

Film industry roles: Screen(writer)play

If you're an aspiring screenwriter, it's important to first consider the most elemental parts of telling a compelling story. Do this before you delve into screenwriting books, or enrol in professional television writing and screenwriting courses. Here are some screenwriting tips from Sorkin that illuminate his own process as a writer.

1. **1. Start with intention and obstacle.** The intention and obstacle of the story is like the drive shaft of a car. Who wants what, and what is stopping them from getting it? Developing the intention and obstacle in your story creates the friction and tension needed to create a strong screenplay. Have you seen a movie where you thought: "That's not that hard of a problem!" Avoid that by pressing on your intention and obstacle. Make the stakes high, urgent, and convincing to keep your story compelling and believable. Introduce intention and obstacle early. If you're writing a movie, you have a few minutes. If it's a TV show, you need to do it immediately. If it's a play, you have a bit of time.
2. **2. Give your characters traits that directly relate to the overall story.** A character is born from the intention and obstacle—they want something, and something stands in their way of getting it. How they overcome those obstacles, or what tactics they use, define who the character is. Stick to the facts of a character that matter to the conflict—this saves you the trouble of writing long, unnecessary character bios. Focus on their intention and obstacle, rather than details that are irrelevant to the story. Does this mean you can't give your characters an interesting backstory? Of course not. But keep in mind that sometimes a screenwriter knows something about their characters that doesn't show up in the story arc that audiences see on the screen. A standard movie script almost always gets cut down to its most important plot points, and you may have key details (such as backstory) about your leading character or supporting characters that aren't represented in the final cut. But that doesn't mean you can't use those character details to guide your writing process through a first draft, second draft, third draft, and beyond.
3. **3. Embrace structure—it can actually make you more creative.** Dismiss the idea that art is not a place for rules. Art, much like music and sports, is made much more enjoyable by certain rules. Learn those rules by watching films, reading screenplays. Deconstruct their parts, and putting them back together. Become a diagnostician. Watch TV shows, plays, and movies with the screenplay in your lap. When something doesn't work, figure out why it doesn't work. Did it break one of Aristotle's rules?
4. **4. Create a three act story arc for your screenplay.** Here's a way to think of a three act story arc. First act: you chase your hero up a tree. Second act: you throw rocks at them. Third act: you get them down (or not). Be sure to avoid any magical surprises in Act 3 by setting up and introducing everything in Act 1 through exposition. Exposition is the first part of drama, but it's not easy. One way to get through exposition in your screenplay is to have at least one character early on who is a stand-in for the audience; Rashida Jones's character in *The Social Network*, or Chrisann in *Steve Jobs* for example, because they ask questions of the main character that the audience might have.
5. **5. Read your dialogue out loud.** Try to be physical with your dialogue. Say it out loud to hear how it lands. Remember: you are in the business of writing things that are meant to be performed, not read. Don't be intimidated if what you're writing is not how people

sound. Screenwriting is an art — feel free to take liberties to create a fantastic piece of dialogue.

6. **6. Use rewrites to address specific problems.** Liken rewriting to the idea of a sculpture—your first draft is the hunk of marble. To get to the statue of David, begin to chip away anything that isn't related to the main conflict. It will certainly be hard to “kill your darlings,” but be comforted by the fact that even someone like Sorkin has to take out what he considers are some of his favorite lines and moments.
7. **7. Be selective about whose writing notes you solicit.** When receiving notes, be careful who you listen to. You can rely on some people to spot a problem, but unless you're talking to someone who's smart, understands scripts, and understands the way you write, take their notes with a grain of salt. For those who may have opinions about your script but aren't necessarily informed script editors, don't just disregard their comments. Use their opinions as a sign of a problem that still needs to be fixed. Ultimately, you need to collect the right script editors—ones that you can trust, who know your writing style, and who know and understand scripts. And once you find them, never let them go. Ask for specific notes, and begin a checklist to work your way through them. Take comfort that one of the best screenwriters today (and your instructor) has to deal with notes, and no one's first draft is ever perfect.
8. **8. When pitching your writing, be prepared to go beyond what's in the script.** If you want your script to actually come to life as a produced movie or TV show, you will need to pitch your screenplay to a production company, studio, or TV network. Pitching is different from writing, and there has been many a professional screenwriter who dreads the pitching process. The fact is that many writers don't want their creations distilled to a single logline, but in the film industry this is simply standard practice. The good news is that if you're able to succinctly articulate your vision for your television show, short film, or feature-length movie, you can truly impress a picky entertainment executive. Be able to describe several episodes down the line and the arc of the season. Is each episode dealing with a new crisis of the day like “The West Wing?” Or is each episode building on a longer term goal, like “Silicon Valley?” Also think about things like: where will it be shot? Is there a “home-base” set that production only needs to build once? Be prepared to answer questions from executives like, “Will there be a love interest for your characters?”

What Makes A Great Screenplay?

While screenwriting advice from someone like Aaron Sorkin might inspire you to dive into your first screenplay, there's more to scriptwriting than just some great advice. Screenplay writing is hard work, and only the only path toward success is one of dedication and overcoming obstacles that every writer encounters.

Whether you're seeking to write a summer blockbuster or an indie comedy that's bound for a film festival, the best movie scripts contain the following important aspects:

- 1. A real problem for the characters to overcome
- 2. A set up that lets the audience into your world and piques people's curiosity without confusing them

- 3. A main character who is interesting and dynamic enough to be worthy of two hours of your audience's life
- 4. A compelling resolution at the end of the movie. This doesn't have to mean a happy ending or even the kind of traditional ending that caps many people's favorite movies. But the audience should agree with your choice to end the story at the moment that you do.
- 5. When you're brainstorming TV and movie ideas, do keep in mind that rules help guide your creative process, but no one—from Los Angeles executives to audiences on their living room sofas—is looking for you to make a cookie cutter copy of an existing movie. Bring your own unique voice to your writing. Think about what you can offer as a storyteller that no one else can, and embrace that uniqueness. By channeling your own self-expression via some basic rules of story structure, you can find your way in the challenging world of film and television writing.

5 Things to Consider Before Becoming a Screenwriter

Whether you've got an idea for an original movie script or you're writing a spec script for your favorite TV show, here's what to keep in mind when considering a screenwriting career.

1. **Perseverance.** Being a screenwriter will likely involve a fair amount of rejection. You need to keep writing even when you really don't feel like you have anything left in the tank. Read other screenplays and take note of what worked and what didn't—this can help improve your own scriptwriting and you might find inspiration. There are thousands upon thousands of scripts floating through Hollywood—persistence while you improve your craft is the only thing that will make you stand out.
2. **Location, location, location.** The movie business really is centered in Hollywood, and most production companies are based in Los Angeles. (There are exceptions, of course, and those exceptions are likely in New York City.) This doesn't mean you have to pack up and move to the City of Angels to make it, but to break-in to the business at any level, to pitch your screenplay to execs in person, and to network with others in the film business, having a presence in Los Angeles it certainly will help.
3. **Marketability.** Consider the current trends in filmmaking when determining whether people will want what you're writing. There's no harm in having a visionary script, but it might be easier to get your foot in the door if you have a few scripts that appeal to mainstream tastes.
4. **Competitions.** It's true that film industry professionals often scour competitions and film festivals for new talent, and while these can be a great way to get discovered—and the big break stories make them very, very tempting—they can also be a good way to throw lots of money at something that may not pay off. Instead of submitting to as many competitions can, do your research and choose one or two festivals or programs that seem promising and offer good prize money.
5. **An agent.** An agent should act as your advocate in the daunting film industry, pushing your screenplays and for you to get involved as a writer on other projects. In other words, an agent helps find you jobs and negotiates contracts on your behalf. Finding an agent can be just as difficult as getting your script sold, as many agencies and agents will likely

reject you before you find one who takes you. Remain persistent in finding an agent and keep sending your portfolio out.

What Do You Need to Become a Screenwriter?

At a basic level, all you really need to become a screenwriter is a high threshold for rejection, infinite patience, a compelling writer's voice, and lots of ideas. That being said, there are resources that help along the way.

1. While pursuing a **graduate degree** in screenwriting is not a necessary step to becoming a screenwriter, there are many schools that offer two-year MFA programs. Screenwriting courses are a great way to learn about the structure and form of scriptwriting. Obtaining an MFA also affords graduates the ability to teach—which will pay the bills while you shop around your brilliant script. Of course, knowing all that, also keep in mind that scripts are judged on whether or not they are good—not the pedigrees of their authors.

2. If a self-directed study is more your style, another way to build skills and practice is to dive into **screenwriting books**. A few starting points: *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997) by Robert McKee devotes a whole chapter to understanding the various types of genres in storytelling. For a more in-depth review, check out Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies: a Screenwriter's Guide to Every Story Ever Told* (2007), which is actually a guide to a small number of movies, each of which is analyzed and broken down in terms of genre.

3. **Screenwriting software.** All great scripts begin as first drafts, and most first drafts begin in software uniquely formatted for scripts. Final Draft is one of the more popular screenwriting programs, but there are lots of options out there. The key is to make your submissions as professional and readable as possible, so all they see is your story, and not your formatting fumbles.

4. **Script registration.** Once you're ready to send a script out, you should register it with the Writer's Guild of America (WGA). Doing this is one way to help protect your intellectual property, and it's only about \$20 for each script (though note that this is not the same as obtaining a copyright from the Library of Congress). When you send your script to studios, directors, agents, and screenwriting competitions, having it registered will help ensure your idea isn't taken.