

How to Watch a Movie Like a Writer

Plus, my favorite movie-watching writing exercise

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I went to a lot of movies in 2018. A lot.

I had a Movie Pass and for \$9.99 a month, I could go to one a day. I didn't go *that* often. But I did see just about every movie made last year I think. For almost nothing. It was glorious.

Then Movie Pass got weird. And then we moved from Reno to a little town in PA where the one theater in town, and the three in the next small town, didn't participate. So we don't have Movie Pass anymore — and I don't want to spend \$9.50 for *one* movie. Now I'm seeing maybe one a month in a theater instead of two a week.

I still have access to my husband's ginormous collection of DVDs, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and cable movie channels. Plus, no joke, there's a *movie rental store* directly across the street from my house.

When I write my [Commonplace Book Project](#) posts, I often turn a movie on that's related to that day's quote. I like to have favorites running in the background, because I have trouble working in quiet, and a movie I've seen a dozen times doesn't pull my attention.

All of that is to say — movies are important to me.

And I believe that learning to watch a movie like a writer

can make you a better storyteller.

Movies are written differently from books. Mostly, because it's so expensive to make a movie, you can be sure that every screenwriter understands things like beats and scenes and the three-act story structure in a way that sometimes alludes (especially new) novelists.

I'm pretty sure there is no such thing as a pantsier screenwriter.

Some of the best writing craft books use screenwriting techniques to teach novelists about things like plot and character arc and scene development. I especially love [The Writer's Journey](#) by Christopher Vogler, [Screenwriting Secrets for Authors](#) by Alexandra Sokoloff, and [Story](#) by Robert McKee.

There's a lot a novel writer can learn from paying attention to how movies are structured.

My Favorite Movie Watching Exercise

Head over to [The Script Lab's collection of movie breakdowns](#). They've created analysis of hundreds of movies, looking for five key plot points. Each breakdown discusses the plot points and where they show up in the script.

Pick a movie and watch it with the

breakdown in front of you. Do that a few times and you'll gain real insight into the way a three-act story structure works.

Guess what? Novels aren't put together all that differently from movies. Understanding story structure is important for authors. Find a movie that's in the same genre as your novel and pay attention to how it's structured.

Here's an Example

As I write this, I've got *The Matrix* on my television.

I can explain to you over and over again what an inciting incident is — that it's the first really unusual thing that happens to the main character. That it is a question — do you want to come into the world of this story?

In fact, I have done that in countless classes and blog posts over the years.

*But watching *The Matrix* is a masterclass in Inciting Incident, if you pay attention and know what to look for.*

As the *Matrix* starts, Neo is a hacker in deep. While

getting a phone delivered to your cubical at work and being told to go out on a skyscraper's window ledge might be an inciting incident in many lives — it's not for Neo. **Because he's a hacker in deep.**

It's within the realm of his usual.

Just like a story about a homicide detective isn't going to have an inciting incident that's a murder, or a story about a serial killer isn't going to have an inciting incident that is committing a murder.

And it's super obvious when you watch *The Matrix*. The inciting incident is an actual question — will you help us catch Morpheus? And then . . . the first really unusual thing happens after a refusal of the call to action.

Neo's mouth is fused shut and a bug that looks like a shrimp crawls into his bellybutton.

Even a hacker in deep doesn't usually experience something like that. That is this story's inciting incident.

(*The Matrix* also has an iconic lock-in. Red pill or blue pill? The question is asked again, and this time Neo's answer is yes.)

Because movies are so visual and they move so much faster than books (and because The Script Lab has figured out the key plot points for you for so many movies), they're a fantastic learning tool for novel writers.

You can see the whole structure of a movie in one go. Instead of getting the beginning today, the middle over the course of a few days, and the end a week from now — you can see the whole picture (pardon the pun!) all at once.

Stephen King said, "Books and movies are like apples and oranges. They both are fruit, but taste completely different."

Movies are not a replacement for reading.

Writers need to read books. A lot of them. It's the only real way to learn how to be a writer. You need to see what good writing looks like in order to recreate it.

But you also need to just immerse yourself in stories. Watching movies (and television for that matter) is a way to do that. They're not the same, but they're enough the same for you to learn from.