

# If you are a beginning screenwriter...

[Scott Myers](#)

A guide to thousands of Go Into The Story articles you can use to learn the craft... all for free!



Recently, I received an email from someone who wants to begin the process of learning the craft of screenwriting. I started my response with the advice to use this blog as a resource. After all, there are over 29,000 posts and articles in the archives...

Then it dawned on me: *How would a new writer even know where to begin going through those archives?*

So here are five sets of resources on the blog you can use to develop a solid foundation in your learning process.

All for free.

## **How I Write A Screenplay**

One of the more popular series on GITS (Go Into The Story) is this one, wherein I break down 10 aspects of my own screenwriting process. Here are the links to those posts:

[Part 1: Story Concept](#)

[Part 2: Brainstorming](#)

[Part 3: Research](#)

[Part 4: Character Development](#)

[Part 5: Plotting](#)

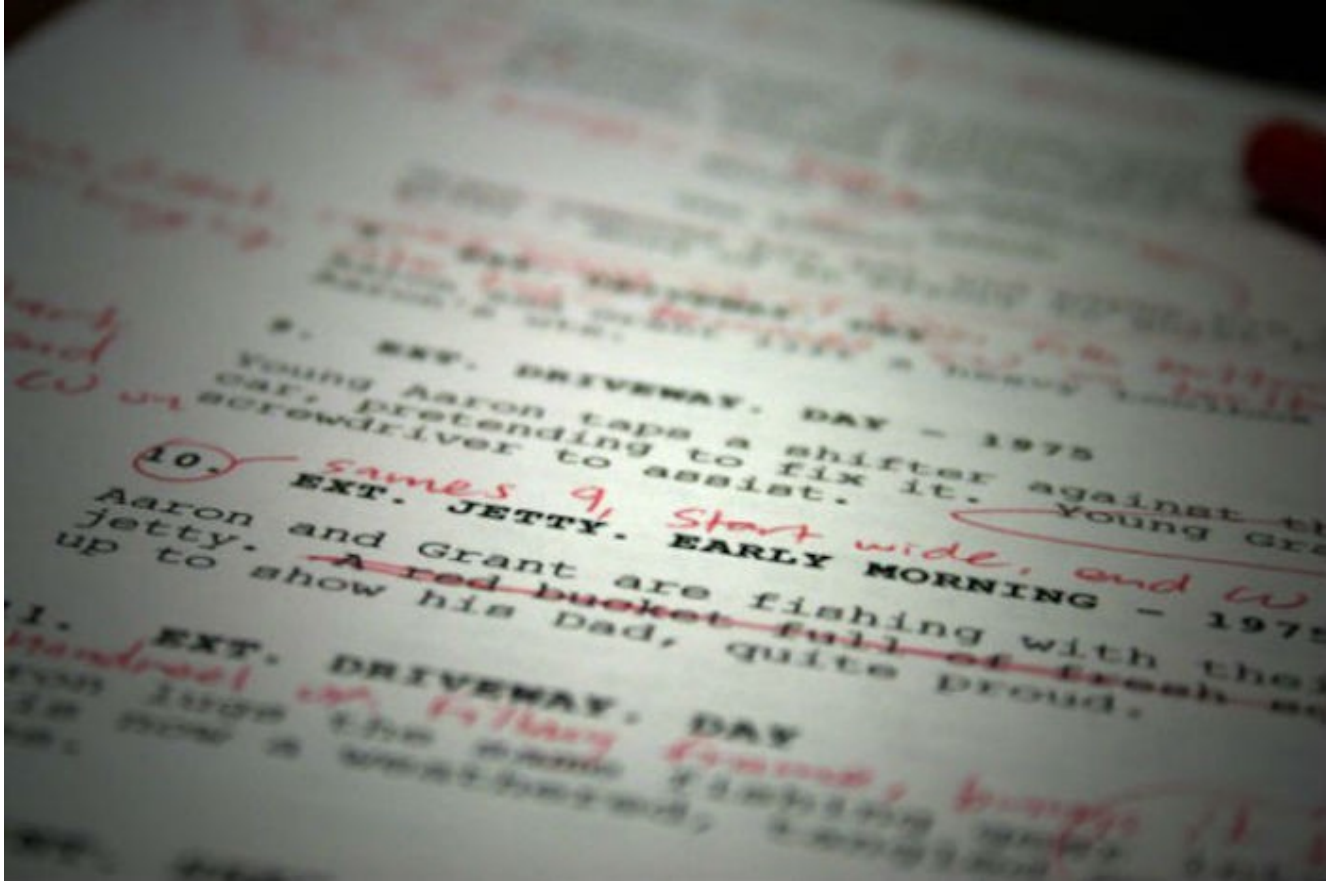
[Part 6: Outline](#)

[Part 7: Script Diary](#)

[Part 8: First Draft](#)

[Part 9: Rewriting](#)

[Part 10: Editing](#)



A few observations:

- This is my approach. If it works for you, great. If not, no problem. As I am prone to say, there's no right way to write. Every writer is different and must figure out his/her own process. That said I'm guessing these ten aspects are probably common to most writers' approaches (with the possible exception of a script diary).
- I am not suggesting these are stages, as if you have to go through them programatically, one by one. Stories are organic, therefore it should not be surprising that an approach to writing would reflect that fact. Moreover some aspects may come naturally to you, others not. Indeed some of these ten may inhibit your creativity. So again, whatever works. If not, feel free to punt.

- A big note: This is not a system or a formula. In fact, these ten posts have virtually nothing to do with any sort of screenplay paradigm or structure. Rather it is what it is: Simply an approach to the process of writing a script. That's it.

Yet that is of considerable importance. And as a beginning writer, you should grasp this simple fact by noting that 7 of the 10 parts of the series are about *prep-writing*, everything we do leading up to typing FADE IN and pounding out script pages. Why is this so important?

Perhaps the single biggest flaw with neophyte screenwriters is they do not take the time to go into the story to the depth required to write a great script. Rather they leap into the writing before they look around the story universe and get to know the characters sufficiently enough to understand who they are, what their respective narrative roles are, let alone make them come alive on the page.

Writing is a process. That's probably as good a place as any for a beginning screenwriter to start their journey. And these 10 posts represent one way to approach that process: How to write a script.

**1, 2, 7, 14: A simple strategy to be a more productive and better screenwriter.**

What is that strategy?

### *1: Read 1 screenplay per week.*

Pick out your favorite movies. Or do a genre study of several scripts in a row in one genre. Try scripts in genres you don't particularly like to experience different tone and atmosphere. But every week, read at least 1 full-length movie screenplay.

### *2: Watch 2 movies per week.*

Go to a theater and watch 1 movie for sheer entertainment value. Rub shoulders with a real crowd to remind you of your target audience. Then cue up Netflix or pop in a DVD, and watch 1 movie to study it. Note its major plot points. Better yet, do a scene-by-scene breakdown. Maybe 1 new movie, 1 classic movie. But every week, watch at least 2 feature-length movies.

### *7: Write 7 pages per week.*

That's one page per day. It may take you ten minutes, it may take you an hour, but however long it takes, you knock out a page per day so that every week, you produce 7 script pages.

### *14: Work 14 hours per week prepping a story.*

While you are writing one story, you are prepping another. Research. Brainstorming. Character development. Plotting. Wake up early. Take an extended lunch break. Grab a few hours after dinner. Stay up late. Whatever it takes, carve out

2 hours per day for story prep. Create a master file Word doc. Or use a spiral notebook. Put everything you come up with into that file. You'd be amazed how much content you will generate in a month. Most professional screenwriters juggle multiple projects at the same time. Here's how you can start learning that skill-set: Writing one project, prepping another. Two hours per day so that every week, you devote 14 hours to prep.

1 2 7 14

Those are simple, clear goals. Daily goals, weekly goals. Goals that will give a beginning screenwriter solid work practices and much more. Because if you do this, here's what you will have done in one year's time:

You will have read **52 screenplays**.

You will have watched **104 movies**

You will have written **2 feature-length screenplays**.

Spread that out over 5 years: 260 screenplays, 520 movies, 10 original screenplays.

That means you could have read every one of the top [101 screenplays](#) as voted by the WGA, plus 159 more.

That means you could have seen every one of the [IMDB Top 250 movies](#), plus 270 more.

That means you could have written the exact number of original screenplays Lawrence Kasdan (*Body Heat*, *The Bodyguard*, *The Big Chill*, *Grand Canyon*) wrote before he sold his first one.

All by setting these simple goals: 1, 2, 7, 14.

## **Study the pros**

When I was in graduate school studying theology, I learned about *primary sources* and *secondary sources*. The difference: A primary source is original material. A secondary source is content about the original material.

So for example, if you are a Shakespeare scholar, primary sources would be the Bard's plays, secondary sources would be analysis by scholars about his plays.

If you are a beginning screenwriter and your fundamental goal is to learn the craft, you will want to be aware of primary sources and secondary sources. From my point of view, that means:

**Primary Sources:** Material created by professional screenwriters.

**Secondary Sources:** Material created by non-professional screenwriters about the craft.

It's not quite an exact parallel, but the point it allows me to make is a critical one: First and foremost, you should study the pros. What they say and what they write should take

precedence over people who are non-professional screenwriters.

Why? For a very simple reason: There are realities about the actual practice of the craft that can only be known by writers who have worked on the front lines of Hollywood.

Any person can say anything about screenwriting.

Ultimately, however, none of it means squat unless it passes the sniff test of what it means to be a screenwriter working with Hollywood professionals — interacting with directors, actors, producers, studio executives, managers, agents; experiencing the pressure of pitching, development, pre-production, production, even post-production; communicating with other professional writers.

The only people who can know whether this or that theory, practice or approach passes that sniff test are those who have the actual experience of writing for income in Hollywood.

So how can one determine who is a professional screenwriter? Go to their IMDB page. Do they have produced credits? Do they have projects in development? Have they had a history of working in the business? It's that type of boots on the ground experience that separates pros from non-pros.





How can you learn from the pros? A plethora of ways:

- **Scripts:** Read the screenplays they write. Online sites where you can download movie scripts include [Simply Scripts](#) and the [Go Into The Story archive](#).
- **Movies:** Watch the movies with which they are associated.
- **Interviews:** It's my impression that screenwriters are getting more press than in year's past, so here's a good routine to develop: Make a list of the movies opening in theaters on the weekend, do a Google search with the key words "interview" and the writer's name. I do this pretty much every week for the written interview I post on Saturdays. Then on Sundays when I post a video interview, I do the same thing, only on YouTube. Speaking of which, a good place to start is right here on my blog where I have hundreds of interviews: [Audio](#), [Video](#), [Written](#). There are also a whole slew of books featuring interviews with screenwriters, some of

which I feature here: [How They Write A Script](#). Another great resource: "The Q&A with Jeff Goldsmith" who has been interviewing screenwriters and filmmakers for years and whose audio sessions can be accessed [here](#). Finally, I have done [nearly 200 Go Into The Story interviews](#) which are distinctive because they are in-depth conversations about the craft.

- **Social Media:** There are a lot of professional writers on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and they frequently comment on the craft. In fact, I have aggregated several dozen screenwriting 'tweetstorms' [here](#).

## **Understand how script readers think**

Outside of yourself, the single most important person in the life of your spec script is more than likely the reader assigned to cover it. Almost no material gets submitted in Hollywood without coverage and that coverage is written by a script reader who is paid — or sometimes not — to read your script. What they say about your script, indeed how they distill in their coverage the key narrative elements of your story can have an enormous influence on how the material is perceived by people further up the food chain.

But who are these people? How do they think? What sort of lives do they lead? How do they go about the grind of reading scripts and writing coverage?

To wit: "An Impression of a Script Reader: Hollywood's

Threshold Guardians.”

It is late at night, 11:58 on a Sunday evening to be precise. We are in an apartment in Santa Monica. Scratch that, Los Feliz. Uh... let's get real. We are in a cramped two bedroom one bath dump in North Hollywood. The script reader — let's call her Beth — shares the apartment with two other young adults (mid-20s), one of whom is on the lease with Beth, the other an old high school friend who hit LA to stay for a few nights, but now has essentially moved in, sleeping on the living room couch.

Fortunately Marvin — that's the slacker roommate's name — is out tonight carousing. *Maybe he'll get lucky and he won't come staggering home drunk as usual*, Beth thinks hopefully. The other roommate Brenna is asleep, no doubt grinding her teeth, already in nocturnal stress about what Monday morning nightmares await at her job as an agent's assistant at a boutique lit agency.

Beth is sprawled in her reading chair, the nicest piece of furniture in a living room jammed with mismatched pieces. It was her best yard sale find to date, all of \$18. The fabric is well-worn and frayed, but its arms are wide, perfect for piling up scripts, pens, laptop, and endless bottles of Pepsi zero to fuel her reading regimen. She loves that her chair is so functional and comfortable. She hates sitting in the chair because she knows when she's there, she is working.

Computer on her lap, Beth finishes pounding away on the

keyboard, and hits save. Coverage on a script, the last of three she was supposed to read over the weekend. Yet another pass. Yet another shitty script. Yet another two hours of her time in this universe devoured by 107 pages of wan inspiration and lame execution.

Beth offers perhaps the world's weariest sigh, then thinks: *How did I get here?* She didn't intend to be making a living — such as it is — reading scripts. Eighteen months ago after finally landing an intern position at a big production company, when she showed up for her first day of work, a stack of scripts somehow ended up on her desk, accompanied by a two-sheet explanation of the outfit's guidelines for writing coverage. No matter that Beth had never read a script before. She would learn as she went along. Fortunately she had majored in creative writing in college. Her overlords must have liked her coverage because she became the go-to person in-house to read the higher tier of scripts (which at least got her out of reading all the stray submissions that mysteriously slipped through the cracks of the company's 'no unsolicited material' policy).

One thing led to another — picking up a freelance script coverage gigs, moonlighting at an actor's prod co that was suddenly plowing through all the pay-or-play scripts that had stacked up — Beth found herself working as a script reader. No diploma. No business cards. No office. No certification. Just a steady stream of phone calls from a variety of companies requesting her services. She likes to

think it is because she is good at it and clients can see that she really understands story, but she has a nagging fear it's because she's cheap. She keeps intending to raise her quote, but doesn't. It's incredibly competitive out there. Moreover a lot of outfits are relying solely on interns to provide script coverage. *As if*, Beth sniffs. *They wouldn't know a good story if it hit them in their pretty little faces.* And yet companies keep cutting back on paying for script coverage, a silent battle being waged from Culver City to Burbank. No matter that the quality of coverage suffers. In these economic times, the bottom line isn't "Recommend," "Consider," "Pass," rather it's all about dollars spent and dollars saved.

Beth stretches, rolling her head around resulting in a series of explosive skeletal pops. How long had she been sitting here? Three hours? Four? When was the last time she'd been outside? Had she eaten dinner? Lunch? No matter. Now it was finally her time. 11:59PM. One more minute left for the weekend. What would she do with it?

Of course, she knows what she should do. Click open the Final Draft file of her spec script *To Dwell*, the period piece family drama set in Ireland she'd started... *God, was is really eight months ago?* She's a writer, she knows that. She is passionate about this story... or at least *used* to be when she first conceived it. She still claims she is, but she has hectoring doubts. A period piece. Family drama. Ireland. Even the title. If she picked up that script to provide coverage, she knows the first thing she'd do when she

checked it out would be to groan. And yet Hollywood needs great stories, right? At least that's what all the screenwriters say when she attends the endless rounds of free seminars and screenings in town.

Beth is just about to open *To Dwell* when she spots it, peeking out from under her chair, the little yellow post-it note waving at her. She goes through several contortions to adjust all the crap on her chair to be able to bend down and pick it up. It's a script. The note reads:

"Some dude dropped this by. Rush read or whatever. Due Monday AM. M."

M as in Marvin. M as in maggot! Why the hell hadn't he told her about this? The asshole had been sitting on the couch no more than... however many hours ago. The goddammed script was right there, directly in his line of vision. He could have told her about it then.

And there goes her best intentions to work on her own spec script, crushed by yet another story requiring coverage.  
*Fuuuuuuuccck.*

Beth goes through her regular routine when she cracks open a script. She checks out the title page: *Death Kill*. Not good. Writer's name? A nobody. Writer's Guild registration number. Amateur.

Then she flips through the script from front to back, letting her eyes scan the pages, checking to see how much black

ink there is. Tons of it. Whole pages with no dialogue. Thick blocks of scene description. Obviously a script with a lot of action, but did the asshole have to write so much of it?

Finally perhaps the most important consideration: The last page of the script: 127 pages. 127! *What the fuck? Dude thinks he's fucking Tarantino? Nobody needs 127 pages to tell a story especially not some hack from Ohio... I'll just bet he's from fucking Ohio... fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.*

Beth presses her eyes shut, hoping it will all go away. Her exhaustion, the rent check that is due, Marvin the maggot... and most of all this goddammed script.

She opens her eyes. There it is on her lap. *Death Kill* awaits her. Checks the clock. It's 12:00AM. Now Monday. Script due in the morning.

There is nothing... nothing Beth wants to do less than read this script.

And yet she settles into her chair. Alone in the dim light. Opens the script to page one hoping against hope there might be one shred of something... anything in the story to keep her awake for the next two hours knowing that in reality, there's a big fat PASS just hanging over head.



This is a moment in the life of one of Hollywood's threshold guardians. The film business simply could not operate without them, not when it funnels through 30,000 submissions per year, so in some sense script readers are unsung heroes. More than that, they are a writer's audience. You may think you are writing your script for the masses, but in the day to day grind of the movie acquisition and development process, the people you are really writing for are script readers.

Therefore, the next time you sit down to write, you would be well advised to have Beth in mind. Are your pages entertaining enough to break through her weariness and encroaching cynicism? Is your story compelling enough to propel her to read every page as opposed to the first 30, then scan the rest?



Write your script. Write the hell out of it. Write something that shakes Beth out of her lethargy and reminds her why she got into this business in the first place: To tell great stories.

Write something Beth will love.

To learn more about script readers, check out these blog posts below:

[The story behind script coverage](#)

[Q&A with veteran script reader and story analyst D.C. Mar](#)

[Twitter Q&A: Amanda Pendolino, The Bitter Script Reader, Nate Winslow](#)

## **Scene-Writing**

If you figure the average scene is one-and-a-half to two pages long and a feature length screenplay ranges from 90–120 pages, that means when you sit down to write a script, you are confronted with the prospect of handling anywhere from sixty to ninety scenes. Looked at this way, it's fair to say the most basic act of screenwriting is *scene-writing*.

So the practice of scene-writing is one critical component of the learning the screenwriting craft.



You can use several resources on Go Into The Story to help you do this.

[Great Scenes](#): Go through the dozens and dozens of examples of notable scenes from a wide range of movies. All of the posts include excerpts from actual scripts, so you are seeing how a variety of writers approach scene-writing on the page.

[Script To Screen](#): Over a hundred more examples of noteworthy scenes, again from a diverse set of movies. I chose these scenes specifically to compare what is on the page and what is on the screen, as this is a key part of learning how to write scenes at a professional level. That process — studying a written scene and its movie version — is important.

[Scene Description Spotlight](#): Yet more examples of movie scenes, these with a focus on the language of scene (or action) description. Here you want to embrace *imagematic* writing, using strong verbs and vivid descriptors to paint word pictures in the mind of the reader. Also think poetry more than prose, lean yet evocative language.

My advice: (1) Break down each scene into its Beginning, Middle and End to get a handle on scene structure. (2) Consider what the function of each character is within the scene. (3) Zero in on the conflict or tension at the center of the scene. (4) Look for subtext in the dialogue and underlying intentions for any actions characters commit.

All of that is about script analysis. How about putting what you learn into action?

[Scene-Writing Prompts](#): A bunch of exercises you can do to test your hand at a variety of different types of scenes. Plus if you check out comments, you can see dozens of writers who have posted hundreds of scenes to analyze how others have handled the exercises.

Scenes are the building blocks of a screenplay. The more you become comfortable writing them, developing an instinct for them so when you sit down to write, you *feel* your way through the process, the better off you'll be.

The path to becoming a professional screenwriter is an arduous one and extremely competitive. To maximize your chances, a new writer needs solid information grounded in

the realities of working in Hollywood's front lines as well as a pragmatic form of inspiration.

You can find both here at Go Into The Story.

[Comment Archive](#)