

How To Read A Screenplay (Part 7): Style and Language

[Scott Myers](#)

There are multiple layers to any story. The more you dig, the deeper your understanding.



James Stewart reading a screenplay.

I can't remember exactly how this subject came up on the blog, but it did, and when I asked whether people would like to explore how to read and analyze a screenplay, the response was quite positive. So here we are with yet another Go Into The Story series on

screenwriting.

Let me be clear up front: I am not suggesting you have to read scripts precisely this way. Nor am I saying if you choose to use this overall approach that you do so in the order presented. These are not steps so much as they are analytical tools which you can use any way you see fit.

I begin with this supposition: **There are multiple layers to any story.** The more you dig, the deeper your understanding. Moreover there is a special kind of learning you can experience only by cracking open a story and exploring its many moving parts, a knowledge that settles into your gut where you start to develop an innate sense of what works and what doesn't. From the standpoint of being a professional screenwriter, when often you are working against a ticking clock, either to assess a story and come up with a take to pitch, or do a writing assignment, having that internal sense of story is critical to your success as it can help you *feel* your way through the process.

So at the very least, I would encourage you to try out these approaches I will be detailing in this series to see if and how they fit with your own writing sensibilities. Look at each as a different 'lens' through which you can examine a story, providing a unique perspective and insight into the overall narrative.

Note: This series is not in any way, shape or form an attempt to train people how to be a professional script reader. They have their own approach and I am almost positive would not have nearly the time to go through as many steps as I'm suggesting here. Rather this is for writers who want to learn their craft better.

Today, Part 7: This one is easy. And you need go no further than this quote from [Shane Black](#):

"I studied William Goldman's writing style, especially the scripts for Marathon Man and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. I found both of those to be really riveting, entertaining in their own right, as if you were reading a condensed novel good for one sitting. Similarly, Walter Hill's scripts for Alien and the original 48 Hours when they were looking for a Clint Eastwood kind of pairing — I thought these were wonderfully written scripts. I studied the language and the style. I didn't realize as I was reading them, that these were very unusual. That most people wrote scripts much differently. I assumed there weren't many rules and you just sort of did whatever you wanted to stylistically and had fun with it. So, I took those two writers as examples and mentors."

I studied William Goldman's writing style [emphasis added].

Point made. Hopefully point taken.



SHANE BLACK

Author of Lethal Weapon

H. H. CAFE
I NORMALLY
WOULDN'T
EAT ANYWHERE
THAT HAD ME
ON THE WALL
BUT YOUR
BREAKFAST
IS BY DAMN
GOOD!

One of Hollywood's highest-paid screenwriters, Black's spec script "Lethal Weapon" evolved into a blockbuster franchise for Warner Bros. The film starred Mel Gibson as a cop on the edge whose partner is a stable family man played by Danny Glover. The film went on to gross more than \$100 million and spawned three more films. Black received a shared credit on "Lethal Weapon 2."

In 1990, he was paid \$1.75 million for "The Last Boy Scout," which was made into the action film starring Bruce Willis. Three years later, Black received more than \$1 million for his rewrites on the 1993 Arnold Schwarzenegger film "The Last Action Hero."

Black again grabbed headlines with the \$4-million sale of the script "The Long Kiss Goodnight." In the 1996 action film, Geena Davis portrayed a woman with amnesia who discovers that she was once an assassin.

Black has also earned hefty fees to rewrite other scripts.

RIGGS (CONT'D)
Everyone thinks I'm suicidal, in which case I'm f*cked and no one wants to work with me. Or they think I'm faking to draw a psycho pension, in which case I'm f*cked and no one wants to work with me. Basically, I'm f*cked.

MURTAUGH

Guess what?

RIGGS

MURTAUGH

I don't want to work with you.

RIGGS

Then don't.

MURTAUGH

Ain't got no choice. Damn. We're both f*cked.

RIGGS

Terrific.

... speak, Riggs has pulled to a stop in front of downtown bank building.

MURTAUGH

(rubs his eyes)
I'm very old...

(sighs)
... God hates me, that's what it is.

RIGGS

Hate him back. Works for me.

In the past, I've mentioned how I immersed myself in scripts when I first broke into Hollywood, reading everything I could get my hands on. In fact, that's where I came up with many of the ideas about script analysis I've laid out in this series. Here's another one: Go through a script and excerpt all the good, strong visual writing.

In a nice bit of synergy, here is what I did with Shane Black's script for *The Last Boy Scout* about 20 years ago:

THE LAST BOYSCOUT

Pumps a cigarette into his mouth
Chins the receiver
Keys the ignition
Stretches his mouth into a grimace
Slams his ass over teacups
He lands, hard. Sucks the ground.
Stabs a button. Scoops up the receiver.
Paws his coat pockets, looking for a cigarette.
The telephone shrills in the stillness.
Pumps three shots...
Drop all your belongings out of a plane. They will land like this.
Holsters the gun
After three drinks, every girl on stage looks like your high school sweetheart. Maybe she was your high school sweetheart. Was your sweetheart fat? Did she have excessive body hair?
Scans the crowd with shrewd eyes
His gaze wanders across the room
The hitman stands with a shocked look on his face.
Blood bubbling.
Fires the gun once, into the ground. Drops it from nerveless fingers. Stares at Hallenbeck, aghast.
Hallenbeck meets his gaze. A savage, feral gleam in his eye.
The guy pitches over dead.
Engine revving...
Laughs through the smoke. This may be the funniest thing he's ever heard.
The tires are pulped.
A smile twitches his upper lip.
Dawn is a ghost on the horizon...
A taser gun. He fires point blank.
The electrode hits Hallenbeck in the chest.
A crackle of electric current. He jerks spastically.
Strikes with a flattened palm.
Breaks Chet's nose.
Drives it up into the brain.

Chet stands, pole-axed. Blinks once.
Pitches over dead.
He does a spit-take, spraying bourbon.
A savage wind sweeps in off the ocean...
Rains punches on his chest and gut.
Slams an elbow into his kidneys.
Drives a knee into his groin.
Lets his gaze roam up and down her body.
Removes a .9 millimeter Beretta.
Works the slide. Jacks a bullet into the cylinder.
Stashes it in the waistband of his pants.
Snaps a full magazine into the rifle...
He resembles nothing human. A Demon in black.
Eyes burning. Gun held loosely. An extension of his arm.
Jam the rifle barrel into his throat, nearly crushing his larynx.
Shredder shell
He does the funny little dance peculiar to those with pierced necks. Falls. Dies.
A hot slug rips through his arm...
He's trying to make the freeway. It's a good fifteen feet. Try it sometime...

See, I wasn't lying when I said I did all that script analysis!
And check out that action writing and scene description.

It's taut and efficient, yet visual and cinematic. Clearly Black is a writer who loves language and understands the power of words. That is something to which we should all aspire.

You should feel free to play around with your writing style. Read a bunch of scripts, pick up some ideas, then test them out. Eventually you will settle into a style that suits you.

Plus don't forget the importance of considering your story's [Narrative Voice](#). You must make choices about style within the context of your story's genre.

So yet another lens through which to read a screenplay: style and language.

Reminder: This is just one approach to analyzing a screenplay. Everyone is different and has different needs, either personally or per project. If you resonate with any ideas here, feel free to use. If not, feel free to lose.

For Part 1: The First Pass, go [here](#).

For Part 2: The Scene-By-Scene Breakdown, go [here](#).

For Part 3: Plotline Points and Sequences, go [here](#).

For Part 4: Subplots, Relationships and Character Functions, go [here](#).

For Part 5: Metamorphosis, go [here](#).

For Part 6: Themes, go [here](#).

[Comment Archive](#)