conflict—and in which every event in that sequence directly impacts the success or failure of a noteworthy life transition. *Rocky* isn't about the history of boxing, but the change one man makes as he finds the strength to pursue a dream. *Ordinary People* is about Conrad's change in the relationship with his mother, and the consequences of that change on his family. *Rain Man* is the story of Charlie Babbitt's change in the way he relates to other people brought on by his relationship with one person, his autistic savant brother, Raymond. *Braveheart* is about the change in a much larger society brought about by one man's transition from complacent submission to defiant resistance.

Let's say then that

Ordered
Drama is \wedge Conflict

The screenwriter's job is to extract the consequential incidents from life and arrange them in an emphatic sequence to tell the *story* of the transition. To do this, the screenwriter compresses time and collapses events.



The imaginative screenwriter has available all time and all space from which to draw a story. For the sake of convenience, we can represent this availability of material as a simple continuum, the Alpha to Omega of existence, from the Big Bang to the Big Squeeze. Obviously, the entire history of the universe is too much material to write a screenplay about, so the screenwriter begins to compress time into a manageable proportion.

Whether the time selected for the story is present day, a thousand years in the past, or a hundred years in the future, the screenwriter has limited the scope of the story. Depending on the particular story, the time is further limited to the events of one week, or twenty-four hours, or even a few minutes. The screenwriter skillfully selects only the scope of the story that is needed to express the significant change (✕). All too often, beginning screenwriters are tempted to include far more time leading up to the event of change than the audience needs to know about. But experienced screenwriters have learned that the span of time immediately encompassing ✕ is important only to the degree that it has a direct cause-and-effect relationship with ✕.

Likewise, the skilled screenwriter collapses events, choosing only those incidents that directly impact the story and, more particularly, have an intrinsic connection to the ✕ that the story is about. Everyone knows, for instance, that characters in movies never have to take out their wallets and fish around for exactly the right taxi fare. They just grab a bill at random and hand it over to the cabbie. But, of course, the act of having the exact taxi fare is simply not important to the outcome of the drama. It has no bearing on the success or failure of the significant transition that the story is about.

On the other hand, such a mundane life event could have a crucial effect on the story if the writer chooses to make it so. We all know that, unlike real life, parking places abound in movies, and it is always possible to pull up directly outside the building the character is visiting. But in Robert Benton and David Newman's masterful script for *Bonnie and Clyde*, the screenwriters punch this staid convention in its nose to horrifying effect.

Bonnie, Clyde, and their dimwitted driver, C.W. Moss, pull into a small town square to rob the local bank. Small though the town may be, however, there's enough car and wagon traffic to prevent C.W. from parking.

It hardly matters, because the robbery will take only a couple of minutes and then they'll be off again on their spree. However, while Bonnie and Clyde are inside the bank, C.W. spots a place being vacated. With great effort, and to the delight of both the audience and on-screen characters, he manages to shoehorn the car into the small gap. Unfortunately, when Bonnie and Clyde emerge from the bank, their getaway car is nowhere to be found! With a tremendous grinding of gears and jolting of bumpers, C.W. succeeds in extracting the car from its confinement while Bonnie and Clyde run to climb in. By now the furious bank manager has dashed out of the building and, as the getaway car careens around the corner, he leaps onto the running board. Panicked by the unexpected events, Clyde spins around in the car and shoots the bank manager square in the face.

It is a chilling moment in the film, and the turning point of an inevitably tragic story that has, until this event, scrupulously avoided violence in favor of an almost lyrical romance. The scene of not being able to find a parking place *by itself* would have been meaningless, but the screenwriters accomplished a paradoxical shock to the audience's system by carefully selecting an event so ordinary as to seem comical, and then turning that event into the catastrophic linchpin of an ever-darkening drama.

THE SCREENPLAY PREMISE

By thoughtfully abbreviating the contiguous time of the story, and singling out only those events that have immediate influence on the success or failure of the life change of a character, the screenwriter develops a *premise*, that is, a brief statement of the central conflict of the story:

- ✓ Who is the main character?
- ✓ Who is the antagonist?
- ✓ What are they fighting about?
- ✓ What is the change that results from the conflict?
- ✓ Why must the main character take action to achieve the change?

It is this moral choice to act that the character must make which creates the *gestalt* and the sense of satisfaction and completeness that drama provides an audience, and that distinguishes a narratively compelling drama from the catalogue of random happenings that make up daily life.

Next, we'll look at the *audience-focused sequence* that grows from the premise and establishes the overall structure for a dramatic story—a beginning, middle, and end.