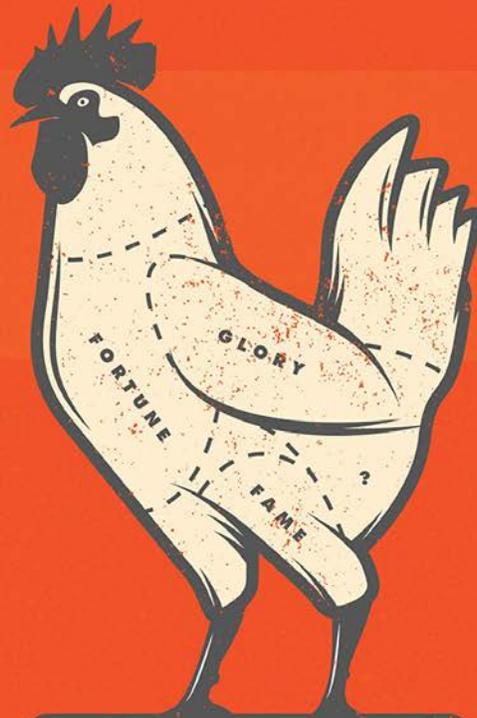


J O E G I L F O R D



WHY DOES THE

*Screenwriter
Cross the Road?*

+ OTHER SCREENWRITING SECRETS

INTRODUCTION

LET'S ADMIT IT: writing a good screenplay isn't easy. Any seasoned professional, including me, can tell you that.

You really want it to go well. You really want to do a good job. You want those involved — including yourself — to be very pleased.

You really want it to be satisfying for all parties, in this case that means your characters and your audience.

I believe great care is always taken in writing the best screenplays. The story needs to be psychically and spiritually nutritious. This isn't a one-night stand. This is something that needs to be meaningful, maybe even last a lifetime, which is difficult even under the best circumstances.

Believe it or not, in the end, it needs to make sense in some way.

Even if you don't see yourself as some kind of "artist," you can't avoid it. You're going to be writing this script using your whole psyche. All of the feelings, physical sensations, life experiences, sense of human values, and conscious actions you perform are the product of your entire being.

I don't know about you, but the whole idea of my script being good and being liked by people is very personal.

You want this thing to be powerful, memorable, and most of all, you want them coming back for more.

But what feels right? What works? It's different every time you

start a new project. What's the next move? What should I do to make this better — and better — and better? How can I make it as satisfying as possible, but at the same time not make it self-conscious or formal?

This is the personal and emotional side of what you do when you write a story.

But there's craft involved.

I like to describe screenwriting as a professional craft, which can be thought of as a combination of music, law, and architecture.

Music: because the creative notation of the written document is absolutely nothing like the beauty of the final product. You don't "see" a screenplay and you don't "listen" to sheet music. But without it, nobody would know how to perform it; how to bring it to life. Ultimately, the reward of a movie and a symphony are actually invisible. The final product is *felt* by its audience.

Law: because, in a story, you've got to prove something to your audience — and it must make sense according to essential human values.

Architecture: because you cannot ignore certain proven principles of cause and effect; because you must have structure so that we understand what it is; because you must respect the rules of engineering so that the whole thing doesn't fall apart.

And for one of the most important reasons you'll learn in this book:

A screenplay is not written — it's built.

This book is intended for anyone who is thinking about writing a script. That could be a feature film, a one-hour drama, a sitcom spec, or a short film, and this includes students, first-time scriptwriters, and professionals who want to revisit the governing principles of our craft or those who just want to take a crack at it.

Orson Welles once said something both funny and cynical: “Anyone can learn anything in this business in forty-five minutes.” I actually agree with what sounds like a grotesque undervaluing of the remarkable amount of craft that goes into every aspect of filmmaking.

But what he’s right about is that this is like becoming a lumberjack. How much do you actually need to learn that you haven’t learned already? And are you ready to listen? And are you ready to cast off so many notions that provide you a toxic kind of comfort for some of your ideas, which may have no business being translated into a screenplay?

The ideas and principles that we’ll explore cover the basic principles of all dramatic writing and so it doesn’t matter how long or short your script turns out to be.

So let’s get something out of the way right at the start. It’s just my opinion, but . . .

Film is NOT a visual medium.

Blasphemy?

Okay, if your knees shook or you wanted to punch me in the face maybe this book isn’t for you . . . or maybe it is.

If you’re an open-minded creative person curious about other points of view and figure “what harm can yet another book on screenwriting do me?” then keep reading.

PROMISE: Read this book, and you’ll understand what I’m saying. It will also free you from a lot of ideas and methods that are making it more difficult for you to work through and finish your decent and producible screenplay. It will also help you dispel a lot of delusions about writing scripts that will allow you to use your native talent (which I’m sure you have, otherwise you wouldn’t be reading this) and finish a good script that people will read.

This book will help you connect with something that will make your script better than you thought. It’s what I call the *human value*. This is what your story is about; what the main character struggles

for. It's what audiences really want to see. It's what actors really want to be involved in. But it's not a sermon or an essay. It's a screenplay. A dramatic script that will then go through the amazing process of being transformed into that wonderful final product: a movie.

Remain excited. That's another thing you'll learn to do.

That human value is pretty simple. "Crime doesn't pay." "Love finds a way." "Be yourself." "It's better to be connected to people than not." "Money isn't everything." "Family is important." Yes, just the kind of things everybody struggles for in their everyday lives.

But telling the story of your character struggling with this value needs to be exciting, funny, engaging, and original in some way. Aristotle claimed there was "nothing new under the sun." Yet even with the limited amount of great human values out there, we just can't stop trying to tell those stories in a staggering variety of ways.

Read this book and you'll also have the opportunity to free yourself from the self-judging and inhibiting mindset you bring to your work every day.

It will stop you from hearing certain things from your "savvy" friends, even industry professionals, who pollute your mind with statements like, "Oh, they're only doing horror movies this year" or "Nobody's looking for that."

What this book affirms is that what "they" are looking for is *a good script*. They always have been and they always will be. What this book proposes is to improve the skills that you need in order to write a good screenplay; what I like to call *a screenplay that works*.

Industry professionals, studio executives, even independent producers live in a world of fear. It's not their fault. They come by it honestly. They're frightened of saying "yes" to the wrong thing and just as frightened of saying "no" to the right thing. Best thing you can do is stay out of that dilemma and simply write what you believe works.

Notice I have not used the word *sell*.

Sure, I can tell you which kind of script sells — the one they just bought!

Nobody knows if a script will be produced or if it will sell, so forget about that. And they can't really tell if a movie will be successful. Odds are against every movie being either critically or financially successful anyway. If that's why you picked up this book, just shut it, right now, and go find a book that makes the ultimately false guarantee of helping you write a script that will sell. Won't happen. At least I cannot make that promise. Sorry.

But take this book home, get what you can out of it (and please don't pass over any other of my colleagues' worthy books), and the script that you write will be *read* and read by the people who matter: actors, talent agents, artists' managers, producers, and directors. If you're a student, your advisor will see a clear and sensible piece of work that has imagination and originality. If you're making your attempt with a real producer or buyer, you'll know if their notes are stupid or not. If you are an experienced professional and need to look at this whole thing from another perspective, you are as brave an artist as you need to be and I'm flattered at your attention.

I'll also help you write a likable script, which will get your next script to the right people even faster. Your script will be "industry ready."

I do guarantee that the script you learn to write from reading this book will not be stupid or embarrassing to you. It will be a script that works.

This book will ask you to work harder (not faster). It will help you find a way to write better, but not more. It will also ask that you come up with a personal way to actually anticipate the response to your work, both negative and positive. You will *know* what your script is, why you wrote it, and who the audience for it might be. You will know what's right about it, but more important, you will know what's wrong with it. And yes, there will be something wrong with it. After all, it's a work of art. But that's the whole deal with works of art. They perfectly express our human imperfection in a perfectly imperfect way.

There's no *one way* to write a story. If you took a survey of every great writer's methods and techniques, you'd get a list as different as each of their wardrobes. The person who tells you "This is *the* way to write a script" is like the person who tells you "My language is the only language to speak."

Certainly, any language must have nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Same with screenwriting. There are certain principles in storytelling that you simply can't do without, but somehow every script turns out differently.

When we write a story, whether it is prose, fact-based, or personal, we unconsciously observe many of the basic principles of storytelling. You do it every day.

A story is a carefully structured, sometimes spontaneously imagined piece of human craft. It's an amazing thing. We do it naturally and intuitively and we've been doing it for thousands of years. Yes, we understand in our hearts that the thoughtful and deliberate choices we make in the telling of a story are what make the story likable (or appealing or spellbinding or funny) — in short, entertaining.

These principles are simply natural to storytelling. We all know them, use them, and respect them. All of our favorite films, television series, and novels use these principles.

So you've been living with and using these principles all of your life. If you're interested in writing scripts, then you're probably even more conscious of these principles than you realize. You're already "breathing" them.

The principles we'll be working with in this book have all been extracted from the rich and long history of dramatic writing. Whenever we write a story we're paying tribute to Euripides, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Shaw. The great novelists like Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Fitzgerald also observed these ages-old principles.

But rather than impose a set of rules on our work, we will use what naturally occurs in the process of storytelling that has worked through the millennia. We will codify it and make it like a list of

“things to do”; “what to pack” before we can claim that our story is finished.

These fundamental principles of screenwriting upon which we build successful dramatic stories have been collected and distilled from a few other experts on screenwriting whom I admire: Robert McKee, Syd Field, William Goldman, Michael Tierno, and several of my colleagues at NYU, like Paul Thompson, or from UCLA, including Hal Ackerman. You should read all of their work as well.

I also urge you to examine as many different approaches as you can tolerate. I’m not a mind reader, but I can tell that this isn’t your first and it won’t be your last exploration of perfecting your craft as a screenwriter. It’s not my last time either. No matter how long I’ve been doing this, I don’t ever feel like I’m done learning about it. Every new script is a new experience — a new character, a new world, and a new story.

Even when you’re working alone, screenwriting is collaboration. If it’s not collaboration with all the dozens of craftspeople involved, it’s collaboration with a part of your mind that thinks up the story. This is your silent partner who is in love with movies.

Using these fundamental principles, your story will finally achieve:

Unity — The story is always being told.

Clarity — The human value of your story is completely obvious.

Emotional impact — It will be moving or funny or both. It will entertain.

These are the qualities that attract performers and other professionals to your script. If these people like it, it stands a much better chance of reaching the screen and/or earning you some money.

Most pleasant of all, you will actually enjoy re-reading your script, you will be in a position to fight for what’s good in it, and you’ll be

more open to what needs changing. Because you will have structured it clearly, others will see the human value in it and will work along the same ideas that you have constructed, helping you to strengthen it.

Unfortunately, dramatic writing is not like cabinetry. However, as in cabinetry, there are fundamental principles of craft that we must follow in order to create a dramatic story; a story that does what it needs to do — *excite and engage the audience*.

Screenplays are not movies. They are carefully, thoughtfully, and deliberately written documents that *propose* the final movie, but must also evoke the great values and actions in the story.

These very talented people who make your movie are not simply interested in putting on a show and making a lot of money. I believe they are truly committed to using their artistic talents to illuminate a small part of the human condition.

BTW, if your script is not exciting to read, it will not be exciting as a movie — and I don't mean you're going to use exciting language. Producers, actors, everybody knows what an exciting script is and it has little to do with the language (while in a novel, language is almost everything).

The two major questions:

- Is the story always being told?
- Are we intensely interested in what the protagonist is going to do next?

In the 1930s, George Bernard Shaw, the leading dramatist of his generation, was lunching with Louis B. Mayer, founder of MGM Studios and, at that time, easily the most powerful man in movies (especially according to himself). Wanting to impress Shaw with his respect for aesthetics and high art Mayer expounded for some time on the subject of artistic values, showing off his knowledge while Shaw politely listened and chewed. When Mayer took a pause, Shaw

was said to remark: “Mr. Mayer, that’s all very admirable. But you’re talking about art. I am here to talk about commerce.”

More shocking news: the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Somehow, a myth has developed that the two are worlds apart. Certainly, there is a long history of films that were not very artistic but were nonetheless commercially successful. But, by and large, the most successful movies of the last one hundred years were both commercially and artistically successful.

Your script can be artistic AND commercial. This runs the full spectrum from *Dumb & Dumber* to *Chinatown* to *Breaking the Waves* to *The Sopranos* and long-running sitcoms like *Friends*. Good stories are simply *good* and appeal to a wide audience and continue to do so for very long periods of time. If you can still look at Da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa” after 500 years, then let’s admit it, that’s some great work of art and, in its way, has been very commercially successful. The same thing applies to movies: if you can watch a film over and over again without getting sick of it (my minimum is ten times) then that movie is a damn good movie and goes on the permanent “art” shelf.

This Book . . .

The primary focus of this book is two-tiered.

My experience and my mentors have taught me a most important principle:

Story = Structure

That’s because screenplays do not depend on “the writing” (language, style, voice, poetic ideas, grammatical mechanics) but on the structure (acts, scenes, lines of action — what’s happening and what characters are *doing*).

Screenplays are like presenting your idea of a human being by only showing the skeleton except you’re going to tell me, through the story, what this person will do when faced with certain choices.

That's action. That's the basic DNA of a story. The big question at every moment of your story, as your main character is faced with important choices:

“What's the hero going to do *now*?”

But where does this so-called “story” come from? Here's my answer:

Character = Story

That's what this book is about. After years of writing and teaching I have come upon an approach that I feel works for many writers, including me. It has also served me well as a teacher of hundreds of students including those at NYU's Undergraduate Film Program.

Create a central character who plays in great scenes and has a lot of problems to face — actively — and you've got yourself a movie.

These principles are the launching pad for your story. What your character does or doesn't do moves the story. Your story doesn't do anything without your main character being affected. But remember, you're not writing material to be read or enjoyed in people's minds while they're curled up on the sofa. You're writing material that is created to be performed.

If great scripts and stories were plentiful, then you wouldn't be reading this and there would be one hundred contenders for the Best Picture Oscar every year, not just nine. In fact, if things were different, we would almost never complain about seeing bad movies, sitting through boring plays, or reading lousy novels.

You wouldn't struggle for months or years writing a script, it would just tumble out of your brain like your grocery list. In fact, there would be no need for story departments, script development, and no one would need to read a script before it gets produced

— *there would be no rewrites!* What a world that would be! We could get out the crew and the equipment and just make a movie.

But that's not the way it is.

The great Hungarian émigré producer Alexander Korda fled Nazi Germany penniless (with his Duesenberg limo, a chauffeur, and a valet), landed in England, and single-handedly created the British film industry. He had a famous sign hanging behind his desk that read: "It is not enough to be Hungarian — one must also have a good Second Act!"

Even Lars von Trier uses traditional structure in his films, as do David Lynch and Jim Jarmusch. They just do it in their own special ways.

Let's remember, a script is a naked, unadorned blueprint of a filmed screen story. It will be looked at, combed over, debated, hated, loved, and microscopically analyzed by about a hundred people before it gets produced and that's if you're on the fast track.

Unlike a novel or a ballet, it will enjoy the comments of these hundred people; their whims and opinions. And because they are paid to do it, they will make you change it. And if you can't (or won't) change it, they will hire somebody else who will. Let's not forget the generic name of your beloved script, the yield of years of labor, blood, sweat, and tears; your "baby." Industry big shots traditionally call it "The Property." And just like a piece of real estate, once it's got a new owner, that person can do anything they want from repainting the bedroom to gutting the kitchen. But I'm not saying you shouldn't be attached to it. Just know what's ahead of you.

You can't hide anything in a script like you can in a novel. Everything in your script is liable to cost some money. It's like the plans for a house, with each separate contractor asking, "What's this?" A movie script is scrutinized for quality, clarity, and cost as much as a fast-breaking news story is scanned for its accuracy. You can run, but you can't hide.

If there's something flimsy or questionable in your story, you will inevitably be exposed. If you're lucky, it happens before you start shooting. If you're not lucky, the audience will let you know in their own wonderfully ruthless way. If the owner — the studio, the network, or any producer — chooses to ignore a flaw in your story, don't think you've gotten away with something. They will pay in the end and they will blame the writer.

Ultimately, the audience will catch you and that'll be that. "I didn't believe he would go out with her, did you?" "How was he able to get that job so easily?" or "Can you actually obtain explosives by regular mail?" and hundreds of other comments that can doom a movie's credibility.

Movies, despite their belonging to what we call "popular culture," are thoughtful, deliberate, carefully arranged works of art. But they aren't like opera or classical music. They're more like good rock'n'roll; a folk art, but they are still important to our cultural and spiritual nourishment. Everybody loves the movies.

Your script will be read by an agent, sent to the story person at a film company, looked at by producers, directors, production designers, financiers, insurance actuaries, actors' managers, actors' personal story staff, the director's spouse — the list is very long. But the people I prefer to sell to, the people who I believe are *the* ones who decide if a picture gets made, are not the producer, the director, or the development person. I am writing my script for the person whose face gets blown up to the size of a billboard and is the last person to handle it as an artist. This person is the one whose face is up there and whose ass is on the playing field: the actor.

Along the way I will familiarize you with what we'll call the *moving parts* of your story. These parts are the things you cannot do without if you want to tell a good story.

If you were building a car, you'd need wheels, an engine, and a strong frame. If you were building a chair, it must be something people can sit in. However, isn't it amazing how many different

kinds of chairs there are in this world? So you can be original. But these moving parts cannot be excluded. People need to be comfortable sitting in your chair.

I will make another promise:

You get to *keep* everything in your story. Every crazy
idea and wonderful quirky moment you want —

. . . but it has to work.

I call this *putting it in the box*. Don't get turned off. You will get to keep everything you've imagined in your script — but you have to “put it in the box.” This script still has to turn out to be a recognizable story. It's a chair we can comfortably sit in or a car we can dependably and safely drive. I hope to give you an understanding of the true function of the characters, acts, scenes and scene structure, action, the beats (quanta of action), types of characters, the climax, what goes where — all that stuff.

Imagine your script as a wristwatch. It's a collection of all these unique moving parts, yet they are all working together to create a single experience — to tell the time. Your screenplay will be made up of different parts all unified in a single purpose — to tell the story.

My writing methods are pretty simple:

- Write everything . . .
- Write a lot . . .
- Make it into something . . .
- . . . and then rewrite it!

I want you to throw your clay onto the wheel and get going. I don't want you to justify yourself. That can get very depressing. It's the process of self-judging that's stopped many a story from being told.

You're going to stop sucking the wind out of your sails by pitching

your idea at Starbucks to your best friend who has no intention of supporting your effort. You're going to be discreet, professional, and, yes, thoughtful about your project. You're going to give yourself and your work the respect you both deserve.

You're most likely going to wind up stifling yourself if you sit down and ask yourself, "What's my story about?" That's a real buzz kill. Rather than interrogate yourself, I want you to *tell* yourself what you already know:

"There's this guy/gal and he/she is walking along one day and then — they are thrust into something that is really different and necessitates some kind of change." That's your idea; your pitch.

The rest is not so easy — but now, at least, you've opened the door. You with me? Let's get to it.