

Craig Batty

SCREENPLAYS

how to write and sell them

creative ESSENTIALS



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INTRODUCTION

Oh no, not another screenwriting book! And that's just what *I* thought.

But then, when I thought about it some more, I realised we *do* need good screenwriting books; that, in fact, there's quite a shortage of them. While there may be hundreds on the market, few of them actually speak to the writer, telling them instead what they should and shouldn't be doing. What's missing is a sense of conversation, a sense that the author knows what the writer's trying to do, and so speaks to them in a way that's helpful and personal, as well as insightful.

I want this book to speak to you as a writer, to connect with what you're going through – good or bad – as you develop your screenplay, and to inspire you to move forward, helping you to find solutions that you're happy with and that you believe in. Above all, I want this book to be a guide that you come back to again and again, if not for help with a specific screenplay problem, then as a guilty pleasure – perhaps reminding you that, yes, you do know what you're doing. And I use the word *guide* intentionally here. It's not a rule book. Nor is it a set of principles, techniques, tricks, tips, etc.

Over the last nine years, I've worked with lots of screenwriters, student screenwriters, professional screenwriters, emerging screenwriters, and people who write screenplays as a hobby. I've read lots of screenplays and screen ideas (treatments, outlines) – at least a thousand – and I've discovered that I love working with screenwriters on their screenplays. Writing your own material is one thing – and I love

that, too – but to work closely with someone on their idea is something else. There’s a buzz that comes from talking about characters, plots, themes, visual images and dialogue – it’s like chatting to your friends about a film when you come out of the cinema, only better. There’s even more of a frisson when you can see the passion rising in a writer; when you can see them getting excited about their screenplay, and talking about it with much more verve. And here’s the thing: the best buzz of all comes from seeing a writer suddenly make the leap into finding their own solutions. They’ve ‘got’ what they’ve been trying to achieve, and suddenly they fly. As a guide, a mentor, you get real satisfaction from this moment.

I’ve also written a lot about screenwriting. Some of you might be familiar with my first book, *Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches* (2008), which was written with Zara Waldebäck. The response to that has been really positive. Not because we’re saying things that are explicitly new, but because we wrote it in a way that was intended to be helpful and inspiring. We touched on the idea of creativity, too, and how often in screenwriting training there’s a lack of attention paid to the creative process – it’s all about craft, technique and industry. Although these things are very important, they’re nothing without creativity. A screenwriter is a creative writer, after all. So we decided to follow this up with a second book, *The Creative Screenwriter: Exercises to Expand Your Craft* (2012). Quite different in tone and format, this book offers a plethora of creative writing exercises intended to deepen the screenwriter’s understanding of key aspects of screenwriting – character, structure, theme, dialogue, pitching, developing ideas, etc. I also wrote the book *Movies That Move Us: Screenwriting and the Power of the Protagonist’s Journey* (2011), which, in essence, develops Christopher Vogler’s famous Hero’s Journey model to take into account both the physical and the emotional journey experienced by a protagonist. There’s quite a lot of theory in that book, but there are six case studies of famous films that highlight the points I’m making. Vogler himself endorsed the book, which was very nice. I don’t expect everyone to agree with my ideas

– how boring life would be if they did – and I know that there will be things I've missed or seen differently to others. But I'm certain there will be something in this book that will connect with you; something that will make you see and understand screenwriting in a different way than before. I'll not see the recognition in your eyes – the passion rising – but I'll know it's there.

So, I hope you find this book useful, and I hope you enjoy it. In the end, we write because we get pleasure from it. There are times when we utterly despise our art – we can't get the plot right, the character doesn't sound right and nobody likes the screenplay – but we only despise it because we love it so much. And, because we get so much joy out of it, we want it to be perfect, and we want others to enjoy it, too. Rather than seeing this book as a chore, then – something you've got to read for university, or plough through to see where you might be going wrong – try to relish working through the material. Let it guide your own thoughts and feelings about good screenwriting. Have fun thinking of your own examples. And, where it feels appropriate, enjoy having your own alternative readings, or the fact that you disagree with what I've said!

1. THE NATURE OF SCREENWRITING

A few years ago, when I was delivering a workshop on creativity at the London Screenwriters' Festival, three men walked out. As they left, one of them mumbled something along the lines of, 'This is ridiculous... creativity's got nothing to do with screenwriting.' Maybe it was the way I was pitching it – though I'd only been talking for about five minutes – but creativity and screenwriting not connecting? Being creative having nothing to do with screenwriting? Well, actually, this is a view that many people have. But it's wrong. Screenwriting is creative writing. It's perhaps got more of a business slant to it than other kinds of fiction, but it's still creative writing. And it's through developing creativity that a screenwriter can make a film leap from being formulaic to formidable.

For those who stayed in the workshop – about 40 of them – we proved that, by thinking 'outside the box', ideas were strengthened and stories became more engaging and original. Some of the writers realised that their ideas had to be abandoned in favour of new ones that emerged – but that's what it's all about. After all, who wants to stick with an idea just for the sake of it, when there's a better one out there waiting to be tackled?

Nevertheless, a common perception is that screenwriting is driven by business. In one way, it is – there's a lot of money involved usually, and many more people needed to make a film possible, which of

course brings with it financial risks. The development of a screenplay also leans more towards the business-driven model, with more people vying for their voice to be heard, and more 'at stake' when people like the director and financier get involved. All of this is important, and screenwriters should know about these kinds of factors, but that doesn't mean that creativity should be sidelined. Being a screenwriter is still about being creative. It's about having the ability to see things in different and interesting ways and, when the going gets tough, being able to find creative solutions to problems – your problems or other people's problems (which you might very well have to take on board).

Creative exercise

How are you creative? What does creativity mean to you? Thinking specifically about your life as a screenwriter – however long it may be, or experienced you are – make a list of all the things you do that you'd categorise as creative. These might be decisions you make, or actions you take. When you've done this, make a list of all the things you do that you'd categorise as business oriented. How does the list look? Are there clear connections between creative and business decisions and actions – and if not, how might you try and connect them?

JUST A WORKING DOCUMENT?

Another common perception is that the screenplay is only a working document. It's an artefact that will be turned into something else entirely – the film. So it goes from being a static, paper-based thing to a live piece of moving image. Although this is technically correct, it's philosophically incorrect. A screenplay isn't static at all – aside from the fact that it'll go through many re-writes, it's a document full of life. You don't just read a screenplay because you want to understand how the film will be made – you read it because it's a good story in itself, one that has the power to entertain and move you. The action on the

page runs through your mind as you read. The dialogue comes to life in your head. Even the pace of the story emerges through the way the screenplay's been written – the overall structure and scene-by-scene construction. Because a screenplay is written in the active voice, in present tense, it speaks to you as you read it. Your imagination works just as much as it might when reading a novel. So a screenplay isn't 'just' a working document. It's a well-crafted and experiential piece of writing, one that will hopefully be made into a film afterwards.

More will be said later about writing the actual text of a screenplay, but, for now, think about all the ways in which you might create a 'good read' on the page. Think about how you might use evocative language to capture the reader's attention. About how you might use the layout of the page to help give a sense of the feel of a scene. About how you might connect scenes to punctuate meaning and build pace. And about how dialogue might be carefully crafted to complement or juxtapose with what we're seeing on the screen.

Creative exercise

Get hold of a screenplay – hopefully you're reading them regularly! – and think specifically about how the writing on the page is connecting you with the story (or not). What does the page look like? What kinds of description are being used – if any – in the screen directions? Which feelings are being evoked by what's on the page, and how's that being done? How do you know whether you should be empathising with a character or not? What's the screenwriter giving you?

LAYOUT

There's no point in giving a really detailed set of instructions about screenplay layout here, mainly because it can all be done for you nowadays using widely available software packages. The most well known package is **Final Draft**, which adheres to all industry standard

layout guidelines. But it's not free – and it's actually not that cheap. Another one, slowly taking over the market, is **Celtx**. And this *is* free. The BBC also has one – **Script Smart** – which comes with a really handy instruction guide for laying out a screenplay, written as a screenplay itself. All of these packages – and others – are easy to use and allow you to save your documents in formats that others can open, such as Microsoft Word and PDF.

Nevertheless, I'll point out here a few guiding principles about laying out a screenplay:

- A **slugline**, or **scene heading**, indicates where a scene's set, which is necessary for both reading and production purposes. INT. means interior, or inside, and EXT. means exterior, or outside. The slugline also indicates a general idea of the time, such as morning, day, evening or night. Occasionally, screenwriters will give specific times.
- **Scene action**, or **screen directions**, details what's actually happening on the screen. It's used to describe both what we see and what we hear, and is always written in the present tense. Scene action is divided into short paragraphs, each paragraph usually not exceeding three or four lines. Scene action can also be just a word or two.
- The **character's name** indicates who's speaking, and written underneath this is their **dialogue**. A character sometimes speaks in voiceover, and this is still written as dialogue, with 'voiceover' or 'v/o' in parentheses next to, or underneath, the character's name.
- **Parentheses** are used when the screenwriter wants to indicate how something's said, if it's not clear from the dialogue. They're also used when a character performs a minor action between his or her lines, stopping the need to write scene action and break up the flow.

- Occasionally, **scene transitions** are written at the end of a scene to suggest how one scene moves into the next. But this is usually only for specific effect. The start of a new scene (slugline) implies a cut between scenes anyway. 'Cut to' can be used, but isn't necessary.

Here's an example of how a screenplay might look:

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

It's quiet. And dark. Very dark. Even the moonlight struggles to pierce the density of the forest.

It's very still. Until...

All of a sudden, an animal darts past us.

No sooner is it here than it is gone.
Stillness once more.

INT. FOREST CABIN - NIGHT

Harris and Jordan drink beer in front of a roaring fire. They just stare into the flames.

All of a sudden, the cuckoo clock strikes...
scaring the hell out of them both.

HARRIS

Jeez... !

Jordan laughs.