

## HOW TO WRITE A MOVIE

A while back, I was on Radio 4's Film Programme the same day as Simon Pegg. We were asked what we thought of screenwriting manuals. I dismissed them as get-rich-quick compendiums of cliché. Pegg said he thought they were really  
5 useful. Our films opened that weekend. His vacuumed up money. Mine tanked. It may well be, I thought, that I've been missing something.

I decided to watch all my favourite movies again, notebook in hand, to figure out what made them work. Here are some of my observations. This is not a  
10 description of how I write. It's more how I wish I'd written. A map of the rocks on which I perished.

### 1. Write a play instead

Are you sure you need to write a screenplay? Almost any movie takes years. I've just done a TV film for the BBC that has taken 20 years to go from idea to  
15 execution. If you've got a great story, it might be worth writing it as a play first, or a book. To get a movie into the world, someone needs to love it enough to spend millions of pounds on it - and years of their life. A play costs a few thousand and takes a couple of months. Plus it makes you a playwright, which is way upmarket from a screenwriter. And if it's successful, people will want to make the movie.

### 20 2. Do the title first

Seems obvious, but you'd be amazed. A great title can make a big difference. The musical Oklahoma, as it was initially called, famously flopped in the provinces, but became a massive hit after they added the exclamation mark. Orson Welles said Paper Moon was such a great title they wouldn't need to make the movie,  
25 just release the title. If you want a good title, you need it before you start, when you're pumped up with hope. If you look for it afterwards, you end up thinking like a headline-writer. If Victor Hugo had waited until he'd finished Notre-Dame de Paris, he would have ended up calling it I've Got a Hunch.

### 3. Read it to people

30 It's easy to fool yourself on the page. Tell people your story and watch them. Is there a bit where they check their watch? Are there bits you unexpectedly feel you want to skip? Do they guess the ending? Get it worked up into a good anecdote. This also means that if you bump into The Money at a film festival, you can pitch the story right there. The same applies after you've written the script.  
35 Danny Boyle, director of 28 Days Later, makes you read your script out loud to him. It's horrible. It leaves you nowhere to hide. But it saves weeks of second-guessing.

### 4. Forget the three-act structure

All the manuals insist on a three-act structure. I think this is a useless model. It's static. All it really means is that your screenplay should have a beginning, middle and end. When you're shaping things, it's more useful to think about suspense. Suspense is the hidden energy that holds a story together. It connects  
5 two points and sends a charge between them. But it doesn't have to be all action. Emotions create their own suspense. In American Splendor, the film about comic-book creator Harvey Pekar, you hope till it hurts that his relationship will work out. Secrets are good at generating tension, too. In A Knight's Tale, you fret all the way through that someone will discover that William is not really Sir Ulrich  
10 von Lichtenstein.

A delicate art. If a setup is too obvious, it can announce a payoff. I remember watching Se7en in a multiplex. When Morgan Freeman said he was going to retire in a few days, someone shouted: "Gonna die!" (For once, it wasn't true.) On  
15 the other hand, if the setup doesn't signal something, it doesn't generate any suspense. The trick is to create an expectation but fulfil it in a completely unexpected way. I'm going to give the Oscar for this to Geoffrey Chaucer for The Pardoner's Tale, where they go looking for Death but find a pile of money instead. And the twist is ... they scheme over it and kill each other.

## **6. Don't write excuse notes**

20 Sympathy is like crack cocaine to industry execs. I've had at least one wonderful screenplay of mine maimed by a sympathy-skank. Yes, of course the audience have to relate to your characters, but they don't need to approve of them. If characters are going to do something bad, Hollywood wants you to build in an  
25 excuse note. If you look at Thelma and Louise, you'll see it's really just one long excuse note with 20 minutes of fun at the end. The US cop show The Wire, on the other hand, gives you characters you couldn't possibly approve of, or even like. Then, when it needs to, it gives you another glimpse of them. In one heart-scalding scene, a nasty, hard-nosed young drug-dealer from the projects finds himself in a park and says: "Is this still in Baltimore?"

## **30 7. Avoid the German funk trap**

People have a tendency to set up the characters and then have the stories happen to them. I think it comes from TV, where you want the characters to survive the story unchanged, so they can have another adventure next week. It's like in  
35 detective fiction, where "characterisation" means the detective is really into 1970s German funk. And "complex characterisation" means his wife is leaving him because she doesn't understand his love of 1970s German funk. In a film, you should let the story reveal the character. What happens to Juno - getting pregnant - could happen to any teenage girl. It's how she reacts that leads you to conclude she's charming (or sickening, depending on your point of view). Do it the  
40 other way around and it's like when someone introduces you to one of their friends and says: "I know you're going to like each other." It just makes you think: "I have to go now."

## **8. Do a favourite bit**

No one leaves the cinema saying: I loved that character arc. They come out saying: I loved the swordfight, or the bit with the bloated cow, or whatever. The manuals emphasise the flow of a narrative, but it's better to think of a film as a suite of sequences. That's where the pleasure is. I'm working on an animated feature at the moment. Traditionally, these films had no script at all. Teams built up a series of set-pieces and sequences around the story and characters. This is a great way to think. If you look at the first Godfather film, it's really an accumulation of anecdotes held together by the moral decline of Michael. Kes also works like this: the football match, the taming of the hawk, the careers officer and so on. Try breaking your script down into a series of chapters and giving them headings. If you want to see this not quite working, look at the Mission: Impossible films. Terrific action sequences marooned in quagmires of soggy exposition.

## **9. Cast it in your head**

Characters tend to be blurry in screenplays, partly because, if you over-define things, you limit the number of actors you can cast from. But just because you can't describe their eyebrows shouldn't stop you understanding thoroughly what makes them tick. When Sam Peckinpah was rewriting scripts, he used to cross out all the characters' names and replace them with the names of people he knew, so he could get a fix on them. Sometimes an arresting stage direction works wonders. The example writers always quote is Guy de Maupassant's line: "He was an elderly gentleman with ginger whiskers who always somehow made sure he was first through the door."

## **10. Learn to love rewrites**

In *Sunset Boulevard*, the screenwriter says: "Maybe you saw my last movie. It was about Okies in the dustbowl. Of course, by the time it went out, it was all set on a submarine boat." Screenwriters famously kvetch about the rewrite. I don't get this. One of the glories of being a writer is that you get so many chances to get it right. Ask Norwegian footballer John Arne Riise how he would feel if he was allowed to say: "You know that last header, where I knocked it into my own goal? That didn't really work for me. I'm going to take it out. I've decided that match would be better with a happy ending." The trick is to stay in the loop and use the process to make your script better.

## **11. Don't wait for inspiration**

I think people see inspiration as the ignition that starts the process. In fact, real moments of inspiration often come at the last minute, when you've sweated and fretted your way through a couple of drafts. Suddenly, you start to see fresh connections, new ways of doing things. That's when you feel like you're flying. The real pleasure of any script is the detail. And a lot gets lost in the process. Put it back in at the last minute.

## 12. Celebrate your invisibility

5 Ben Hecht famously said it would be easier to get famous by riding a tricycle than by writing screenplays. This is a good thing! When you go to a film festival, you'll see directors and actors besieged by the press and having to trot out the same old stories over and over, while you get to sun yourself. Remember: invisibility is a superpower.

## 13. Read, read, read, read, read

10 Read other screenplays. Read [wordplayer.com](http://wordplayer.com), which is full of discussion, advice and heartbreak. But above all, read *Karoo*, a novel by the late, great screenwriter Steve Tesich, who did *The World According to Garp*. It tells you everything you wanted to know - and a lot that you didn't.

to dismiss	zavrhnout, opustit, pustit z hlavy
compendium	souhrn
to tank	neuspět, selhat
to perish	rozpadnout se
execution	uskutečnění
upmarket	luxusnější
headline-writer	autor titulků
suspense	napětí
execs (executives)	vedoucí
maimed	zmrzačený
glimpse	zahlédnutí
suite of sequences	sled/sada sekvencí
marooned	uvězněný, nechaný na (pospas)
quagmires	šlamastika
soggy	promáčený
blurry	rozmazaný, nejasný
whiskers	vousy, licousy
dustbowl	Prachová pánev (Dirty Thirties)
to kvetch	reptat
loop	smyčka
to fret	trápit se
besieged	obléhaný
to trot out	omílat pořád dokola