Screenwriting FOR DUMMIES® 2ND EDITION

by Laura Schellhardt
Adjunct Professor, Northwestern University

Foreword by John Logan

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Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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Laura Schellhardt holds an MFA in Literary Arts from Brown University and degrees in Theatre and Creative Writing from Northwestern University in Chicago. Her scripts have been produced in New York (SPF, The Hangar, The Exchange Theatre), Seattle (Seattle Repertory Theatre, ACT), Chicago (Northlight Theatre, Serendipity Theatre, New Leaf Theatre, Citadel Theatre), Washington DC (The Kennedy Center, Woolly Mammoth), Providence (Trinity Repertory Company, Brown University), Minneapolis (Theatre Limina), North Carolina (Center for Performing Arts), and Provincetown, Massachusetts (Provincetown Repertory Theatre, Provincetown Theatre Company).

Original works include ***The K of D, The Chair, Courting Vampires, Shapeshifter, The Apothecary's Girl, Inheritance,*** and ***Je Ne Sais Quoi.*** Adaptations include ***The Phantom Tollbooth, The Mysteries of Harris Burdick, The Outfit*** (Jeff Award Nominee), and ***Creole Folktales.***

Laura is a recipient of the Theatre Communications Group 2007–8 Playwriting Residency, The Jerome Fellowship, the New Play Award from ACT in Seattle, and a Dramatist Guild Playwriting Fellowship. She has participated in the SoHo Rep. Writer/Director Lab and the O'Neill National Playwright's Festival. Laura has assisted in the development of new work at The Goodman, Steppenwolf Theatre, Northlight Theatre, and Trinity Repertory Company. She has studied writing with the likes of Paula Vogel, Maria Irene Fornes, Erin Cressida Wilson and has taught alongside Oscar-nominated John Logan of ***Aviator*** and ***Sweeney Todd*** fame.

Laura currently heads the playwriting program at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois and teaches workshops across the country.

Dedication

To John Logan — for a beginning

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The fearless Schellhardt crew: Mary Kate, Eliza, and Stephen — for your love, your example, and your laughter.

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Foreword

So, you want to write a movie. Where do you start?

My personal advice to aspiring screenwriters is always the same: If you want to write, read. Start with Shakespeare. He will teach you everything you need to know about drama. Read everything. Read slowly and carefully. Read aloud and open yourself to emotion. Hamlet and Falstaff and Iago and Cleopatra and Rosalind will teach you about dramatizing character and conflict. Shakespeare's glorious combination of prose and verse will teach you about language. *King Lear* teaches you tragedy. *As You Like It* teaches you comedy. *Antony and Cleopatra* and the *Henry IV* plays teach you both.

Then go back and read Aristotle's *Poetics.* Then you might treat yourself to Ibsen and Chekhov. If you're feeling really madcap you might then move on to Sophocles, Euripides, Shaw, Pinter, Beckett, and O'Neill.

And then read *Hamlet* again.

My point is you must be a *dramatist*, a theatrical storyteller, first and foremost. The structural concerns of the ideal three act movie structure or perfectly timed "inciting incident" must be entirely secondary to your passionate desire to tell the story honestly. Be an artist first, then a technician.

My dear friend Laura Schellhardt, the author of the book you are holding, offers some valuable advice on ways to approach writing a movie. She presents any number of provocative and clever ways to understand the screenwriting process. Used wisely, this book can help you hew your way through the very dark forest of screenplay construction.

I leave a final bit of advice from my frequent colleague, director Ridley Scott. After I delivered a particularly mammoth draft of ***Gladiator,*** Ridley turned to me with a wry smile and said, "John, write less words."

So, I guess that covers it. Read lots of words, and write less of them.

—John Logan

John Logan's film works includes ***Gladiator, Any Given Sunday, Star Trek: Nemesis, The Time Machine, RKO 281,*** and ***The Last Samurai.***

Introduction

Screenwriting For Dummies? If this book wasn't part of the *For Dummies* series, I might've thought twice about writing it. After all, the last thing the world needs is another dumb screenplay. But rest assured that by "Dummies," I don't mean you. This book isn't for dummies — quite the opposite, in fact. Writing is challenging work. First of all, you have to decide who and what to write about. Second, you have to figure out how to expand your chosen characters and subject into a story — a 110-page story at that. To do that, you need some basic information and a newly organized daily routine. Finally, when you finish your script, you have to come up with a way to introduce it to Hollywood. To do that, you need some industry tips and marketing strategies. That's a lot of information.

So I repeat, this book isn't for dummies. This book is for writers — beginners, advanced, and anyone in between. This book is for both teachers and students — of cinema, of theater, of life. This book is for film-lovers and filmgoers and for dreamers of all sorts. If you have an active imagination, curiosity, and a sense of adventure, welcome. This book just may be for you.

About This Book

To say that I enjoy writing would be an understatement. I *love* writing, and I *love* films, and I fervently believe that screenwriting is a craft worth pursuing. I also believe that it's a demanding craft with many facets to consider. Most screenwriting books cover one of those facets in detail — how to write a first draft, how to find an agent, how to sell your script to the industry, to name a few popular topics. There's nothing wrong with focusing on one portion of this complicated art form, but if you have the space, why not tackle it all? This book has the space. From finding an idea to spacing it on the page to marketing it in Hollywood — in this book, you can find out about the screenwriting process from A to Z (or Action to Zoom in film lingo.)

Conventions Used in This Book

This book isn't heavy on special conventions. But it does have a few, and here they are:

- I reference a lot of films, plays, and television shows in this book, and to help you locate them in the text, the titles are in bold italics. For example, ***Lord of the Rings*** would look like this in the text.
- In this book, I also reference several novels because screenwriters often adapt novels for the screen. These titles appear in regular italics; for example, *The Cider House Rules*.
- Short stories and poems appear in quotes; for example, "The Lottery."
- Web sites and e-mail addresses appear in `monofont`.
- Important words to know also appear in *italics*.

Foolish Assumptions

You know what they say about assuming, but sometimes, it just has to be done. Although this book is for a wide variety of people, I did assume the following about you when writing it:

- You enjoy writing or think that you might.
- You've written a script or are looking to start one.
- You've been to at least one movie and enjoyed yourself.
- You believe that good stories can change the world.

How This Book Is Organized

Screenwriting is an art, a craft, and a business. Each aspect contains a lot of information. For your convenience and sanity, I've divided this book into five parts, each dedicated to one facet (there's that word again) of the process.

Part 1: So You Want to Write for Pictures

In this part, I introduce you to . . . well, to yourself — to your screenwriting self, that is. Artists sense the world in a slightly different way than people in other professions do, and screenwriters are no exception. These chapters focus on developing a writer's "eye" for detail, a knack for finding ideas, and the ability to organize a busy calendar around the expansion of that idea. If you've ever wondered how it "feels" to be a writer, turn to Part I and find out.

Part II: Breaking Down the Elements of a Story

This part tackles all the building blocks of a story — the sequence of events, the characters, the conflict, and how the whole thing sounds when you toss those elements together. It also touches upon the writer's responsibility to all those movie-goers who eventually journey through that story with you.

Part III: Turning Your Story into a Script

Part III involves the nuts and bolts of turning your story into something you can sell to Hollywood. From outlines to format to revisions, these chapters detail how your film should look both on the page and in the mind's eye of your reader. I also discuss how to adapt other mediums — poetry, fiction, theater — to the screen. And if you're writing with a partner? Flip to Chapter 18 for some tips on collaboration.

Part IV: Selling Your Script to Show Business

Part IV involves switching hats from artist/creator to businessperson. You have a product to sell — actually, you have two. You want to market your script, yes, but more importantly, you want to market yourself as a writer. This part helps you narrow your market and package your work accordingly. It then guides you through the crazy world known as show business — step by star-studded step.

Part V: The Part of Tens

I toss around a lot of examples in this final part. Want to know who's made a successful living as a screenwriter? Here are a few examples. Want to know who's "one-to-watch?" Here are a few examples. Want some scripts worth reading or a heads up on some screenwriting myths that you may want to avoid? That's right, here are a few examples.

Icons Used in This Book

In order to highlight some important and/or interesting information on the screenwriting profession, I've used the following icons throughout the book.

This icon does one of two things: It either suggests a theory or example worth bearing in mind as you read the ensuing text, or it reiterates advice from a previous passage that may be pertinent again.

Keep a lookout for this icon. It signals some time-saving suggestions and/or tricks of the trade.

This icon references a screenwriting term or some showbiz jargon and gives a plain-English definition. If you're really in a hurry, you can skip over these Jargon Alert paragraphs and still understand the chapter. But you may find the definitions to be helpful.

This icon alerts you to a theory or practice that may actually be detrimental to your writing routine or to your career. Don't skip these paragraphs; you'll regret it later!

Many chapters contain a sidebar, flagged with this icon, that presents an exercise for you. These exercises are totally optional, but you may find that they can help you develop your screenwriting skills.

Where to Go from Here

You can go anywhere you want in this book! Read it according to your personal needs as a writer or a writer-to-be. If you want to start at Chapter 1 and read the book cover to cover, great! (After all, I worked really hard on this book!) If not, that's fine, too — you won't hurt my feelings. The information in this book is accessible and relevant regardless of your path to it.

Also, no two writers are alike in what they're after, and this book is designed with just that thought in mind. Read it cover to cover or jump around. Worried about writer's block? See Chapter 14. Want to protect your work? Flip to Chapter 19. Not sure where to begin? This book has two, count'em *two,* tables of contents. The Contents at a Glance gives you a basic overall picture of what you can find in this book. Skim through it and see what ropes you in. Or simply close your eyes and point. When you find a topic that interests you, you can go straight to that chapter or use the detailed table of contents to get even more specifics of what to expect. Every chapter stands on its own, so take your pick and feel free to skip around at will.

Part I

So You Want to Write for Pictures

"You know that kid that submitted a screenplay to us on the back of a restaurant menu? I'm passing on it. I like the screenplay, but I hate that restaurant."

In this part . . .

It all begins with an idea. You're driving through the city (or stuck in traffic as the case may be) when a childhood memory flashes before your eyes. This would make a great film. You're reading a newspaper, and a third-page crime scene sparks an array of chilling images. This would make a great film. You're minding your own business in some public forum when you overhear a startling conversation and — you guessed it — this would make a great film. This part of the book is about the all important idea — finding it, nurturing it, imagining it on the screen. Because you know what? It probably would make a great film, and if you don't write it, who will?

Chapter 1

Introducing the Art of Screenwriting

In This Chapter

- Getting an overview of the screenwriting process
- Putting your ideas on paper
- Revising your work
- Selling your script

Screenwriting is a craft, and like any craft worth pursuing, you can never know too much about it. You wouldn't tell a doctor to stop scrutinizing advances in medicine, would you? Can a teacher ever learn enough about education? This chapter provides a glimpse of screenwriting and alerts you to where in the book you can go to find it. Consider it your preview of coming attractions.

Thinking Visually

Quick — in what children's book does a character require green glasses to enter a city gate? If you answered *The Wizard of Oz,* you're absolutely right. Dorothy needs green glasses to enter the Emerald City. And while they cut this detail in the film version, the question is nevertheless relevant to screenwriting. It's a question of vision — what do you need in order to see where you're going?

Screenwriting requires a unique vision, eyes trained to scan the world with particular acuity. It seems silly to say that screenwriters look at the world with a visual eye. Of course, they do. Doesn't everybody? After all, looking is a visual act.

And yet, there's a distinct difference between what screenwriters see and what people in other occupations see. Screenwriters break the world down into visual clips or scenes — in other words, into moving pictures. And screenwriters see with more than their eyes. Consider for a second that it's possible to see moving pictures while

- Observing the world around you
- Reading a novel, a play, or a poem
- Reading the newspaper
- Listening to music
- Listening to someone else's story

Screenwriters look for moving pictures in everything, though some sources yield more than others. Want to know how your vision stacks up? Find a public place, sit down for a while with a pad and pen, and write down what you notice. Then, flip to Chapter 2 and find out how visual your eye really is.

Developing the Writer's Mind

Imagine a storage facility, with aisles and aisles of file cabinets, some overflowing and some empty but for one scrap of paper. Or imagine a playground full of children, yes, but other people as well, people you wouldn't expect to see. Maybe two construction workers are playing basketball, or a few CEOs are eating donuts on the lawn; students and couples and blue-collar employees are all in the same space. Or imagine a long hallway full of doors. Occasionally, people emerge, have an exchange of some sort, and return behind those doors. Now, imagine a blank canvas. Paints and brushes sit nearby, but they remain, as of yet, unused. Any one of these spaces may resemble the mind of a writer.

Writers collect and store tons of details. They amass images, pieces of conversation, intriguing characters, sounds, expressions, slang, and more. They also costume what they find, envisioning different outcomes. Add some boots, some dust, and a gun — *voilà.* You're in a western. Dim the lights, strip away the color, and give everyone a cigar — presto! You have the black-and-white, suspense-filled world of a film noir. Introduce a spaceship or a time machine, and suddenly, the world becomes science fiction. This is how writers spend much of their time — not exactly a dull profession. So, I suppose that the question here is, What does your mind look like? If you want to find out, turn to Chapter 3.

Approaching Screenwriting as a Craft

Writers take their vocation very seriously. They'll do almost anything to inspire that muse, and I do mean anything. Rumor has it that

- Alexander Dumas color coordinated his paper with the type of fiction that he was writing. Blue paper was for novels, yellow paper was for poetry, and rose-colored pages were reserved for nonfiction.
- Mark Twain and Truman Capote had to write lying down.
- Ernest Hemingway sharpened dozens of pencils before he wrote.
- Willa Cather read the Bible before writing each day.
- Poet John Donne liked to lie in an open coffin before picking up a pen. Now, there's a story for you.

I'm not implying that to take up the craft of writing you have to become an eccentric, but that may happen of its own accord. Writing is both fun and frustrating; it requires flights of whimsy as well as hard work. It's equal parts imagination and preparation. Striking a balance between the two worlds is a constant challenge. Catching the muse is one thing, but keeping her with you is another — that's where the tools of the trade come in handy. If you want a glimpse of some of those tools, turn to Chapter 4 where I discuss the craft of screenwriting. You find advice on how to flex your imagination, channel it onto the page, and maintain the writing schedule necessary to do both.

Finding Your Screenplay's Story

So how do writers find material? It depends on the writer, of course, but in their ongoing quests for stories, writers resemble any or all of the following:

- Archaeologists
- Detectives
- Gardeners (plant a seed, and it will grow)
- Reporters
- Research analysts
- Scavengers
- Secret agents
- Voyeurs

Great stories abound; you just have to know how to catch them, or hunt them down, as the case may be. You should also know what details attract you to a story. Are you a people person? Do locations draw you in? Are you compelled by certain kinds of events? You want to consider these questions before your story search begins. Chapter 5 helps you find the perfect story and discover which material you naturally gravitate toward.

Working through the Writing Process

As soon as you get an idea, you have to develop that idea. The development process isn't unlike chaperoning several restless children across the country in a small car. You're likely to hear the following questions over and over:

- How does the whole thing start?
- What happens next?
- Who are these people?
- What happens next?
- What's the problem?
- Does that make sense?
- What happens next?
- Can we go any faster?
- Are we there yet?
- Why, why, why, why, why?

The whole journey can drive you nuts without a good road map, and in screenwriting terms, that map is known as *plot*. I consider plot to be so important that I dedicate three chapters to it — Chapters 6, 7, and 8. After all, every story has a beginning, middle, and an ending, and the same questions apply to each part. There's a whole other set of questions for character building in Chapter 9 and yet another chapter (you guessed it — Chapter 10) dedicated to orchestrating vibrant language for those characters once you know who they are. As you may suspect, without a navigation panel, you're in for a long, bumpy ride. So if you want to pacify that back-seat yammering, turn to Part II and start reading. Otherwise, you're liable to pull the car over and walk home.

Formatting Your Screenplay

Here are a few things that I've figured out about the screenwriting trade:

- Always look before you leap.
- People do judge a book by its cover.
- Actions speak louder than words.
- Brevity is the soul of wit (and most films, I might add).
- Try to make a long story short.
- You never get another chance to make a first impression.

You don't have much control over most aspects of the screenwriting profession. Ideas often arrive unbidden, characters sometimes dictate what they want to say, the ending of your story may change several times, and you may even find yourself in a different genre. And when you're talking about Hollywood, forget it. The business is always in flux. One day, they're looking for war films, and the next day, they want candy and roses. They may be searching for a script with the word "wedding" in the title; you just never know.

One of the only things a writer has complete control over is the script's appearance, and in this industry, appearance is everything (at least at the beginning). So how wide should your margins be? How do you introduce a scene? Where do you insert special effects? And how long is too long? Getting readers to flip past the cover is half the battle, and correct formatting may ensure that they do so. (For more on formatting your script, flip to Chapter 14.)

Constructing Your First Draft

By the time you sit down to write your first draft, you'll be armed and dangerous. Among other things, your arsenal will include the following:

- Strong characters
- Equally strong conflicts
- Character goals and dreams
- Locations
- A series of events
- Remedies for writer's block
- Outlines of the action
- A solid writing routine

So, now that you're considering a first draft, how good are you at puzzles — or at weaving, matching, or redecorating? Screenwriting requires all these skills. Crafting a draft is really a matter of arranging your arsenal of information into some desired form and then linking those moments together.

In screenwriting terms, your *catalyst* or *inciting incident* propels the action into the big event, which then shuttles the story toward a *midpoint* after which it rises to a *climax* followed by a *resolution* of some sort. Make sense? If not, don't fear; just read Chapter 16.

Rewriting Your Script

So, what do you have in common with Plato, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, and screenwriter John Logan? Before trying to answer, consider the following facts:

- Plato revised *The Republic* 50 times.
- Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times.
- Katherine Anne Porter took 20 years to finish *Ship of Fools.*
- John Logan spent more than ten years rewriting his play *Never the Sinner,* during which time he removed a dozen characters.

So where do you fit in? All these anecdotes involve revision, and if you're serious about completing a script, you're going to encounter that process as well. Have you heard the phrase "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"? Well, in screenwriting, success arrives in stages, and you almost always have to try, try again. After you outline the action and throw the story onto the page, you'll probably want to try, try again. First drafts are generally dynamic, but they're also unruly, which is why many writers believe that the real writing occurs in revisions. The phrase most often applied to this principle is "Writing is rewriting." Your first draft is written for the story and for you. Your internal editor isn't invited. But in the revision stage, the editor emerges in full form, sizing up each moment and weighing how it affects the whole. And will your revisions take you 20 years to complete? I hope not, but if you're worried that they might, flip to Chapter 17 for extensive advice on revisions.

Adapting Your Screenplay from an Outside Source

Have you ever read a story or watched a play and thought, "This would make a great film!"? If so, you've experienced the first step in the adaptation process: identifying a source. You can adapt all kinds of material for the screen. ***Memento*** began as a short story written by the director's brother, ***Chicago*** was originally a stage musical, ***A Beautiful Mind*** was first a biography. Strong primary source material abounds.