

Writing a Great Screenplay

Billy Wilder once stated that "Audiences don't know somebody sits down and writes a picture. They think the actors make it up as they go along." Unless you are a writer, chances are you have never heard of, or are relatively unfamiliar with names such as Kelly or Wallace, Frank Pierson, Pen Densham, Babaloo Mandel, or Lowell Ganz. These people are some of the top screenwriters in the business, whose words, ideas, characters, and conflicts have produced numerous films considered classics of today.

In fact, unless writers are among the few to win one of only two Academy awards for writing given out each year (Best Original Screenplay or Best Adapted Screenplay), people outside the film industry will more than likely never have an idea of who the writers are. The best screenwriters may labor in anonymity, but what they leave behind is a future all their own, the unmistakable "footprints in the dark" that will illuminate the way for all who follow.

The script is the basic tool of the movie and television industry. No matter how spontaneous a television show or film may seem, you can be absolutely sure that there was a script involved. How do these scripts get developed? Where do ideas begin? What is the first step towards creating a great script?

The writer begins with a blank page and must create a story, imagine the characters, and start the long visualization process that will eventually yield a motion picture. The journey from script to screen will be long and arduous. Hopefully, it will be a good collaboration. When it is, producers, directors, actors, production designers, composers, and many others will embellish and hone the ideas, adding layers to the characters and the story. They all will be interpreting and enhancing the original screenplay.

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You can only get better with practice. It has been stated that once you have written a million words, you will sell your material. "Write and keep writing," states Ken Sherman (Ken Sherman Agency), "I had one client who wrote about 8 scripts before he mastered screenwriting form. I could see the person was extremely talented. In the first script he wrote great characters and no plot, and the next script had an excellent plot and weak characters. Suddenly, it all came together.

He ended up with an overall deal, including a corner office with a parking place downstairs, \$100,000+ a year salary, and most importantly, the ear and eye of all the executives at the studio." Obviously, achieving fame and fortune as a screenwriter is a difficult task that takes patience and a lot of perseverance. In order for a writer to function creatively under these conditions, a certain mindset is required, a firm belief that what you are doing can make a difference.

A screenplay is a form of creative writing. Structured like a play, flowing like music, it consists of 120 pages or so of dialogue and a few sparse stage directions that will act as the creative impetus for everything that is to come. Ideas come from within and without. It's partly a need to communicate something about the human condition, to communicate to people who might have the same experiences, feel the same emotions, or who are influenced and impacted by the same stories. Part of the writer's job is to find the idea that will speak to millions.

Developing Ideas?

Even Hollywood, bombarded by thousands of scripts weekly, complains incessantly of a shortage of material that is fresh in voice, vision, and point of view. "The ideal writer is the one that has a great concept, a great story and can execute it. Usually, you get one of those things," states Candy Monteiro (Producer, Monteiro Rose/Los Angeles).

Elliot Stahler (Kaplan Stahler Agency/Los Angeles) describes what everyone is looking for in these terms; "Most of what we see is on the Bell Curve, written by intelligent people and it's all about C- to C+. In the C to C+ range, we try to help them. We may send them off and tell them to come back with another script. There are very few where it's clear they should be in another field. The other ones who jump off the page, where it's clearly special that it's super stardom, that's rare."

One of those rare situations occurred in 1997 when the Best Original Screenplay Academy Award was given to Matt Damon and Ben Affleck for the writing of *Good Will Hunting*. The first script written by either man, *Good Will Hunting* proved to be an exceptional, touching film about a rebellious 20-year old MIT janitor with a photographic memory and a troublesome lifestyle.

Damon and Affleck admit the script was written out of desperation because both men were broke and looking for work. After the overwhelming success of the film, both actor/writers are now basking in movie stardom and see no end in site. This is a rare situation, however, and does not occur very often in the industry, particularly on a first script.

"I always know that a writer is not very good when he/she doesn't want to tell me what his project is about because he thinks I'm going to steal the idea," Robin Moran Miller explains. "Good writers know it's not the idea, it's their voice." Many people who like writing feel inadequate when it comes to finding story ideas and designing plots or story structures. Young (and not so young) writers often feel that nothing has really ever happened to them. They compensate by working from the outside inward, emulating types of stories, or writers that they admire.

Like actors trying to learn from other actors, they neglect their most precious resource-what the writer has seen and experienced. "What people want to see is a script they haven't seen before," Rima Greer (Above the Line Agency/Los Angeles) states. Ken Sherman points out that he looks for originality, passion, an individual voice, as well as someone who is a craftsman and is not afraid to be different.

The fatal impediment is not lack of experience but lack of knowing how to recognize, value, and shape it. The key lies in what Thomas Hardy called "moments of vision," those instants of piercing clarity when one stumbles on a special truth or meaning.

Most people who write want to bring about a script that reflects who they are and their own perception of the world, their own reality. Although the thought of writing material that the market or industry prefers seems like a good idea at first, it has to be understood that by the time production takes place preferences may have changed.

Writing scripts based on what you think others may want is almost never a good idea. "There's a difference between writing and trying to write," states Bob Hohman (Hohman Maybank Lieb), "It's just elegant." "Oh, I probably look for the same things that producers are looking for," explains Jim Preminger (Jim Preminger Agency), "good writing, a good story, well developed characters, something that feels real, something that feels unusual and not too familiar."

To be original, writers, composers, and other artists must be able to think radically at the outset. After the basics are laid down and elaboration is under way, it is difficult or impossible to make a clichéd idea into something better. "There's no mystery about writing," explains Lynn Pleshette (Pleshette/Millner Agency), "You can read one page and know. You know if you are in good hands by how somebody writes.

Good writers have an ear for how people use language. With most new writers, all the characters sound alike. You can tell by the density of pages sometimes. If the descriptions go on forever instead of one line or if the writer needs a half page of prose to describe the scene, generally speaking, you are in trouble. Not to mention that it can be really boring."

If there is a single key to developing as a writer, it is to keep writing, and to keep submitting your writing to the reactions of an audience. Write every week

One of the many ways to develop story ideas is to write in outline form. This writing technique keeps your basic ideas compact and highly visible. Because you and your critical readers can see the fundamentals of your story's characters, dynamics, balance, and meaning, you can easily make changes.

This is much harder once you have invested a lot of work in writing an elaborate screenplay. By then, one is naturally more resistant to changes. Writing in outline form also helps you to create stories as if you were an observer seeing from the outside, which is vital in screenplay work.

Michael Rabiger points out in his book *Developing Story Ideas*, that if there is a single key to developing as a writer, it is to keep writing, and to keep submitting your writing to the reactions of an audience.

Use a computer or typewriter for any presentation that will be read by others. Use your computer's spelling checker to catch typos or other anomalies. Have someone literate proofread your work. Although these suggestions may seem obvious, a lot of discoveries are made through evaluations such as these. "Write, write, write. Until you have made it, don't try guessing what's trendy, write for quality whether for series television or feature films," states Jim Preminger.

Getting Started

Why do so many people who want to write have such trouble doing so? Usually I find that they are trying to swim against the current of their own abilities. Many are suffocated in school by being made to write to formulas or in a dry, pseudo-scientific style. Strong, communicative writing comes from the struggle to describe what is, not what should be.

There are numerous techniques that different writers use to begin new scripts or to keep track of ideas. Michael Rabiger suggests making four kinds of collections: picture files, dream journals, news files, and a writer's journal. In the picture file, he suggests removing pictures from magazines and newspapers that are appealing. These photos may bring inspiration to the writer.

In a dream journal, you write down what you can remember from your dreams as they occur. Although often strange, dreams sometimes bring about very creative and intriguing stories. The news file is used to save news stories for use in news and documentary projects. Finally, the writer's journal should be kept with you at all times, and is used to record spontaneous thoughts, sites or ideas you may have.

For writer-director Lawrence Kasdan the ideas that "bubble up to the surface" tend to be very personal. "I work out of my own interests, enthusiasm, obsessions and neuroses." The man responsible for *Grand Canyon* and *The Big Chill* admits that for him, even one movie is hard to come by. "I don't have a lot of ideas floating around. I wish I did.

I tend to have a few things that interest me, and one tends to bubble up to the surface more strongly than the others and demands my attention. Then I start to let my mind play with that. Of course, once you start writing, almost anything else seems more appealing, but I don't desert what I'm working on for the most part."

Most of Lawrence Kasden's early scripts, including *Body Heat* and *The Big Chill* were done utilizing a type of card system. First he would write down absolutely anything that ever crossed his mind onto cards. The thoughts or situations did not have to relate to one another, he wrote down everything. Next he would match up these "idea" cards with "scene" cards and form an outline from this. Of course not all the cards were ever used, just the ones appropriate for the situation.

Finally he would work the script through his mind, making a final card for different scenes or sequences throughout his newly formed movie screenplay. Another writer, John Singleton, utilizes a journal to write down everything that is going on around him and

how it would pertain to a film. He takes these thoughts and transfers them to 3 by 5 cards, each scene having its own card, eventually plotting out an entire script.

Being Creative

Discovering the source of stories you are best qualified to tell often comes down to finding new connections between causes and effects in your own life. It means identifying what distinguishes your life from others. Where, after all, does the belief and drive to create something like a story come from?

It exists because you carry markings from emotional experience. You feel the impact of particular personalities and situations during your development. For a work to be meaningful to others, it has to go further than merely reflecting actuality. It has to imply ideas about those people and phenomena.

Usually an idea starts out with a simple sentence. For example, someone may say "What if a guy falls in love with a mermaid?" This was Brian Grazer's idea and became the 1980's comedy Splash. Another example could be a movie about creatures going to battle in outer space, in which you come up with films such as Starwars.

In any case, the writing process usually requires extensive research. Much of the time, the story is set in a world unfamiliar to the writer which presents many challenges. This may consist of geographical challenges, such as a writer whom lives in the United States writing about life in a third world country.

Geologic or historical challenges may occur when a writer decides to write a screenplay on something that occurred in the past. Mental and or physical challenges may take place when someone decides to write about being handicapped in some way such as being deaf or being a paraplegic. Every project presents its own set of unique research obstacles.

In filmmaking, as in theater or journalism, one must strongly define one's own point of view, or see one's prerogatives plucked away by stronger-willed colleagues, actors, or crewmembers

Once the concept is clear and the research under way most writers turn their attention to structuring the story, seeking out a natural beginning, middle, and end. Most use a three-act structure as their basic building block, though strategies vary from writer to writer. "Story is structure" is one of screenwriting's most enduring clichés, and not without reason.

Many of the most successful writers say that story structure is the single most important function of the writing process, one that will ultimately determine the success or failure of the script and of the film itself. Comedy can present special structural problems. When writing comedy, Ganz and Mandel (City Slickers, Parenthood) also tend to start with the needs of the characters and the actors who play them.

"If your interest is situation comedy, begin to analyze every comedy on television," suggests K Callan in her book *The Script is Finished*. "Watch the good and the bad. Tape them and watch them over and over. Why is *Seinfeld* appealing? Does it have more jokes? More interesting characters? Does the story unfold more quickly than on a show you don't like as well? Or does that even matter?" Those who create successful stories always seem aware of their themes.

Recalling the raw material of one's life and engaging with it anew can be uncomfortable or even frightening. But inner conflict and unhappiness are normal and necessary parts of the human experience, and they denote the very dissatisfaction that turns a human life into a productive quest.

In filmmaking, as in theater or journalism, one must strongly define one's own point of view, or see one's prerogatives plucked away by stronger-willed colleagues, actors, or crewmembers. A writer or director must work to find a clear sense of direction. Whether comedy or drama, the primary task of the screenwriter tends to be the structuring of the story. Once the structure or "spine" of the story emerges, it's time to focus on the characters that will inhabit that story and what they will learn along the way.

Writing Character's VS Writing Stories

A script is said to be story driven if it relies primarily on a high-concept plot, one that implies action and conflict and can be readily gleaned from a brief synopsis, such as: "A kid is inadvertently left home while his parents go on vacation."

On the other hand, a script is said to be character driven if its appeal relies primarily on the development of the characters and the changes that their personalities undergo during the film. Character-driven stories are generally perceived to be "softer" and less marketable than more action-oriented story-driven projects.

Examples of story-driven films are those such as *Home Alone* or *Robin Hood*, where character-driven films include *Thelma and Louise* and *American Beauty*. Bill Kelley feels that character and story elements work together and offers his own method for getting in touch with one's fictional progeny. "Every scene must reveal character and push the story forward."

Many writers begin by discovering who and what their characters are all about. Frank Pierson tries to find something in his characters that he can relate to his own personality.

Just do it

Overcoming exhaustion is but one of many obstacles a writer faces. Once a structural story line is complete and the characters are speaking, it's time to get down to the business of getting it on the page. All writers have their own approach. "You make it happen by getting your ass in the chair and beginning," Bill Kelley boldly states in Linda Seger's book *From Script to Screen*. Sticking to a set schedule seems to work for many

writers.

"I'm not a machine. I had to learn to accept my own rhythms," Kasdan explains about his personal writing style. How do great scripts differ from those that are merely well written? Every classic script is about ideas. It has something to say about life, about the human condition. "Whether it's a great script or not is secondary," states Marty Shapiro. "The first evaluation is the writing. How good is the person? It's really a subjective thing. I can say they're not good and they can go across the street and someone else can say they're brilliant."

A perfect example of this is the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. The script was written by William Goldman and was initially turned down by virtually every studio that read it. Eventually, 20th Century Fox picked up the script. The film was made starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman and today is considered one of the American Film Institute's 100 best movies of all time.

Most writers find that they explore the same themes over and over, even though their stories may be about very diverse subjects. An example of this can be seen in most all Woody Allen films. Allen is the writer, director and lead actor in most of his pictures. Although his films differ in plot, setting, etc., they all seem to be focused towards struggling, middle aged men. A lot of the time his films also involve the misunderstanding of women.

It all basically comes down to what the writer is good at, finding their particular niche and sticking to what works for them

Other writer's such as Ganz and Mandel admit that most of their films also seem to involve struggling men their age in some type of situational comedy. Kasdan's films have a common theme of struggling between ideal and desire. Bill Kelley is drawn again and again to themes of facing moral imperatives. It all basically comes down to what the writer is good at, finding their particular niche and sticking to what works for them.

Script Format

"A great screenplay is 118 pages or less in correct format, with paragraphs no more than 4 lines long, with castable parts, with a story I've never heard before," Rima Greer states in the book *What Everybody Wants*. Obviously, as important as it is that there be a script, equally important is the necessity for that script to be written in the correct standard format appropriate for a given filming situation.

A one-camera film production requires a specific script format quite different from a three-camera television production. Many people starting out in the business of script writing are unclear as to what the appropriate form is when writing a script. They go about writing the story down as if writing a novel, from top to bottom of the page. Script formats are much different than that of the novel format as will be discussed later.

When you first glance at a completed script, it may appear as merely randomly placed words spread over a page, but this is not the case. Actually, each individual format for a script is logically and concisely planned to suit the individual needs and aspects of the given filming situation. It is pretty safe to assume that if you took a novel and a camera to a location and tried to film a scene it would be nearly impossible.

A well-formatted script is the basic tool used by directors, actors and the entire crew while filming is taking place. Not only does a standard format provide a framework and essential guideline for a specific filming technique, it also serves as an indicator for timings. One script page in proper format generates approximately one minute of screen time. A two-hour feature film screenplay should be approximately 120 pages in length. Pacing of a screenplay is extremely important. Because a 2-hour film is 120 pages long, what happens on page 60 is approximately half way through the film.

Producers are very aware of pacing, and may actually ask a writer to change what occurs on a specific page to better suit the point in the film at which it would take place. While it is usual for a novelist to create a character's identity by describing every detail of their life (for example what they are wearing, what their house looks like, every item they own and where it is placed), a screenwriter does not have this luxury. Normally it is the screenwriter's job to briefly describe the character and then it is left up to the director, costume designer, set designer, etc. to add in the details.

A script must be designed to be read easily, flowing from page to page in smooth transition

Film is a series of visual images (24 frames per second), with a sound track, and it is meant to be projected and viewed. The page is meant to be read. The experiences are different and the internal times are different. It only takes about fifteen seconds to read a well-designed page while it takes a whole minute to view the film. In simplest terms, a script page (11 inches) = reading time (approx. 25 seconds) = Projection time (one minute) = fictional time (variable). Basically, a script must be designed to be read easily, flowing from page to page in smooth transition.

There are several basic do's and don'ts that one must take into consideration when writing a screenplay, as pointed out in *The Complete Guild to Standard Script Formats* by Cole and Haag. The first is to use standard line lengths for direction and dialogue. To achieve this, one must count the number of characters and spaces in the script. For direction, 55 characters and spaces is the standard, while for dialogue 35 characters and spaces are used.

Personal direction on the other hand is 16 characters and spaces. It is important to point out that in order for direction and dialogue to keep these correct forms, margin and tab settings must be placed in the appropriate locations. The tab key in particular is used for things such as character names, personal direction under character names, and scene endings or transitions.

Another important "do" in script writing is to focus on the dialogue of the story. Dialogue is the force that carries the film and could make or break the picture. Even if a film has spectacular scenery and or a fantastic plot, if the dialogue is lacking the film will most likely not be successful.

The format and rules that apply to dialogue are formulated to aid clarity and conciseness. Visually, the lines spoken by a given character in a script are obvious for they are located in the center of the page and are relatively short. Basic formatting of dialogue begins at a tab setting of 29 and ends at a tab setting of 60.

There are four basic rules that should be applied to all script dialogue. The first rule is to spell out all one and two digit numbers. Three or more digits may be written numerically. Rule number two is to spell out indications of time. For example, do not write 2:15, rather, write two-fifteen.

Rule number three is to spell out all personal titles except Mr., Mrs., and Ms. Finally, rule number four is never hyphenate a word from one line to the next unless the word is normally hyphenated anyway. An example of this would be something like son-in-law.

The last "do" for writing scripts is to always stay within the acceptable page count. As previously mentioned, a two hour film should be approximately 120 pages. Generally films are between approximately 100 to 115 pages in length. When a script exceeds the standard length, producers are leery of the script because much of the time this means that the writer is inexperienced in script writing. Experienced writers know standard format and will generally stick to it.

Recently in the film industry there has been quite a number of films exceeding 2 hours in the theater. In some situations, especially when an epic-type of film is being made (ex. Braveheart or Titanic), exceeding two hours is needed to portray the entire story.

There are several don'ts that should be followed when formatting a script. The first of these is do not number scenes. The story should flow from one scene to the next; it is not a play that draws a curtain after every scene. Another is that there should be no shot angles in the script unless absolutely necessary for clarification of the scene.

Do not add scene endings or transitions (such as CUT TO or DISSOLVE TO)

Early draft scripts should contain few if any shot angles to facilitate smoothness and ease of reading. Get your point across, but keep the script as simple as possible. Do not jumble up the script with unnecessary wording and direction, make it easy to read so that someone will actually take the time to read it.

Do not add scene endings or transitions (such as CUT TO or DISSOLVE TO). A scene ending is defined as specific technical instructions indicating the movement from one scene to another. It seems obvious that when one moves from one scene to the next that we CUT TO the next scene, and therefore writing CUT TO in the script is unnecessary.

It is only needed in a script when there is not a logical progression from one scene to the next. A perfect example of this would be the movie Pulp Fiction. Because the film moves around among different characters and situations along with jumping back and forth from present to past, having CUT TO in the script may be needed for clarification.

While writing scripts, avoid standard abbreviated terms in direction. Although there are words that can be abbreviated in direction (for example personal titles), these words can not be abbreviated in the dialogue. There are however, a few terms that require abbreviation in direction, such as f.g. (foreground), b.g (background), O.S. (off screen) and M.O.S. (without sound). Another thing to be avoided while writing is that of personal (parenthetical) direction to the character, except again, where clarification is absolutely necessary.

Personal direction, which should be used sparingly, consists of those special, usually short instructions intended for a specific character and no one else. Personal direction should be kept to a maximum of four lines long. It is also a rule that a page should not be ended with personal direction. If dialogue is to be broken from one page to the next, the break must come before that of personal direction. Personal direction should also never be the ending to a passage of dialogue.

Stage direction, sometimes called the "business" of the scene, is most often referred to as simply direction. It may consist of scene and character descriptions, camera cues, sound cues and various other bits of information needed to facilitate the action, ideas and story line of the script. It is important to note that stage direction need only include the essential information necessary to create the desired effect.

When a character is first introduced and has lines of dialogue, the name is initially capitalized. This capitalization only occurs the first time, after which the name will be in lower case.

It is important to point out that if a character is introduced but has a silent/non-speaking role, their name is not capitalized. Other stage directions, which should be capitalized, are ad lib, titles, voice-overs, beginning and ending titles, and freeze frames. However, whenever a character enters or exits a scene, it is not necessary to capitalize the words "enters" or "exits."

The First Page and Beyond

Most producers flip through a script to get a feel for it: Is it thick with scene description? Is it shorter than a hundred pages or longer than 125? Is it designed in theatrical play format (a mistake for a film script) or is it neatly typed? Good, experienced writers know that writing an action or chase sequence will be different than writing a scene that takes place in one location. More scene description should of course occur when there is a chase scene, where as a scene located at, let's say a party, will require much more dialogue.

If the writer knows the importance of the design of the page, then the important dialogue or scene concepts will not be buried within long scene descriptions. No matter what the setting of the script, each act must always begin with FADE IN and must always end with FADE OUT. Even where there are no acts, the first page must begin with FADE IN and the last must FADE OUT.

If a script is typed and designed well, then agents reading the script, and in turn producers, studios and other decision makers will have a better feeling that the writer has a hold of good content, style and dialogue techniques. On the other hand, if the screenplay is written with the wrong design, this may be a good indication to decision-makers that the writer is new and not ready to be taken seriously in the industry.

Another important concept to grasp while writing is that all screenplays are typewritten rather than handwritten or typeset. As mentioned previously, words are placed in specific positions on a standard 8 ½" by 11" page. The page consists of Scene Headings, Scene Descriptions, Character Names, Dialogue, and Optical. In very few cases personal direction is added, although it is frowned upon because generally actors and directors want to use their own interpretation of the dialogue.

Every component of a script has its own specific placement. Opticals have their proper placement while dialogue has its own placement. Component placement can not be changed, it is standard formatting used by the entire industry. Depending on how and where content is placed on a page will determine the length of the action and generally where the emphasis is placed in the scene.

Is the Script Fished?

With the story structure in place, the characters well defined and the theme woven throughout, the initial wave of pain and anguish is over. The first draft of the script is complete. However, the great script rarely appears right away. Once the first draft is complete, there are the inevitable rewrites. "The life of the writer is rewrite," explains Fredda Rose. "The first draft sent to us by a new writer, should be what they consider their third or fourth draft. We want to represent the writers who write because that is what they do."

No matter how good the writer is, it is difficult to be objective about one's own work. Often, a producer and or director can pick out areas of a script that are not as clear to others as they appear to be to the writer himself. Something that may seem funny to the writer will not make sense to others.

Ideally, rewriting is a process of new discoveries for the writer. With the initial draft completed, the writer may now feel more confident and move to strengthen or sharpen a character. Perhaps a new theme has emerged during the writing process that needs to be explained. More often than not, the painful rewriting process will yield a script with more depth and greater insight.

The screenwriter usually sells control of his script, giving the producer or studio legal permission to change it

There are various versions or rewriting patchworks done to a script after it leaves the hands of a writer. The screenwriter usually sells control of his script, giving the producer or studio legal permission to change it. In the most basic terms, the first version of the script is generally the author/screenwriters version, which is sold to a studio or producer.

The second version is usually the director or producer's version. This script may contain various camera angles that the director has added. Producers may cut out certain sequences that appear to be too expensive for a set budget.

Version number three is the studio version, in which the producer will try to obtain financing by having a certain actor or director affiliated with the script. With this in mind, it may be necessary to change certain parts of the script to accommodate for these new elements.

The next version is the Set version. Through the process of filming scenes are sometimes improvised. Sometimes studios will ask that a typed version of the improvisation be established as to have a historical log of the shooting of the scene. Version number five is the legal version of the script. Once the film is in its proper release form, the studio may request a copy typed up from this version. This particular version is done on legal sized paper and a copy is deposited in the library of congress.

Finally, there is a published version of the script. This version is the form that is viewed by most people not affiliated with the industry. Unfortunately, the published version generally ignores proper formatting and beginning writers who rely on this to format their own screenplays are lead in the wrong direction.

William Goldman, a well known screenwriter of such films as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and The Princess Bride has seen and been through virtually all the trials and tribulations a writer can go through during a career in the film industry.

Goldman explains, "One of the problems inherent in any screenplay book is this: which draft do you publish? With a novel or a piece of non-fiction, what happens is I write the book, then I meet with the editor, talk, make changes. My stuff is pretty close to the published version when it comes out of the typewriter, because I can't write until I know what I'm doing, so it's often in my head before I can put it down. I make the changes and then I fiddle. That can take weeks, months, whatever. But the second draft is pretty much it. Totally different with a movie."

Over a period of eighteen months, Goldman wrote 21+ drafts of the screenplay to Misery. Each draft was not an entirely new screenplay, more than likely a scene or two was added or deleted.

Maintaining the original version of the screenplay is somewhat easier if the writer is also the director. In 1965 Woody Allen wrote and acted in the film *What's New Pussycat*. He was hired to write the script, and after writing what he felt was a pretty good screenplay, the producers took it and rearranged it.

The outcome was a film that Woody was very unhappy with but could do nothing about. Although at this time he had little to no experience in directing films, Woody vowed that he would never write another script unless he was the director of the film as well. Woody Allen is of course one of the most well known director/actor/writers of today.

To Sum it Up

The writer must remember that the act of scriptwriting, like any kind of writing that comes from the heart, must provide its own reward. Some screenwriters are given an idea, they write a script, sell it and move on. They never see the script again and never view the film, it's all a business to them.

Other writers take their work very personally because much of it comes from personal experience. Either way you look at it, it is important for the writer to realize that their story, if produced, is going to be shown to millions and changes in the script are inevitable and unavoidable. This is something they can not take personally.

The fundamental function of a screenplay is not as a piece of literature, but as a guide for the work to follow. The first draft is a blueprint, something to base future work off of. A finished novel, poem or a magazine article is a completed or nearly completed piece of work.

A finished screenplay on the other hand is only the beginning of weeks and weeks of work to be done.

"The best thing you can do is write something you truly believe in," explains Jonathan Tolins (playwright / screenwriter). "If you spend your time trying to create what you think sells, you're dead in the water. In my case, it was only when I wrote something from the heart, something extremely personal, that people in the industry took notice. And then, lo and behold, they began to think of me for all sorts of things. They even took a second look at my old scripts they previously had thrown in the trash. You must write for yourself first."

"As soon as they finish the first script, they should start on their second one, as soon as they finish the second one, they should start on their third," Howard Sanders (United Talent Agency) suggests. "They should write and write and write. What happens too often is that a writer turns in the script to the agent and then sits on his hands and waits for the agent to call and say 'Guess what? I sold your script for a million dollars.' It doesn't work that way."

Some basic points to consider when beginning a new script are first and foremost to define your goals. What is it that you want to accomplish by writing this screenplay? Pick your genre and stick to it. Don't decide to write comedy because that's what seems popular at the time and then turn around and try to write a drama. Perfection comes from practice and will never be accomplished when you continually change directions. "You can tell if somebody is funny in three pages," states Bob Hohman, "You recognize it when you see it. It's just sincere and genuine."

Study the classics. The American Film Institute has put out lists of the 100 greatest actors, comedies, and films of all time

Always write to form. Neatness counts. Some people will not even look at a script if the form is bad. Always have a lot of material to work from. Brainstorm ideas, write down thoughts you have, whether they are a brief sentence or paragraphs long. All this information may prove useful at some point in your writing.

Finally, study the classics. The American Film Institute has put out lists of the 100 greatest actors, comedies, and films of all time. Look at the way the story is portrayed, what is being said, how the story unravels and how it makes you feel or what it makes you think. Digital videodisks (DVD's) are another great source to view. Many DVD's contain interviews with writers, directors and producers in which they discuss the script itself. The Bravo Television Network has a show called Inside the Actors Studio, in which they have interviews with actors, directors, and screenwriters discussing their craft and the art of filmmaking. There are also hundreds of books and websites on screenwriting and published scripts

FilmMakers recommendation

ACTION CUT - This is the most unique series of learning tools in the film industry that provides an in-depth look inside the directing craft on a step-by-step, shot-by-shot professional level of production from the written page through the moviemaking process to the final film.

From Script to Screen : The Collaborative Art of Filmmaking by Linda Seger, Edward Jay Whetmore

The Complete Guide to Standard Script Formats by Cole & Haag

The Script is finished, Now what do I do? by Callan, K.

Developing Story Ideas by Rabiger, Michale

The Big Deal : Hollywood's Million-Dollar Spec Script Market by Thom Taylor

Four Screenplays with Essays by Goldman, William

Woody Allen on Woody Allen by Grove Press

Breaking into Film by McHugh Kenna

All you need to know about the Movie and TV Business by Resnik, Gail and Trost, Scott

Movies and Money by David Puttnam, Neil Watson