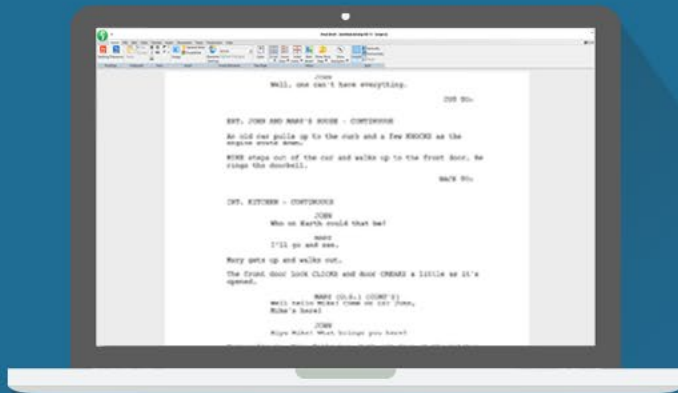


HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY



(DURING QUARANTINE)

a free ebook from **nofilmschool.com**

by **Jason Hellerman**



FOREWORD: HOW TO USE THIS EBOOK

First of all... are your hands clean? Is your keyboard?

Just making sure. Your health comes first!

Writing a screenplay is hard enough, even when you aren't saddled with an extra layer of anxiety about the state of the world and the health of your family.

We created this eBook to help you jump in and start writing. Get those ideas flowing!

This book was written by screenwriter, teacher, and prolific No Film School contributor, [Jason Hellerman](#). It combines many of the best practices, tricks, and resources found in dozens of screenwriting books out there on the market. If you've already read multiple screenwriting books, great—this will refresh your memory. If you haven't, by all means, go out and get several others after you've finished this one. But our main goal with this eBook is to prompt you to put pen to paper—whether this is your first time writing a script or your hundredth.

After all, the best way to learn is by doing—and right now, you might have some extra time on your hands. We've put together a ten week plan for you. Regardless of how long you're stuck at home, we think this is a good amount of time to spend on getting a first draft out the door.

You can travel through this screenwriting journey in sequential order (which we recommend the first time through), or you can hop to any section to brush up on something, rediscover some of the tools of the trade, or just grease the wheels when you feel stuck.

We've also loaded this book with examples from some of the greatest movies ever written, because our mission at No Film School is to help people learn to tell better stories, "no film school" (or student loans) required.

Years from now, when treatments and vaccines for coronavirus have been widely deployed, people will look back at this time as a prolific writing period. Some great movies are going to be made from all of the screenwriting done in relative isolation in 2020. We hope this book helps your script become one of those great movies!

Ryan Koo
Founder

George Edelman
Editor-in-Chief



[No Film School](https://nofilmschool.com)

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INTRODUCTION

So you want to write a screenplay? What's wrong with you? Writing a script is one of the hardest things you can set out to do. Sure, storytelling can be a blast. There are times when you have the audience in the palm of your hand, twisting them and turning them for the sake of drama...but there are also times when you stare at a blank page and want to curl up in a ball and die.

Regardless of those highs and lows, writing can be one of the most fun endeavors in the world. You get to explore without leaving the comfort of your own home (or, in normal times, your coffee shop or office).

And you get to create something from nothing.

So welcome to No Film School's *How to Write a Screenplay (During Quarantine)* E-book.

Let's get on our way.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

If you're an aspiring screenwriter, this is the place to be. I'm going to teach you the basics and guide you through brainstorming your idea from inception to fruition.

But don't turn back if you're an experienced writer, we have stuff for you too.

I think one of the most important things you can do in your career is to always be writing a spec screenplay.

What's a spec screenplay?

A spec screenplay is short for "speculative screenplay" and it is one the writer does for free outside of the studio system. It's "[speculative](#)".

You write the spec based on the speculation that the idea is good enough to sell in the open market. The purpose is to showcase the budding screenwriter's acumen at telling a story through action, structure, and dialogue.

It's a chance to demonstrate that the writer is capable and that the idea has legs.

Where new writers are concerned, spec screenplays are the lifeblood of Hollywood. Specs can change the course of your career in an instant and can open new doors and opportunities for you as well.

Whether you're writing a brand new spec, rewriting an old one, or writing on a paid gig (congrats!), we have your back. We'll take you through ten weeks that will help you stay on schedule and produce new work.

WHAT WILL THIS BOOK TEACH YOU?

I want everyone reading this book to come out of it with expert-level knowledge of screenwriting.

They should be incredible at formatting, writing action, dialogue, and structure in their story.

What I won't teach you is how to write well. That's something I don't believe you can learn from an e-book or a post on the internet.

Storytelling comes from within. So light a scented candle, turn the lights down low, and achieve whatever zen puts you in the right place.

Your story must come from within. You must be passionate about telling it.

I want everyone reading this book to come out of it with expert-level knowledge of screenwriting.

WHY SHOULD I LISTEN TO YOU?

This is the modern era. The first thing you're going to do is Google "[Jason Hellerman](#)" and realize that I'm not an A-list screenwriter. Then you'll probably find the only movie I have listed online, [Shovel Buddies](#), and see that it's only a 5/10 on IMDB.



Shovel Buddies

© 2016 - 20th Century Fox

If that makes you think this book is worthless, then I encourage you to go out there and seek out any of the extremely expensive screenwriting seminars. I hear they're fun.

I'm not going to sell you a book. I'm not going to ask you to pay for this service.

And I'm not going to pretend I'm some genius or guru.

What I am is a D-list working writer in Hollywood. I had a script on the [Black List](#) (Hollywood's annual list of best unproduced screenplays).

Editor's note: *Jason is being modest. He's a produced screenwriter and his feature film, starring Bella Thorne, premiered at the SXSW Film Festival.*

I have sold pitches and treatments. I do comedy punch-ups, dialogue passes, give professional notes, and I write a ton of commercials and some live television.

In addition to that, I pay my bills writing screenplays. It's the dream job.

Editor's note: *Ok, that's more like it, Jason! Don't sell yourself short.*

I have my Masters of Fine Arts in Screenwriting from [Boston University](#). So I'm certified to teach and have taught some courses, on the collegiate level.

No matter what you think about me, I would argue this book is about to save you \$50K/year. You're welcome!

Trust me; I have student loans, they're crushing.

Here's the real deal: I'm not going to bullshit you.

I'm going to tell you about my experiences, I will occasionally reference people much further ahead than myself, and take the next ten weeks to write a script with all of you.

WHAT SHOULD I WRITE ABOUT?

Writing something new is always a challenge. The blank page stares at you and seems to laugh more menacingly than Joaquin Phoenix on a subway train. But what if you actually have a lot of ideas? [How can you decide which idea](#) is worth the next few weeks or months of your time?

Especially if you don't have a [representative](#) that can help walk you through what they think is good for your brand or in the market. The answer might surprise you:

Pick the project that you know 100 percent how it ends.

Yup. That's it.

It doesn't matter if you don't have all the characters worked out yet, or the setting, the second act, or even the thematic tentpoles to hold all of those up. Pick the one idea whose ending stands out strongest and moves you the most.

Pick the one idea with the ending you feel the most for and about.

Why? Because you know how hard it is to figure out everything that happens in a screenplay. If you know the ending, you always have something to work toward.

If you know the ending, you always have something to work toward.

Or, in some ways better, a place to work backward from.

Should I write a biopic?

Biopics are always going to be great specs. They are usually in the public domain and can help you create a buzz around your work that can lead to reps and meetings. But there are a ton of them out there. So try not to pick a person who has been done over and over.

Pick someone who is fresh, but still famous enough that it matters to the public.

What about a stunt spec?

Stunt specs, like the *Friends* episode where everyone gets AIDS — or the *Seinfeld* that happens on September 11 — are prevalent in television. They help show you can write in another show's voice, but also that you can think outside the box.



Seinfeld

© 1989 - NBC Television

These TV stunt specs only work as samples — the good ones, at least. The writers will not sell them. They will never air.

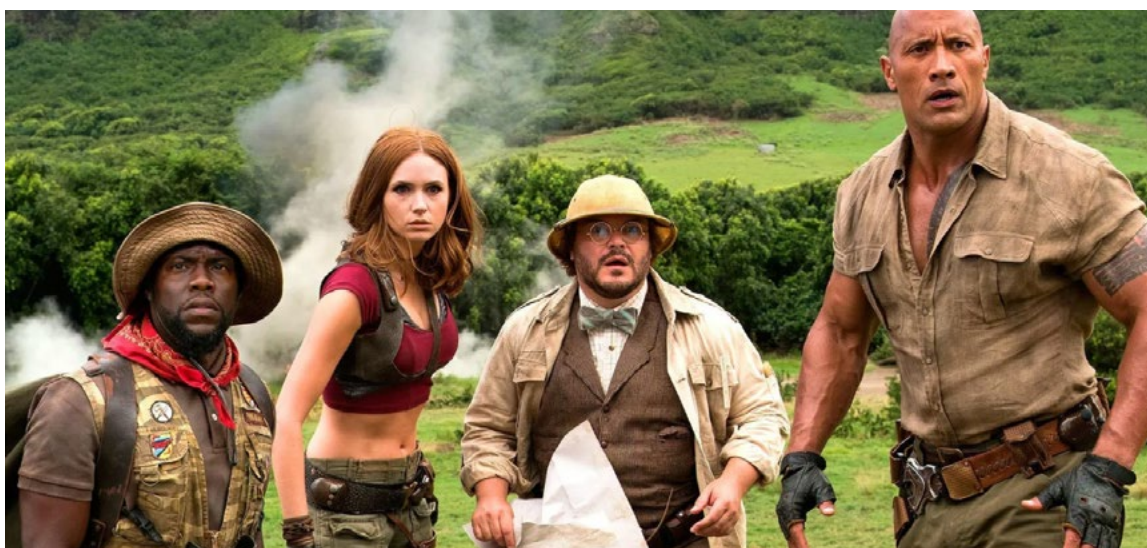
In features, stunt specs — like [2007's *Wonder Woman* spec](#) that Joel Silver and WB scooped up that got its writers repped — can help generate heat and hopefully lead to other work.

What's a reliable genre?

Horror screenplays are always popular in Hollywood because they don't rely on intellectual property and they can usually be made for pretty cheap. Plus they come with a huge built-in audience.

Action movies are usually a fun and easy read. They can attract bankable stars looking to headline the next *Taken*.

Adventure movies — like something *Jumanji*-y, are expensive. But I had some success going with an Atlantis movie in 2018 because the story is so well known in folklore that it works as IP.



Jumanji

© 2019 - Sony Pictures

Gangster films are few and far between. But gritty, grounded crime thrillers — think *Hell or High Water*, movies that subvert

the genre for an affordable price — can get made. (It also didn't hurt that that film's screenwriter, Taylor Sheridan, was coming off considerable heat thanks to *Sicario*.)

Fresh comedies are fun for assistants to read and get passed around all the time. Oh, and many execs love a revisionist western and dramas are not dead on streamers. Contained science fiction is also something studios and Netflix are actively looking for.

It's kinda overwhelming!

But listen to me—It really doesn't matter.

Write a great script, no matter what it's about, and great things can happen. But if you cannot decide...

Pick the one with the best ending! Endings matter so, so much.

They knit everything together and can be the reason people remember everything you put on the page, many years later. (Think *Sixth Sense* or *Seven*).

So chase the ending.

Let the rest fall into place as you go.

PRE-WRITING

In general, prewriting is all the work you do before you sit down to write your screenplay. It can be outlines, treatments, notecards, or even drawings.

Look, we all love to procrastinate. There's an essential fear when it comes to staring at the blank page. I have it. You have it.

So before we dive into all that, I want to prewrite. Your prewriting will become part of your process, so you want to tailor it to what works best for you.

Here's what works best for me:

First things first. I have to write a logline.

HOW TO WRITE A LOGLINE

I love writing screenplays. And I hope, if you're reading this, you love writing too. Writing helps me put my [complex character emotions](#) onto the page and lets me talk about the things I care about while telling a story. But sometimes my stories are so complex, that it's nearly impossible to get a pitch together, let alone distill it all down into one sentence.

Let's get writing.

Logline definition

A logline is a one-sentence summary of the story put forward in your movie screenplay or television pilot.

Yup, that's all that it is. But a whole bunch of work goes into creating a logline. So let's go over some logline formulas to help you get your idea out on paper.

What makes a logline “noisy?”

Today most screenplays and ideas are sold because of their “noisy” logline. A noisy logline stands out from the crowd, in buyers' minds, and gets the most attention on annual lists.

A noisy logline is one that jumps off the page and makes you

want to immediately read the screenplay that follows. It should scream “GOOD IDEA!” and be easy to understand and leave room for the person that hears it to imagine all of the possibilities of the story.

Are loglines and taglines the same thing?

No, they are not. A tagline is the words on the poster or advertisement Hollywood uses to sell the movie to the public. A marketing team will come up with the tagline.

So the pressure is off of you there.

What are some common logline mistakes?

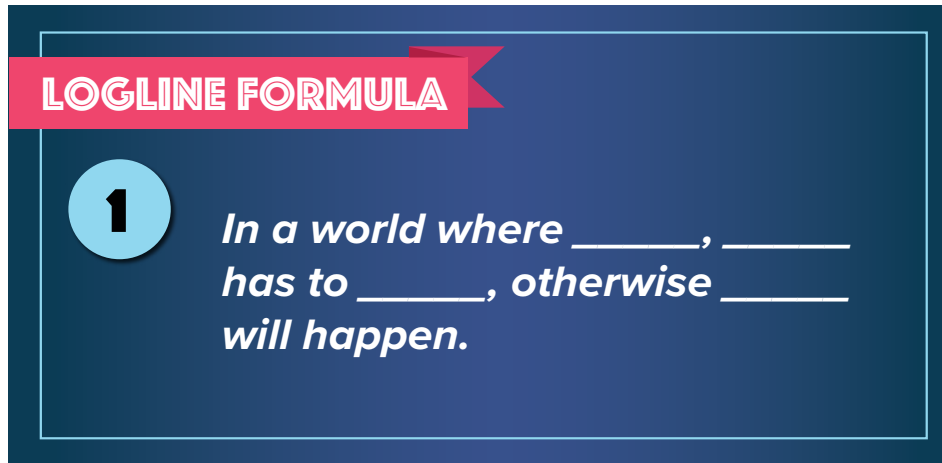
Many novice writers try to make their loglines way too much of a summary. They go long, and in the end, they submit a paragraph or a run-on sentence that is exhausting to read. Another thing novice writers tend to do is forget to match the tone of their logline to the tone of the movie. You shouldn’t make a joke for a drama, or dramatize something that’s supposed to come across as a comedy.

Lastly, it’s quite common to get a logline that tells us nothing at all. Sometimes people are trying to be too brief. It’s “boy meets girl,” which tells us nothing about what makes what you’ve written unique.

Again, this needs to show us who you are as a writer, and it needs to be enticing, so try to get it out and make it exciting!

What is a good logline formula?

Your logline needs to set up the character, conflict, world, and stakes. It's the first sentence that gets them to read the next 100 pages. A lot of people are going to try to sell you a logline generator or a logline formula, but that's all bullshit. If you want somewhere to start, use the tried and true "in a world" formula.



In a world where _____, _____ has to _____, otherwise _____ will happen.

So for something like my movie, *Shovel Buddies*, "In a world where their best friend died, a group of friends bands together to honor his last wish and put him in his football jersey, otherwise, their friend will be cremated without his last wish being fulfilled."

Was that the actual logline we used?

No.

[All writing is rewriting!](#) But I think the "In a world..." technique is a great way to get started. After you have that one, try refining it with this logline formula:

Your logline needs to set up the character, conflict, world, and stakes.

LOGLINE FORMULA

2

*Inciting Incident + Protagonist +
Journey + The Stakes*

Inciting Incident + Protagonist + Journey + The Stakes

Let's go back to *Shovel Buddies* to refine it further.

"After they open a Snapchat from their dead friend, a group of friends has a crazy night out on the town trying to fulfill his dying wish before he's cremated and they worry their friendship will disappear along with him."

See how that doubles down and refines on the initial idea? One of the most important things here is that we continue to refine what the movie is about and continue to write in a way that attracts other people to see a little bit of themselves in it. You want people to be excited to crack the script!

Logline examples

I scoured the internet and found this great resource called [Film Daily](#) which had this whole article of [logline examples](#). I added a few below so you could see how writers refine and reform their loglines.

The Godfather: *"The aging patriarch of an organized crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son."*

Pulp Fiction: *“The lives of two mob hit men, a boxer, a gangster’s wife, and a pair of diner bandits intertwine in four tales of violence and redemption.”*

Forrest Gump: *“Forrest Gump, while not intelligent, has accidentally been present at many historic moments, but his true love, Jenny, eludes him.”*

The Matrix: *“A computer hacker learns from mysterious rebels about the true nature of his reality and his role in the war against its controllers.”*



The Matrix

© 1999 - Warner Brothers

Silence of the Lambs: *“A young F.B.I. cadet must confide in an incarcerated and manipulative killer to receive his help on catching another serial killer who skins his victims.”*

Inside Man: *“A cop has to talk down a bank robber after the criminal’s perfect heist spirals into a hostage situation.”*

Rear Window: *“A wheelchair-bound photographer spies on his neighbors from his apartment window and becomes convinced one of them has committed murder.”*

The Hangover: “A Las Vegas-set comedy centered around three groomsmen who lose their about-to-be-wed buddy during their drunken misadventures then must retrace their steps in order to find him.”



The Hangover

© 2009 - Warner Brothers

The Shawshank Redemption: “Two imprisoned men bond over a number of years, finding solace and eventual redemption through acts of common decency.”

I hope these logline examples helped inspire your own work. See how they tell you the story, clue you in on the genre, and give you a sense of the stakes? There’s also a lot of variety in these examples. You don’t always need a protagonist name or an exact description of the plot, all you need to do is hook the audience.

That’s why I hate logline formulas. Loglines adjust for the story at hand. And the writer is in charge of making those adjustments.

Who uses a logline?

If you have an agent or a manager, they will use the logline as part of your submission of a script to producers, actors, and directors. You will use a logline to enter a contest, to put at the front of a [film or tv treatment](#), and there are even [logline services and contents](#)!

You want to refine your logline because that's what people will use to pitch you and your project. When *Shovel Buddies* made the Black List and was passed around, everyone sold it as the “kids steal the body” script. It was a weird one that had such a noisy concept and logline, everyone wanted to read it. That's not me bragging, it's just something that's been told to me, and something I've tried to learn from with my other projects.

If your logline doesn't get you excited to write the project, then why write it at all?

You should use your logline to motivate yourself to keep writing.

After I'm done with the logline, I explore the idea in a beat sheet.

BEAT SHEET

Your screenplay is built up of individual story beats that create emotional reactions in the reader and viewer. These beats are based on [classic screenplay structure](#). The beats help guide the character arcs, [story structure](#), and even your [elevator pitch](#). So where do the beats come from? A lot of people find [Save the Cat a little overrated](#) and it seems like every writing website has their own template.

Wait, what's [Save the Cat](#)?

Blake Snyder was a successful screenwriter with more than 12 [spec script](#) sales under his belt. Some for over a million dollars. He was trucking along in Hollywood when he realized a pattern to the scripts he was selling.

There was an identifiable structure that seemed to please executives and audiences alike.

So Blake Snyder set to work on what would become *Save the Cat*, a bestselling book that would require multiple printings. It was first published in 2005 and now is on its 34th printing.

Today, *Save the Cat* is taught in film schools, [sold on Amazon](#), and has become generally ubiquitous in the world of screenwriting. However, when everyone is working from the same template... the resulting movies can be a little too formulaic.

In this book, I am proud to bring you a brand new beat sheet template. My version is a great alternative to *Save the Cat*, it will help you structure your screenwriting work, and it can make your script stand out from the rest.

What is a beat sheet?

A beat sheet is a list of emotional moments in a feature film screenplay that helps a writer outline their story.

There are writers who love to follow beats and writers who think they're a waste of time. I tend to like any tool that helps me really whittle down an outline and follow the character and plot points. Beat sheets are just a tool and only function as well as your story, so think about how to implement them moving forward. Do whatever works best for you.

Now let's take a look at what works best for me and, hopefully, it helps you.

Beat Sheet Template

Writing is terrible and hard and maddening. But when you have a spark of an idea, nothing feels better than beating it out and setting up all the emotional payoffs. I love beating out a story because it truly gives me something to clearly work toward. A great beat sheet, coupled with our [story map](#), gets my drafts ready to go out into the world.

Here's a template we made for you to use as a guide.

MOVIE BEAT SHEET



The Movie Beat Sheet

1. The First Frame

We know the importance of [first and final frames](#) and we've covered [the best opening scenes of all time](#) on our website, so I won't belabor the point. You need to grip the audience right away. A [script reader](#) will tell you that the first ten pages are where they make the determination about whether or not they want to recommend a script.

So make your opening image stand out and try to link it to the theme of the story.

Think about how *Manchester By The Sea* opens... we're on a boat in choppy water. But at the center of that scene is family. The story is set right away — here are the dynamics that will shape the movie and how the theme of family and resilience is introduced.

Find a way to stand out, even subtly, and make everyone want to read more.

2. The World Around Us

After we're hooked, steep us in the world. I want to know who inhabits these areas and what's going on in the world. Are we in the present, past, future? This is where you really set the tone as well. If you're writing a comedy, these pages should have people laughing. If it's a drama, give us some drama.

I don't think there are better “world-building” scenes than the ones within *Blade Runner*. They are quick hits that show us a dystopian future. We see what the world looks like, how police function, and what blade runners do. These hits occur before the opening scene.



Blade Runner

© 1982 - Warner Brothers

That being said, this would be a good time to point out that beats are malleable.

They can come in a different order and be switched up to fit the story you want to tell.

3. Protagonist Introduction

At some point, we need to meet your [protagonist](#). It would be wise to give us a [character introduction](#) and [character name](#) that are also indicative of the tone of the story.

When we meet your main character, we want to know them and know their story. Try to put them in a situation that makes us care about them or understand their struggle.

***Gaylord Focker
would not
make sense
in American
Beauty.***

Gaylord Focker would not make sense in *American Beauty*.

Think about how we meet Craig Robinson's character in *Hot Tub*

Time Machine. He works at a pet store where he's trying to get car keys out of a dog's ass.

We know immediately that he's too good for this job. We see a guy with an expensive car be a dick to him as well. We're on his side from the start and we're laughing.



Hot Tub Time Machine

© 2010 - MGM

4. The Character Traits

This is another good time to point out that some of these beats can occur in the same scene, or a series of scenes grouped together. When you meet your character, we need to see what's driving them. What stands out about them. What do we think they need to change? Hint at possible arcs. Allude to who they are and how they interact with others.

Game Night does this especially well. We know the level of competitiveness of the leads and why they work well together.

In order to create drama inside the movie, we see the story work at driving these two apart.



Game Night

© 2018 - Warner Brothers

5. The Emotional Hurdle

We talk a lot about an external conflict in stories, but what about [internal conflict](#)? We want to know what's inside the character that can hold them back. What needs to come out over the journey?

In *Love, Simon*, this is a literal coming out.

Simon is dealing with the struggle of who he is, how society views him, and the fear of if anyone will be around when he shows them who he really is on the inside. These hurdles don't just happen in the first act, but it's where we set them up so they can be paid off later.

6. The Physical Hurdle

This is the beginning of the [external conflicts](#) in the story. Again, these beats get repeated, but we need to know what impedes the characters.

But even in act one, we need to know what's going to stand in the way. In an adventure movie, it could be an opening set piece that

shows the world and tone. Or in a science fiction movie, it could be navigating a world you're not used to, in a place where you have no allies.

One of the most inventive versions of this is from *The Terminator*, when Kyle Reese arrives on earth he has to navigate cops and city streets in order to find Sarah Connor.



The Terminator

© 1984 - Orion Pictures

Your audience will appreciate getting over these hurdles — and the scenes will illuminate more about the external and internal struggle of the main character.

7. The Reason Forward

Each protagonist's quest needs to have a reason behind it. When do we break from act one to act two?

What's the driving force?

For Indiana Jones, it's the thrill and the call from Army intelligence. He wants to stop the Nazis, that's his external driving force, but he also wants to secure the greatest find in human history.

So that's something to get on a plane across the globe for... that and Marion Ravenwood.



Raiders of the Lost Ark

© 1981 - Paramount Pictures

8. The Decision to Try

As you enter the second act, your character needs to fully decide to participate in the quest. This decision to try, to put it all on the line, is the most important one of the script.

This is what sets the audience off on an adventure, or even just begins to change their life. Not always for the better.

It wasn't enough for Frodo to get the ring to Rivendell. He has to seize the moment and offer to get it to Mordor as well.

9. Why We're Here

Why would someone pay to see your movie? What are those trailer moments that draw the crowds? This is where it shines! But I think we do need a series of scenes that really give people those trailer moments. If you went to an action movie, you'd want

to see huge set pieces. If you went to rom-com, you want to see people falling in love.

And if you went to a horror movie, you want the kills.

This is where *Scream* racks up the body count and gives you the suspects. These scenes are the reason you chose to write the script. So have fun, be bold, and stay interesting.



Scream

© 1996 - Dimension Films

10. Antics and Escapades

These are the actual events within the promise. I think it's important to look at them in two different beats. This is the first. In these, you want the payoffs to be fun and engaging.

This is where things go right. Your characters could even get a bit cocky here. We often associate these pages with the genre.

In heists, it's the break-in. There can be comedy set pieces, but what about within dramas?

Take a movie like *Spotlight*. While the successes here involve an

investigation, the answers to the questions are damning. This is not fun and there's no joy here, but as the intrepid team gets answers, the story moves propulsively forward.

11. Consequences and Casualties

One thing we need to see is a failure. Things can't go smoothly. Beats of failure are the most important part of a second act. This is where great characters deal with their actions. When you see your character fail, you can expose the character traits you want to see them fix.

You can also build in the backstory to explain those failures. The more we know about the people within the world, the more we will root for them. Or against them, depending on your story.

One thing I love about the failures in *Avengers: Infinity War* is they come with consequences. If Peter Quill doesn't hit Thanos, he might have saved more lives. But we know his flaws...he's cocky and arrogant...and so does Thanos. When Peter fails, we set up the necessity to see him succeed... although it might take another movie for that.



Avengers: Infinity War

© 2018 - Walt Disney Studios

12. The Final Straw

At some point, we need to see the straw that broke the camel's back. What's the low point? The one where our heroes want to quit. Where the mission stops making sense.

I think this is gracefully handled in *Saving Private Ryan*. We see characters lose their friends, brave danger, all to find this one guy, who when they get there won't come home.

It provides a breakdown not only for the characters but for the theme of the movie. What is war? Why are we fighting?

Is this all worth it?



Saving Private Ryan

© 1998 - Dreamworks Pictures

13. Rock Bottom

After your character has found their worst failure, we need to see them wallow. Wallowing scenes can still be funny or dramatic or action-packed.

Think about how John McClane deals with the knowledge that

his wife has been taken in *Die Hard*. He runs to the roof, she's not there, he's being shot at by the Feds and by terrorists, it's insane. Let him think it's all over. Let him think he's going to lose.

Let him wallow in that loss.

And make that loss hurt.

Make the worst part of their day or life reflect the worst thing they're going through. A divorce. A terrorist takeover. The city of Los Angeles. Make it all the worst.



Die Hard

© 1988 - 20th Century Fox

14. The Bounce Back

Once you've hit rock bottom you can only go up. When the story bounces back, it can be in a big way.

Your player was down, but now he's up taking one last swing, or one last run through the airport to get the girl like in *Love, Actually*.

We want to see that passion and desire bubble up into palpable action.

15. Triumphs

We all like a winner. Maybe these triumphs come at the expense of someone else, or maybe they're just minor wins. What you want to communicate to the audience triumphs here—even if your characters lose.

That's the lesson, the moral, the reason you want people to tune in and watch. This is where you deliver that lesson, bitter, sweet, or somewhere in between.

Don't let anyone down.

Think about the payoffs in movies like *Apollo 13*. We sat on the edge of our seat for two hours.

Give us a reason to cheer!

16. The Final Frame

We covered the [first and final frames](#) above. But this is where your story ends. What image will you leave in your reader's mind? What can sum up the story or sum up the intentions of the story and close the loop of the character's journey?

I love the final frames of *Being There*, the Hal Ashby movie. The protagonist turns and walks away... across the top of a lake.

It completely recontextualizes everything you saw before the story got going.

Was this person we witnessed a god all along? Or is god a fool?

Or maybe we're fools for believing in god?

Summing up the Beat sheet

So that's the beat sheet, an incredibly effective tool to help you, the writer, see an entire movie all at once. Once you've figured out the beats for yourself, however, you might want to expand on the story — for other people. A beat sheet is generally a private document for the writer. What if you want to put together a document that someone else can read and understand?

SCRIPT TREATMENT

What is a film treatment, and how do you write one?

Now that you know how to use a beat sheet, you can put those beats into a treatment to see if the story feels like it's working well as a whole.

A treatment is a multi-page document written in prose, that tells the story that happens in your screenplay. It is a synopsis, with action, sparse dialogue, and works as a roadmap for the reader, producer, and writer.

This is your story, broken down into an easy-to-follow document, that anyone who picks it up can grasp immediately.

And get excited about.

This document must be engaging to any agent, assistant, executive, or layperson on the street. Your screenplay treatment will only shine with hard work.

Why do you need a script treatment for your film?

Screenwriters find treatments are beneficial when it comes to shopping the work around town.

They're also great for hashing out ideas before entering a draft, and to see if that kernel of inspiration is worth pursuing as your next project.

If this is your first time writing a screenplay, a treatment will help you see the story completely.

So many writers quit after page 30 because they have no vision of where the story will take them. If you're writing and already know, you're ahead of the game.

Another thing I love about them?

Treatments do a lot of the heavy lifting when you're trying to figure out your movie or TV show's **tone**.

Treatments do a lot of the heavy lifting when you're trying to figure out your movie or TV show's tone.

It's your chance to be snarky, emotional, and nail the world of your story before you even open your screenwriting software.

It's like a dry-run. And it can be fun to do it, too.

Let's be honest; it's hard to pitch your idea out-loud to people. A script treatment gets all the details out on the page and entertainingly spins them into a yarn worth retelling.

If you can get the treatment down, the pitch is a lot easier.

How long should a script treatment be?

While a script can be 80-120 pages, your treatment's length will vary.

When I write mine, I usually try to keep them around 10-12 pages. I include act breaks, opener, and closing scene.

When James Cameron writes a treatment, they're usually 50-100 pages. They include bits of dialogue and detail every scene.

He doesn't even start writing the screenplay itself until he has everything laid out completely in what he calls a "scriptment" (basically, an extraordinarily long treatment). Then it's time for him to polish.

But some people do a real quick version all on one page.

If I'm making one for a TV show, it might skew longer. But you don't want to confuse a script treatment with a show bible, or even a pitch deck. This treatment should cover the pilot and probably will become a section in the bible.

Lots of people don't add dialogue to their treatments, but sometimes I'll add one or two lines to evoke emotions or even some jokes.

You certainly don't want to go overboard on the dialogue here. The dialogue will likely change, and you don't want someone to bump on the idea because the lines you include don't radiate off the page.

Still, there are no definitive rules about how you do this, so make rules that work for you.

This is your chance to convey your story the best way possible.

Maybe that means outlining characters, spending time on paragraphs describing the world, or even just giving a state of the union on why you NEED to write this movie.

Let this synopsis speak for you and spark more ideas.

Sample screenplay treatment

This is the treatment outline I use when I start this process. It's not perfect, but it prompts me and starts getting me going.

Use it as a leaping off point and customize it for your needs.

So without further ado, check out our film treatment template.

SCRIPT TREATMENT STRUCTURE

LOGLINE:

Sum up the story in one sentence.

CHARACTERS:

Give us only the main characters, and make us fall in love with them.

OPENING SCENE:

Where are we, what's happening, what's the problem, how does it convey the tone?

ACT ONE:

Who's the movie/tv show about?
What's the world?

ACT TWO:

What's the narrative thrust? What brings these characters together and then breaks them apart?

ACT THREE:

If everything is broken, how do these characters put it back together in the end?

FINAL SCENE:

The whole movie/show has been leading up to this moment, what happens in the end and where do we leave everyone? Is there room for a sequel?

Put your voice into this film treatment!

Logline: Sum up the story in one sentence.

Characters: Give us only the main characters, and make us fall in love with them.

Opening Scene: Where are we? What's happening? How does it convey the tone?

Act One: Who's the movie/tv show? What's the world?

Act Two: What's the narrative thrust? What brings these characters together and then breaks them apart?

Act Three: If everything is broken, how do these characters put it back together in the end?

Final Scene: The whole movie/show has been leading up to this moment, what happens in the end, and where do we leave everyone? Is there room for a sequel?

You want the experience of reading the treatment to be similar to that of watching the movie.

I take all these headings and expand upon them.

You want the experience of reading the treatment to be similar to that of watching the movie. It should have all the eventual favorite scenes that will be a blast to write.

It should take you through all the big emotions.

So now that I have a treatment, what's next?

I know I got you excited in the opening about development executives loving treatments, but there are a few things you have to come to terms with... the first being that treatments don't usually sell.

Once in a while, someone will option an idea based on the treatment.

But that rarely happens.

Wrapping up script treatments

A treatment is a great way to organize your thoughts about a project. While they may not be the most commercially viable things, they're great ways to get on a development executive's good sides and to see if your idea is worthwhile in the marketplace.

This is also your first line of defense against [writer's block](#), and it's a "wonder tool" to get your intentions on the page. Hopefully, the movie treatment helps you.

Once you have your treatment...it's time to actually get writing.

But first, you'll need some software.

What screenwriting software should I use?

Script writing software can be pricey and confusing. How do you know which screenwriting software is right for you? Let's break down some popular options together.

Unfortunately, no writing software will make your writing better, but some might be more tailored toward your particular needs.

Every [professional screenwriter](#) has their own app of choice.

What are the best options?

For me, I'd use either [Final Draft](#), [Highland](#), [Fade In](#), or [Celtx](#). If you're co-writing with another writer, [WriterDuet](#) is worth a look too.

These are all professional applications at varying price points that come with free trials. [Some of them even have free options](#). That means if you're a beginning writer you don't have to break the bank, but as a professional writer you won't miss the bells and whistles that you need.

YOUR 10 WEEK SCREENWRITING PLAN

Sitting down to write a feature-length screenplay can seem like a daunting task, but if you take it in increments, it can seem a lot easier.

If you write two pages a day (per weekday, that is), you'll have a feature length script in ten weeks. Some days you won't have the time to write, or you'll get stuck, and you won't write any. Other days you might write ten pages!

So ten weeks is my aim for you.

Can you write a feature film in ten weeks?

Yes you can! If you find yourself falling behind, just try to, by week's end, make the page count goal. Don't worry if some of those pages aren't the best. Get to the end!

Before I start writing, I like to print out my treatment and beat sheet and have them next to my laptop.

That way, if I get lost, I go back to the anchor points of my beats and remind myself where I need to be in the story and what come next.

I also have a secret weapon.

It's called the [Story Map](#).

We made this in case you get stuck while writing and want to look at your beat sheet and treatment through a new lens.

It includes helpful reminders of what should be happening around which page. I use it as my map from opening to ending scene.

You don't have to use the Story Map by any means. But sometimes when writing, even if you've already got your beat sheet and your treatment, you can still get stuck during the actual script writing. This can be a handy graphic to look at to give yourself a fresh angle:

The Original STORY MAP

Use this map to guide your screenplay.



As you write your screenplay, think of one page of your script as being roughly one minute of screentime. Now, even though [most movies don't stick to this precisely](#), I do think approaching your work this way will help you map out your story better. It's a good rule of thumb.

Are you ready to do this? Let's dive into the story!

Week One: pages 1-10

So what do people expect from pages 1-10 in a screenplay?

Let's be real; we already learned that most people know if they like a screenplay within the first few pages (which was further reinforced for us by an [Acquisitions Executive](#)). So you have to nail these.

Generally, you want to introduce your characters, their central conflicts, and show us the world.

If you look at movies like [Se7en](#), the opening of the movie sets up the cops. We learn who they are, their dispositions, and we even get some case details.



Se7en

© 1995 - New Line Cinema

Same thing with *Superbad*. We get the guys, their friendship, the tone, and the fact that they won't be together in college next year.

How about we check a drama out?

The opening of *No Country For Old Men* starts with a question. Who is this man out in the back of a police car? What did he do? And what's that air tank?



No Country For Old Men

© 2007 - Miramax

You want your opening pages to grip the reader. Get them emotionally involved, laughing, or just absorb them in the world. If you can execute that, you'll be able to carry them along for the rest of the script.

I try to make my opening scene emblematic of the entire story.

One adage I like to employ is "arrive late, leave early."

I don't need to see these characters when they wake up; I like all my opening scenes to start on some sort of conflict that can show who these characters are, and where we will go with them on their journey.

If you open on conflict, you already have the reader engaged.

After you're done with the opening scene, I try to use the rest of the opening ten pages to establish the world.

This works on a *Lord of the Rings* level, but it also works on a *Stand By Me* level. When I'm talking about the world, I don't mean a land far, far, away.

I just want to set up what can happen here.

In *Lord of the Rings* we know there's magic, and in *Stand By Me*, we know we're in the real world. Comedies can have some elbow room.

***If you open
on conflict,
you already
have the
reader
engaged.***



The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

© 2001 - New Line Cinema

Home Alone is in the real world, but given Kevin's antics, we know this is a heightened sense of reality.

Just like *Up!* asks you to believe that a house could fly. It plants that possibility in the first ten pages by showing us how those kids live their lives. Be it balloons that travel through windows, or just a house surrounded by skyscrapers.

Use your first ten pages to tell people about the world, characters, and tone.

This is your foundation. The whole story needs to build from here.

Nail it.

Week Two: pages 11-20

You've written the first 10 pages of your masterpiece. Well, it'll only become a masterpiece with [rewriting](#), but we'll get to that.

Pages 1-10 were important because you had to hook the reader right away. But now it's all about immersing them in your world and showing them what they're in store for as they keep going.

As you hit 11-20, the focus should be immersion in the world and setting up the characters' problems.

We're still in the first act (read [what's ahead](#)), but now that we've met most of the characters, it's time to show them in their world and plant some stuff that may pay off later.

Plus, we need to set up the thrust of the movie.

This sounds like a lot, but let's check out some examples to inspire our own writing.

Screenplay Examples: Pages 10-20

Okay, we've seen your dynamic opening, and we're entertained. Now we want to go along for the ride. Pages 10-20 are where we really get a sense of the world and prepare for an adventure.

© 1981 - Paramount Pictures

The mission is presented to Indy, and we get the legend as well. Straight from the CIA guys who present it.

The powers of the Ark. Indy's expertise. Hitler's motivations. So in one scene, we get a sense of the villain, the stakes, the protagonist's drive, and nervous anticipation of what the Ark can do... level mountains.

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Enemy At The Gates

© 2001 - Paramount Pictures

In *Enemy At The Gates*, we use these moments in the movie to set up the thrust of the story. Vassili is good with a gun, but in this war, it takes more than that. After he saves the life of an officer, he's able to move into the sniper ranks.

Since this is an action movie, we want an exciting set piece here, but it also has to show the theme and thrust of the story. This one is about Vassili being used by the Russians during the war.

In *Black Panther*, we use these pages to see more of Wakanda, understand the ritual for how to become king, and to meet the antagonist.

Killmonger's entrance here sets the theme for the movie.

This story is about characters who were left behind, fighting characters who have closed the doors to their world. The protagonist and antagonist are mirrors of one another. But we set up the eventual plan in this scene.

It's engaging and exciting.

So far, these have all been action-based scenes. But what about stuff in dramas?

In *There Will Be Blood*, these pages are used to get Daniel Plainview to the part of the country that will eventually make him one of the richest people of all time.

In an elongated scene, we set up why these guys would move, how good they are at prospecting for oil, and the general thrust of the movie... which is that Daniel Plainview is going to try and cheat some farmers out of their oil.

So does that all make sense?

In pages 10-20, I want to see your world and characters expand. Show your characters trying to do one thing, and failing (or succeeding) at that one thing is what pushes them off on their adventure.

Have your finger on the pulse of the movie, as we need to make sure it's alive and rife with thematic scenes and exciting turns.

Week Three: pages 21-30

You should have already written the first 20 pages of your opus. We should know all about the characters, world, and tone.

We should even have a semblance of the theme.

Now it's time to finish act one and send the screenplay off into Act II.

You're hitting 21-30, so think about everything we need to know as the story moves forward (as I mentioned in week one).

Show your characters trying to do one thing, and failing (or succeeding) at that one thing is what pushes them off on their adventure.

You may be a few pages ahead or a few pages behind. The idea here is to write in chunks, so don't worry about having your page count exact.

So what are we trying to do in pages 21-30?

As your first act comes to a close, you want your characters to be in a (perilous, compromised, unsure) situation that drives the story forward.

As your first act comes to a close, you want your characters to be in a (perilous, compromised, unsure) situation that drives the story forward.

This is just a fancy way of saying, what kind of movie are you promising the audience?

Have you taken the steps to deliver that film?

So let's look at some ends of first acts to inspire our writing and then focus on getting back to the grindstone.

Screenplay Examples: Pages 21-30

As you get ready to thrust the audience into the main parts of the story, you have to write yourself to the point where your characters are pushing off on their journey. This can mean pushing *The Goonies* on the search for One-Eyed Willie, or sending Clarice Starling to interview Dr. Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*.

So let's look at a few movies that use pages 21-30 to get their characters on the way to fulfilling the promise of the movie's premise.

One of my favorite comedies of the 21st century is *Tropic Thunder*. The movie's plot is simple. A team of actors, trying to create a realistic Vietnam War movie, get lost in the jungle and have to face real rebel forces who are not sure the fight is over. This is an

amazingly goofy premise, but the first act has to set up the actors, their flaws, AND get them out into the jungle believing all of the real danger around them is fake, and part of a movie.



Tropic Thunder

© 2008 - Paramount Pictures

To do this, the writers have to trick the characters.

What's fun is, this is all set up within the first 20 pages. We know these guys are a little dumb, and we know the director is obsessed with realism. So to get the story going forward, you need a scene that both showcases the danger of the jungle, and thrusts these guys away from safety into it...

As great as this works for a comedy, I think it's harder to pinpoint scenes like this in dramas, or less genre-driven movies.

Another underrated movie of the 2000s is *You Can Count On Me*. Instead of having a mission that would clearly define the break into act two, this movie is about a family coming back together. The first act sets up the world of this single mom and then shakes it up when her brother visits after being gone for a long time.



You Can Count On Me

© 2000 - Paramount Classics

So how do we know we're in the meat of this movie?

We introduce the brother to his nephew, and we show what's at the core of this film; those two characters bonding. The way we show that is a scene that sets up who these guys are, and how we will dedicate the movie to them seeing eye to eye...

Which might not be a great thing in the long run...

Lastly, I want to look at a more elevated take on the end of the first act in a genre movie.

The Matrix blew everyone away in 1999. It was a complicated movie that had plenty of people looking into computer simulations and whether or not we could all be turned into batteries. Other than that, I thought the structure was very sound.

The first act of this movie is dedicated to showing us the multiple worlds, introducing characters, and letting Neo know there was something else out there. But what really needed to happen was that a choice had to make its way to Neo.



The Matrix

© 1999 - Warner Brothers

The first 20ish minutes are leading up to this scene, and without it, we can't fulfill the promise of this movie.

Week Four: pages 30-40

You did it, you passed through act one relatively unscathed, and now you're ready to enter act two. Act two is every writer's least favorite act.

When you start writing, you're usually pretty clear on where you'll begin and where you'll end. It's everything in the middle that can throw you off.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you're approaching the hardest part of the script to write. I hope you have a solid treatment handy because you're going to need it.

Now that you've set up the characters and world, we need to see how they'll work to accomplish their goal.

If you're writing a particular genre, like a heist, mystery, or treasure

hunt movie, there might be specific tropes of the genre that can help you map out where you're headed.

If you're writing a personal drama, act two might feel more fluid.

But don't fear!

Act two, no matter the genre, is about uncovering the inner demons of your characters, watching them try and fail to solve their problems, and taking them on a journey to their lowest point.

You're going to need to break these people.

One of my film professors once said, "there are no compelling stories about a village full of happy people," so get ready to make your characters suffer.

I'm talking *Passion of the Christ* suffering.

Which, coincidentally, has a great and right second act.

We're also looking for the B story. What else is going on in this movie parallel to the main plot? In *Superbad*, is McLovin going to travel with the cops while Seth and Evan try to get to the party?

Will the suffragettes get the right to vote as Mary Poppins takes care of the children?

Have you seen *You've Got Mail* recently?

And what about the fight between Fox's book and the little shop around the corner? Who wins in that story of conglomerate versus mom and pop?



You've Got Mail

© 1998 - Warner Brothers

Okay. Let's look at some examples from different genres to see how they tackle the bridge into act two and make these screenplay pages sing.

Screenplay examples: pages 30-40

We've talked a lot about "breaking into act two," but haven't actually come to define what that means. Basically, at this point in your script, your characters should have their mission.

We should know their desires, some of their personal and professional failings, and be ready to push them into uncomfortable situations where these are exposed even further.

These pages also give you a little elbow room to reaffirm the tone, and to bring in a B story.

First up, let's tackle one of the greatest comedic masterpieces of the 21st Century, *Bridesmaids*.

Bridesmaids is a great friendship comedy that pits a maid of

honor against other members of the bridal party as it crumbles from within.



Bridesmaids

© 2011 Universal Studios

But the B-story is a sweet rom-com between a woman and a cop.

To get there, we have to set up the characters, the world, and then naturally lead into it.

So after we get some act two shenanigans, we seamlessly transition into the romantic comedy b-plot. This sets us off into two and also gives us another story we can cut to, so the comedy stays fresh.



Bridesmaids

© 2011 Universal Studios

But how can you break into act two if you're writing something a little more...epic?

Saving Private Ryan is a behemoth of a film. Each act is around an hour long. So for this exercise, I'm going with an adjusted page 30-40.

Basically, we get the news that Ryan needs saving, and the group heads off to find him.

As you can understand... this is a hotly debated mission. Instead of leaving the tension under the surface, this movie puts the tension on front street.

Are their lives worth Ryan's lives?

I guess we'll know if they... earn it...



Saving Private Ryan

© 1998 - Dreamworks

So far we've covered two popular genres, but what if you're writing something more dramatic (not more dramatic than war, but something that's not quite as explicitly life-and-death)?

Something without prescribed tropes that we can lean on to move into act two?

One of my favorite movies from a few years ago was *20th Century Women*. It was about a mother who brings in two other women to help raise her child in 1979.

Because this movie becomes, essentially, a biopic of all three women, we need the break into act two to be about how their stories all circulate inside the boy's life.

So as we break into two we have to see how the Mom views these women.

And how the women will interact with her son.

And how they will affect his life moving forward...

Week Five: pages 40-50

When I get to the middle of screenplays, I like to dig into the map and see where it can take me. Also, I like the idea of following a map to tell a story, since you are technically taking an audience on a journey.

Hate that idea? Do whatever works for you.

By the time we get to page 40, we should be climbing the side of the mountain, going through the cave, and about to hit the midpoint. You want your characters to be dealing with their issues, and you want the things you've been planning to start to pay off.

Think about the middle of your favorite movie. What happens?

I'm a massive fan of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The middle of the



Raiders of the Lost Ark

© 1981 - Paramount Pictures

movie is devoted to getting Indy and Marion close to the ark, and then taking them to a midpoint where we think Marion is dead.

This wrecks Indy, and we see all the deep-seated issues he had with Marion come to the surface.

What can come to the surface with your characters? We need to see them fail in these pages. This is the time where they, like you, should be frustrated at their missions falling apart.

How are you advancing your plot? How can you create roadblocks for your characters?

Let's take a look at a few examples to learn how to write a screenplay.

What can come to the surface with your characters? We need to see them fail in these pages. This is the time where they, like you, should be frustrated at their missions falling apart.

Screenplay examples: pages 40-50

We all have favorite parts of movies. We pick out scenes that are memorable and exciting. But these pages you're writing now are the blue-collar pages. They're the workhorses that help move the story forward.

So ask yourself, "What's my story about? What do my characters need?" And now... take that away from them.

Let's start with an easy example: *The Goonies* ([one of the best coming-of-age movies](#)).



The Goonies

© 1985 - Warner Brothers

The plot of *The Goonies* is simple to follow. They're legit using a map to go where they need to go. They want One-Eyed Willie's gold. We take it away from them by putting obstacles in their way and tracking all the fighting within the group. This is where the flaws we've seen in these characters take center stage and they have to overcome those flaws to move forward, to get to the midpoint and decide to keep going forward.

Again, if your movie has a formula or a set of tropes, this is where



Ocean's Eleven

© 2001 - Warner Brothers

you can lean in. Think about *Ocean's Eleven*. We get the guys to the casino. We introduce Tess, then what happens in the middle of the movie? They set their plan in motion so they have to start practicing, and they need to see what problems they'll have going forward (namely needing more parts to help break into the casino).

Okay, what about one of the most moving dramas of the decade?

Back to *Manchester By The Sea*.

Pages 40-50 here are trying to get you to the midpoint, to this jaw-dropping scene where Casey Affleck's character (spoiler alert!) tries to kill himself in the police station.

We finally understand all of the trauma affecting him.

How do you get there?

Again, this is a foundation of the second act. We need to build up our love of Casey Affleck's character and then pull the rug out from under everyone.

We need to set up that Lee has to stay there and that he's got to take care of his nephew. You also have to show that there was some tension with his wife.

In these moments we begin to unravel everything we planted early on. We start to explain why Lee has so much pain in his life, why he doesn't want to be in this town.



Manchester By The Sea

© 2016 - Amazon Studios

So as you write pages 40-50, ask yourself how you can stop your characters from getting what they want and how you can use the B-story to help that.

Could a villain get in their way? Or maybe having two girlfriends and being in a band could too?

Remember, no one wants to watch a movie about a village of happy people. So make things hurt.

Week Six: pages 50-60

Here's what I love about the middle of a screenplay; it's where you get to reinvent the wheel. It's where the audience gets thrown for a loop, a big twist happens, and you have to evaluate where to go from here.

The middle portion of a lot of screenplays is when the audience is yelling at the page.

It's when our heroes start to fall out of love, think they saw Commissioner Gordon die, and learn they're going to need that one last piece to rob a casino.



The Dark Knight

© 2008 - Warner Brothers

Screenwriting gurus like Blake Snyder suggest having a “false victory” or “false collapse” at the midpoint. At the midpoint, either pretend your character’s high point is the middle and then ride them down from there, or give them a defeat, and let them spring back from it.

False victories can be hard to pull off. If you look at *Body Heat*, their false victory is where they think they’ve pulled off the most

amazing con ever, and then the rest of the movie is about it falling apart.

Look at a movie like *Invincible* starring Mark Wahlberg. He thought it was all about making the Philadelphia Eagles' squad. But in the middle, he's on the team and realizes those challenges keep coming.

While not every movie has a dramatic shift at the midpoint, I would encourage you to see this midpoint as an opportunity to really shake things up. Even if it's not a completely character-altering midpoint, at least try to reveal an emotional bombshell that could shake the audience too. Keep us on our toes.

As you can tell from our [Story Map](#) the parts of your story you've entered are...

Reassess the Problem - You're at the middle. Is there another way to get it done?

Try and Fail - Things begin to fall apart, can they handle it?

Last week we learned that the characters had finally started to gel together and things were going well. Now it's time to fracture those relationships, to create the cracks that will lead us to the break.

If you've been planting things along the way, we'll be paying off more here.

Let's jump into the examples to push these points home.

Screenplay examples: pages 50-60

As you know, I love setting off with a [genre entry](#), and I can think of no better midpoint than the T-Rex escaping in *Jurassic Park*.

At the midpoint, either pretend your character's high point is the middle and then ride them down from there, or give them a defeat, and let them spring back from it.

Up until this point in the screenplay, we've spent most of our time exploring a tame theme park. But the real shakeup here is when the park is able to escape the boundaries and begin to interact with the guests. This is the first big step in that arena. These pages are also used to begin to pay off Nedry's fateful decision to sell the embryos.

Remember when I said we were going to test the characters?

Well, after the midpoint, we see Dr. Grant have to confront hating kids, then Ellie confronts being underestimated, then Nedry confronts his greed, and then Hammond confronts his hubris. That's a helluva shift.



Jurassic Park

© 1993 - Universal Pictures

What about something without dinosaurs but with lots of desserts?

One of the greatest screenplays of all time comes from the 2007 movie, *Waitress*, written and directed by Adrienne Shelly. It's a movie about a waitress stuck in a bad marriage, trying to save money to leave her husband, when she finds out she's pregnant.

As if those problems aren't terrible enough, at the midpoint, she begins a torrid affair.

This affair is unexpected and throws the best-laid plans right out the window. Now, instead of just trying to escape her husband, she's also trying to navigate a new love. She has to keep all of this hidden from her best friends and best customers. It catapults into a more emotionally complicated arena and opens the movie to lots of twists, turns, and laughs.



Waitress

© 2007 - Fox Searchlight Pictures

We've focused a lot on dramatic shifts that cause people to see the world in a whole new light. But what if the world your characters inhabit is already awful?

I caught the recent re-release of *Schindler's List* in theaters, and

its midpoint happens when Amon Goeth (commandant of the concentration camp) arrives.

This is where the movie turns. Up until now, Schindler has been able to save lives without much legwork by using his factory. He's getting unbelievably rich. His motivations are monetary. But when Goeth arrives, there's a new world order. The camps become even more deadly. The ghetto is liquidated.



Schindler's List

© 1993 - Universal Pictures

Schindler, who had seen these people as commodities, now sees them as human beings.

The list Schindler made, which was about free labor, now becomes a list he's going to make to save the lives of thousands.

The midpoint in *Schindler's List* is about the arrival of a person who changes the way Oskar views the world. While there is not a major shift in how he goes about his business, we begin to see the humanity within him come out.

That humanity becomes the defining theme of the movie.

Week Seven: pages 60-70

So you survived the midpoint, and you're ready to round out Act II. Congratulations. But don't start slapping yourself on the back yet.

Finishing Act II is pretty complicated.

Let's focus on where you've been and where you need to head.

Last week, at the midpoint, we learned our character had to reassess their problems.

In these pages, our characters need to actively try their new approach... and really believe (wrongly!) that it's going to succeed.

Think about Indiana Jones. Once the Nazis have the ark, he chases after it.

We should feel like our heroes are getting ahead, but they should still be asking questions. These pages need to lead us to the fall, so get their spirits high.

1. Reassess the Problem - You're at the middle. Is there another way to get it done?

2. Try and Fail - Things begin to fall apart, can they handle it?

3. The Fall - The worst thing happens, something so bad you don't think you can ever recover from it.

These pages are crucial, because they're going to take your character right up to the brink, and then dash them against the rocks.

After all the trying, failing, learning, and succeeding, things might be looking up for your heroes. But they'll still have doubts.

I can't think of a better example than when Greg brings home the fake cat in *Meet The Parents*.

Greg has a problem; he needs Jack's blessing to get married. He thinks he can fix this situation by finding Jinx the cat.



Meet the Parents

© 2000 - Universal Pictures

The cat is gone, and in a desperation move, Greg uses one he finds at the pound to trick Jack. In pages 60-70 in the script, we see Greg reap the benefits of being the cat's savior. He enters the circle of trust, he's definitely in a good position to ask for Jack's daughter's hand, and it's all going well...

...until he hears the real Jinx has been found and has to race home.

Let's look at a few more examples to play around in pages 60-70 in your screenplay!

Screenplay Examples: pages 60-70

I cannot believe it's been 25 years since *You've Got Mail* was released. It's impossible not to love a Nora Ephron movie, and I think the best parts of them are how tight and cumulative her second acts feel. They're all about building up ammo to crush you when the characters don't get together.

You've Got Mail does that especially well.



You've Got Mail

© 1998 - Warner Brothers

I love the way we transition from the characters flirting, to knowing who one another is, to running rival businesses, to maybe liking each other.

The movie sets them up to fail, but we have to see them winning too.

That means getting protestors outside Fox books, pushing her Mom & Pop shop forward, and getting us right on the brink of believing everything is okay...

Before we realize it's not.

But what about the culmination of a second act that has a little more pizzazz?

I'm talking about the original (movie version of) *Mission: Impossible*.



Mission: Impossible

© 1996 - Paramount Pictures

I think I watched this movie 50 times as a kid, and it still makes me cheer as an adult.

We went through Ethan Hunt's trying and failing. We found Job. We learned where the list was held, and in the culmination of the second act, we're robbing the CIA.

This is an incredible way to thrust us toward Act III. We think our team is going to pull it off, but nothing is more fun than getting the audience's adrenaline going, and being ready to pull the rug out next.

And it's not just about action or comedy.

It can work in dramedies as well, like in *The Birdcage*.

Structurally, *The Birdcage* is incredibly unique. Most of the second

act takes place at a dinner planned between the Senator and our gay couple, who are hiding their identities.

What's fun is, the dinner starts going well right off the bat, and keeps getting better. Sure, there are some close calls, but as the evening wanes, we need to build suspense in the audience's eyes.

You know something has to go wrong, so their second act is about nervous anticipation. That's how to write a screenplay.

Week Eight: pages 70-80

We're entering Act III. Our characters have been through the wringer, and now it's time to break them.

We go to the movies for many reasons; to laugh, cry, cheer, and feel love. But to get the audience to feel these emotions, we have to show them a world without these feelings. In these pages, we pull the rug out from under the people we love the most and see them at their lowest lows.

I know you've heard this before, but no one wants to watch a movie about the village of happy people. They barely want to read about a [screenwriter's quest to be happy](#).

We can't pull punches on these pages.

You have to be mean, even when it's so hard.

Think about a movie like *Bridesmaids*. That movie is mostly about friendship. The worst thing you can do to the characters is to completely rip the central friendship apart.

***In these pages,
we pull the rug
out from under
the people we
love the most
and see them
at their lowest
lows.***

Once that friendship is burnt down, you can use the next few pages to show the aftermath. It's not only time to rest, but time to explain the audience how badly the first fall hurts.

Even in different genres, we need to see a dramatic fall. Sometimes quite literally.

In *Arrival*, the theme of the movie is communication and non-violence. So when things fall apart, they blow apart. A bomb is sent into the alien craft. While we need things to fall apart, it's smart to also show how the fear of another culture and communication can completely blow away the audience.



Arrival

© 2016 - Paramount Pictures

We also benefit from the theme of the movie being reinforced, so the audience has a reminder as the pages wind down.

Let's look at a few more examples to play around with in pages 70-80 of your screenplay!

Screenplay Examples: pages 70-80

Frequently, I see a lot of first-time writers being way too easy on their characters. I was like that when I started too. I thought I went too far lots of times, but it was a rude awakening when I started reading the pros and seeing how awful they made things for their leads.

And how much better those scripts read than mine.



The Descendants

© 2011 - Fox Searchlight Pictures

Case in point, the Alexander Payne movie, *The Descendants*. The movie is already bleak, but it takes everything to 11 when Clooney has to face his comatose wife.

It's excruciating for him. He has to confront his failings — the things that drove his wife to cheat. It's powerful, intimate, and heartbreaking.

There are times when you think you can get away with making a character not have to face the music. Or the singing bad guy...

I think a lot about *The Lion King*. Not only because they remade

it, but also because it probably could get away with Simba not having to face his worst moments.

The movie already has him see his father die, be exiled, and lose a possible love.

But that's not enough.

Even in a kids' movie, you have to crush hearts.



The Lion King

© 1994 - Walt Disney Pictures

Simba still has to be faced with his own part in all of the bad things that have happened... so he can rise and take his place among the mature adults.

Even if that means looking within to move forward.

Sometimes characters look within, and it zaps all of the air out of the room.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, when Boromir tries to steal the ring from Frodo, it ruins the heart of the quest. We always knew Orcs

would come for it and that there would be a battle. But it hurts the most to see the Fellowship crumble from within.

This harkens back to my advice on the movie's theme.

If you can make this moment echo the theme, it puts you in a stronger position for the rest of Act III.

The Fellowship was built on friendship and trust. The rest of the movies in the trilogy will be about alliances that fracture.

But this fracture is so important. It's why we went to the movie theater. We want the struggle so we can rejoice when we see the triumph.

Week Nine: pages 80-90

Welcome to one of the hardest parts of your screenplay. Outside of act two, these pages are always the hardest for me to write.

I love the challenge of racing toward the ending of your movie because it makes you focus on what needs to be tied up.

You need to take us through how your characters react, and then give us a glimmer of hope for them so they crusade forward.

There are times when I enter these pages and realize I need to go back and [rewrite](#). It can be a necessary step to help my new progressions make sense.

Still, since this course is about always writing forward, I encourage you to continue ahead while we are in the process and do a massive rewrite after you finish.

So, what are we looking for on pages 80-90?

We're in the direct aftermath of the worst possible thing to happen to your characters. And the audience should be at their emotional low as well. You need to take us through how your characters react, and then give us a glimmer of hope for them so they crusade forward.

In our [Story Map](#), pages 80-90 cover the following beats:

The Hidden Clue - What do your characters discover about themselves/the problem that they never saw before?

Race to the Finish - They're up and running no matter what.

Let's look at a few more examples to play around in pages 80-90 in your screenplay!

Screenplay Examples: pages 80-90

The best way to find examples for pages 80-90 in screenplays is to think about all of the moments where characters lose everything... and then study what happens immediately after.

This is where people come to terms with whether or not they're going to make it.

One of the most startlingly real versions of these pages came from *Manchester By The Sea*. Where we find out the lead character just can't beat what he's been feeling.

What we get at this moment in the movie is a discovery of theme. This is a movie about getting over a trauma, and our character realizes here that he will never be over it.



Manchester by the Sea

© 2016 - Amazon Studios

But that doesn't preclude him from being a better uncle and involved in his nephew's life.

We see him sulk, we see him fight, but ultimately he realizes that the people who are alive are more important than anything he feels.

And that realization reinforces the movie's theme of mourning and redemption.

Oof that's a sad start.

Let's jump into something funnier.

Superbad is a masterclass in comedy. After best friends Seth and Evan fight at the party, we think their friendship might be over. The next pages show us how the duo function without each other.

Seth gets hammered and passes out... into Emma Stone's face.

Evan is a good guy and passes up having sex with a too-drunk girl... only to get hammered and pass out himself.

This is where people come to terms with whether or not they're going to make it.

Then the cops come in.

Again, we know the theme of this movie is about friendship. So it only fits that when the cops show up to bust everyone, friends put aside their differences and get back to what matters... friendship!

In saving Evan, Seth can make up for some of his selfish acts. And to deal with the idea that even if they are apart, they will always be there for each other.

We also close the loops to the B-story with McLovin and the cops.



Superbad

© 2007 - Columbia Pictures

The big reveal here is that the cops knew McLovin was an underage kid posing as an adult. They wanted to be cool to him because they had such a negative view of cops as kids, they wanted to defy those expectations.

For Seth and Evan, we learn our main characters love each other and want their friendship to work even when they branch off to different colleges.

In *Manchester By The Sea*, it's that you never get over some grief. You just have to move forward and try to grow from it.

But if you're dealing with a genre movie like *The Sixth Sense*, this is much more of a reveal. Thanks to some handy [plot devices](#).

We think the low points are over. And as we race toward the finish, this script needs to assert what it has been about — not just Cole's redemption, but also Dr. Crowe's.

Again, use these pages to reflect on what you need the audience to find out.

Maybe it's that in *500 Days Of Summer* we need our [protagonist](#) to finally be over Summer. You have to sell the audience on the idea that they moved on. So you put a scene here to show what each person found out about themselves. And how those discoveries can catapult them into a catharsis that ends the movie.

No matter what, if you get stuck on these pages, go back to the theme and lesson.

What do you want the audience to understand about life?

How can you show them that idea through the power of your story?

Week Nine: pages 90-100

As John August and Craig Mazin once said, [good screenplays start with great endings](#).

As you get to page 100, it's time for your screenplay to come to a close. These are the moments when you decide how to close the themes, pay off any last plants, figure out if there's a [big twist](#),

and decide whether or not you want to leave hope for a sequel.

And in *40-Year-Old Virgin*, it's where they break into song... that happens in *Bridesmaids* too.

As you end your screenplay, in addition to your beat sheet, you can also refer to our [Story Map](#) to see where we are in the plot beats.

The Treasure Chest - Did they get what they came for?

Where We Go From Here - Show us the world in a new light, hint what's next.

You've taken your characters through the worst. Now is the time to figure out if they get Keyser Soze, or if he limps off into the sunset, ready to kill again.

Let's take a look at some examples of memorable movie endings to help you land the plane (or have your pilot admit he needs help, like in *Flight*).

Screenplay Examples: pages 90-100

Creating a memorable ending is about more than just closing up the story beats.

Sure, everyone wants their questions answered. We have to know if the good guy gets the girl, the girl gets the job, and the job becomes the career.

These are the moments when you decide how to close the themes, pay off any last plants, figure out if there's a big twist, and decide whether or not you want to leave hope for a sequel.

But you also have to deliver your characters to a place where the audience understands where their lives are going—or not going.

At one point in my life, I did some work with Mickey Rourke. A lot of the stories I have probably belong in our [Ultimate Hollywood Assistant Survival Guide](#), but during the times we weren't arguing over Sprinkles Cupcakes or sparring at Golds Gym, we talked about *The Wrestler*.

The Wrestler has one of the greatest endings in modern movie history.



The Wrestler

© 2008 - Fox Searchlight Pictures

Randy "The Ram" makes his peace with his family, his legacy, and the woman he loves. He ultimately prioritizes his craft, and we know that as that movie ends, he's solidifying his legacy and legend.

Is there going to be a sequel? Hell no.

Did Randy get the treasure? Yes. Just listen to his speech.

While the story is ambiguous about whether he lives or dies, we get

a sense of closure and we will never forget Randy's leap of faith.

What about a more conventional ending?

Or a movie with a sequel?



Horrible Bosses

© 2011 - Warner Brothers

At the end of *Horrible Bosses*, we see Charlie Day's character, Dale, finally standing up for himself after one boss is dead and the other is in jail. We get closure. The gang gets what they wanted, to be ostensibly rid of all of their bosses, and we get the hint that these men's lives have changed. Nick is promoted to president of the company under a sadistic CEO, Kurt retains his job under a new boss, and Dale blackmails Julia into ending her harassment by convincing her to sexually harass a supposedly unconscious patient, while Jones secretly records the act.

What I like here is that while we don't officially set up a sequel, we get the sense that these men have changed for the better, and their newfound confidence gives them the win they've been looking for the whole movie. We can kind of surmise that a

sequel could fit into this world if it had to and if the movie was successful. It was, and that's why we got *Horrible Bosses 2*.

But what about a movie that ends AND directly sets up the next chapter?

Let's go to one of my top 10 all time movies...

Back To The Future.

Holy crap, is there a more fun movie than *BTTF*? Maybe *Raiders*, but don't get me sidetracked.

What makes the *Back To the Future* ending so perfect is that it pays off everything we've been looking for the entire movie. We see that not only has Marty's family gotten back to normal, but all of his actions paid off. The real kicker is that just when we think the adventure is over, Doc Brown shows back up and lets us know there's room for another chapter.

This sets up a bigger world, and in today's studio realm, where everyone is looking for a new franchise, it's a great way to show how profitable your idea can be in the marketplace.

And above all else, *Back To The Future* leaves us with one of the top three movie lines of all time...

"Roads? Where we're going... we don't need roads!"

I got goosebumps just typing that.

Imagine reading it and seeing the franchise's potential...

Great endings do that.

You wrote a screenplay! Now what?

Well, there you have it. As I mentioned in the opening, no matter what page you're ending on, you've ended it.

Congratulations. Do something to celebrate!

For every person who talks about writing a screenplay, one in a hundred actually starts one, and one in a thousand actually finishes one. (I'm not a statistician, but that sounds about right.)

All writing is rewriting, so after you reward yourself for finishing, get back into this draft and make it something special.

Pour yourself a drink, go for a walk, dance a jig.

I'm honored to have been a part of your [hero's journey](#) and hope I have been more Dumbledore than Voldemort along the way.

Till we write again...

Wait, we're not done!

[All writing is rewriting](#), so after you reward yourself for finishing, get back into this draft and make it something special.

The truth is, very few first drafts are ever any good. That's why we told you at the beginning just to get to the end of it. Now you're one in a thousand! And now you have a much better sense of what worked in your movie and what didn't.

However, before jumping in to rewriting, it can be good to get someone else to read it. If they're an experienced screenwriter, all the better. Send it to multiple friends. Or stage a [table read](#), even if you don't have producers and cast members—just cast your friends as actors. Put the first draft up on its feet, warts and all. We promise you that you'll have more ideas for your rewrite than if you just keep it all bottled up in your head.

REWRITING

We've all heard "all writing is rewriting" at some point in our lives, but what goes into rewriting your screenplay and how can you tackle it like a pro?

Now that you're ready to open the document back up, congratulations again on the first draft. Or, maybe your manager got you a rewrite gig, and you're not sure where to begin. Screenplay rewrites are hard!

Regardless, now we're going to go over the skills and steps you need to tackle your rewrite and get the most out of the draft.

So let's get started before I change my mind about this section and go back to rewrite it...

What's a rewrite?

In professional screenwriting terms, a rewrite is when you reopen a finished screenplay or pilot file and go back inside to alter or punch-up parts of the dialogue, scenes, or the entire thing.

What's a “page one” rewrite?

A page one rewrite is one that entails throwing out everything except the concept. It happens all the time. It's why people call it “development hell.” But it can be a great, fresh way for a writer to sink their teeth into an idea without being beholden to the ideas and situations that came before them.

Who's rewriting their scripts?

All good writers.

And movie producers. And studios. And directors. And even some actors have writers come in to do a polish or rewrite for their characters.

The business of screenwriting means you'll probably have a bigger and longer career rewriting screenplays than selling specs. And to make sure that career happens, you're going to need to master how to plan and rewrite screenplays. That's not too hard. It's just fixing what's broken inside them like a mechanic.

The business of screenwriting means you'll probably have a bigger and longer career rewriting screenplays than selling specs.

Let's get into the three steps of how you can rewrite your screenplay and attack your pages with emphasis and direction.

The Three Steps of Rewriting Your Screenplay

Rewriting any story, movie or pilot, can be a daunting task. There's so much to do that you can get overwhelmed easily and not truly commit to making the changes. You could also be too confident, or too scared, and be afraid to make the major changes you needed. So instead you tweak some dialogue and call it a day.

I wrote this book to challenge you to get better not only as a writer but as a rewriter. So let's go over the three steps you should take to tackle this rewrite.

Step One: Where do you want to end?

Start your rewrite from 10,000 feet. But backward. I like to make a list of goals of what I think the end of the rewrite should look like. What's my ideal finished product? What genre do I want it to fit inside? Budget range? Once I have the shell of what I think this story should be, then I make a list of what needs to happen inside for the goals to be achieved.

I like to make a list of goals of what I think the end of the rewrite should look like.

Do I need to cut characters? Change locations?

This is where you need to be BRUTAL. Get a second opinion, don't pull punches, and always be honest with yourself (or with the people who have hired you to work on the screenplay). If this thing needs a page one, understand what that takes. And be ready to explain why it needs that sort of work.

The list matters—you're working as your own development executive here. So take your time and don't go nuts, even if the

list winds up being long.

Once I have everything down in a list I move onto the next step.

Step Two: Make another outline!

That's right, after all that work, I sit and I re-outline the movie. I need to look at the scenes in order. What needs to be added, taken away? Do I need to change the intention of any of these scenes? Once I have every scene outlined, I'll feel okay to start writing. Since I have the foundation of my goals in the first step, I always know what I'm writing toward.

Outlining is not easy—you can get lost and forget the structure. But I like to think about the [conflict](#) in every scene.

Give your characters [obstacles](#) and make sure they add up in the themes you're trying to explore.

Step Three: Perform surgery.

Here's where you actually begin to type. Add a line here, take one away from there, bolster with scenes that help [develop](#) and give characters an [arc](#). You need to write with intention. Remember, the rewrite is totally specific and important. As you add and subtract it can get messy, so make sure you're always pressing "save."

Bonus Step: Rewrite again...then polish it.

Once you're done rewriting its time to... rewrite? Sure, you may have tackled it once and made it work, but it's time to tackle it again and again until you think it's ready for the world. Then you need to polish it. This is an ongoing process. You rewrite to give it to your manager/friend/producer/director.

You rewrite based on your own notes; you rewrite based on notes of others; then you rewrite again once you get a producer attached. Then they get a director attached, and you'll probably rewrite for them too. Hopefully, someone has purchased this screenplay, and all those rewrites are built into your contract and paid. But a lot of times they're not. So try to [avoid free work](#) if you can. Writing a spec on your own is free. Rewriting your own spec is free. Someone else asking you to rewrite another writer's work should never be free.

CONGRATULATIONS!

Welcome to the end of the book. Congratulations—again! Most would-be writers never make it this far.

I hope you're excited about the hard work you put into your script, and excited to start the process all over.

Ten weeks is a lot of time when you're writing several hours a day. You're a different person than you were when you started!

Still, just because you got to the end of the book doesn't mean you're ready to be a professional writer yet. That requires the repeated action and mastery of the art form. (Unless you're already a professional writer, in which case, I hope you found this eBook useful in reaching a new level!)

So go back to page one and start writing again.

I can't wait to see your dream on the big screen.

AFTERWORD: WHAT NOW?

You've written your script. You've rewritten your script. You've gotten feedback. You've done a table read. You've rewritten it again. And again. You finally feel it's in great shape...

Now what?

Having a finished screenplay is only the first step in a much longer journey to getting a movie made. The path forward can go in many different directions, and whichever one(s) you choose to pursue, we have plenty of additional resources for you...

First, and perhaps most obviously, [you can try to sell it](#).

Using the script to find [representation](#) is also a great step.

You can also [enter it into screenplay contests](#) to find representation and/or as a step toward getting it produced. We have some insights into [how to win screenwriting contests](#) from those who judge them.

You can also try and attach actors to make it more attractive for someone else to foot the bill. [Casting is critical](#), even if you [decide to go forward without big names](#). Perhaps you can find [financing for your film](#). Because there are [literally hundreds of ways to finance a film](#), we have an [entire topic at the site](#) dedicated to it.

If the studios aren't calling, you can revise your script to get the scale and scope of the movie down to something you might be able to pull off on your own, perhaps using [crowdfunding](#) or even [crowdinvestment](#), which is the latest (and greatest?) [option for filmmakers](#).

If your [budget is low enough](#), you can try to shoot your project yourself. At No Film School we are all about [DIY production hacks](#), and [microbudget filmmaking](#) is its own field [we've covered extensively](#) including this primer on [planning a micro-budget shoot](#).

If you want to direct it yourself, now would be the time to work up a [sizzle](#) of your own that reflects some of the work you can do, [your unique vision and understanding of the material](#), and how you see the pieces coming together. Here are some [more examples](#), including [NFS Founder Ryan Koo's mood reel](#) for what became his Netflix film [Amateur](#).

Speaking of which, if this is your first feature, you can also listen to our [entire ten-hour podcast series](#) on how Ryan got *Amateur* made.

We just threw a lot of links at you. If that was too many, feel free to just [browse our site by topic](#), including [Producing](#), [Directing](#), [Cinematography](#), and of course, [Screenwriting](#).

Overall, put this script out into the world! Whatever happens to the first script happens, and some of what happens next (or doesn't happen at all) is beyond your control.

One other thing you can do?

Get started writing another script! Don't make the mistake of putting all your eggs into one basket. The more you do anything, the better you will get at it. Write ten more scripts!

What you can control is getting better at the craft of storytelling.

Get another script under your belt.

The more you write, the better you'll be at it...

We hope to see you on the site at [No Film School](#). Thanks for reading!

If you would like to share this book with a friend, please send them here, where they can sign up for their own free copy of the most current version:

<https://nofilmschool.com/screenplay-ebook>

How to Write a Screenplay (During Quarantine)

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Written by Jason Hellerman

Edited by George Edelman and Ryan Koo

Designed by April Tapley

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