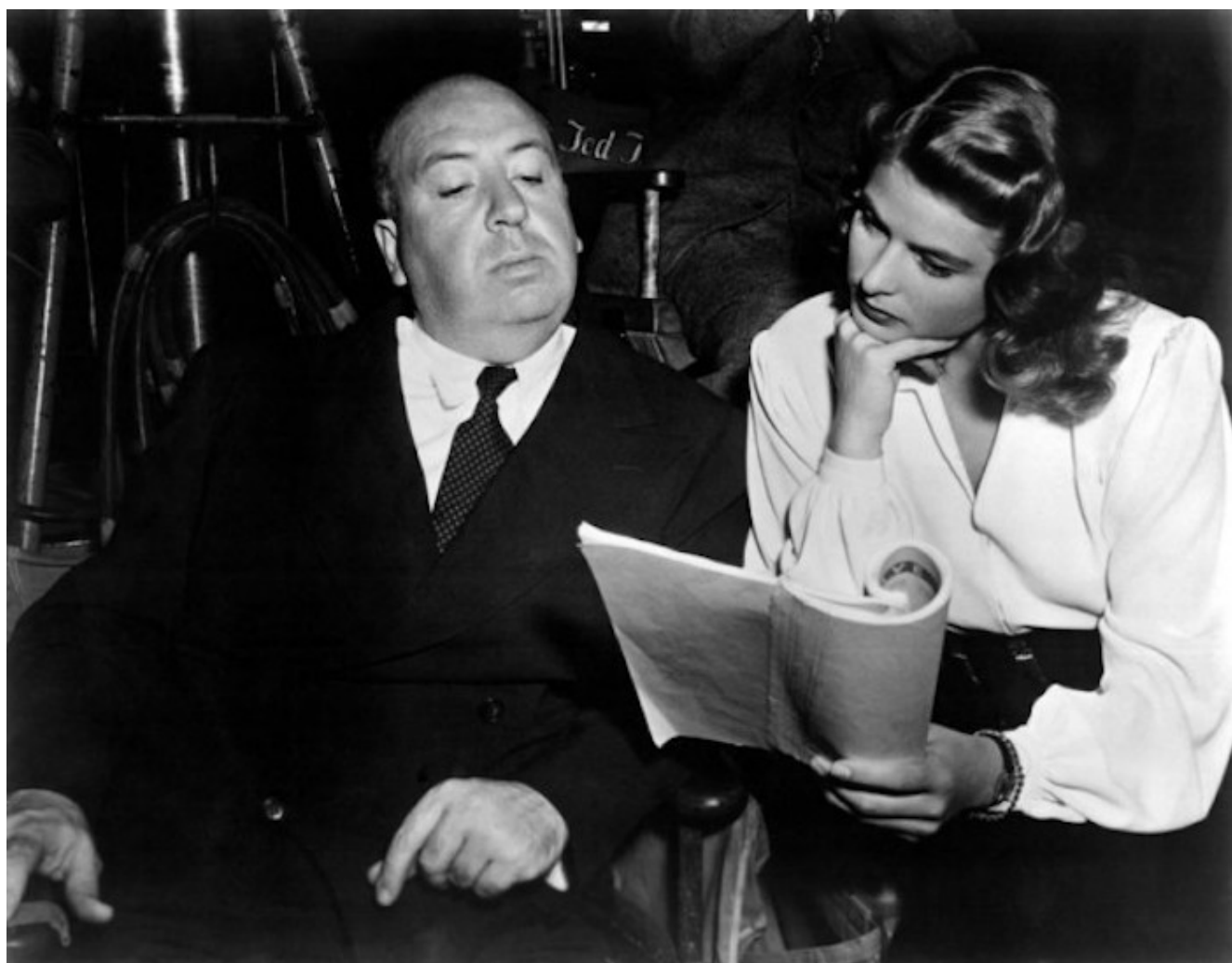


# How To Read A Screenplay (Part 1): The First Pass

[Scott Myers](#)

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



Alfred Hitchcock and Ingrid Bergman reading a script on the set of the movie 'Notorious.'

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 1: The First Pass

This is pretty easy — with one proviso [see below] — because it is basically what you do now: Sit down and read the script. Personally I like to turn off my analytical mind as much as possible and simply read the story for what it is. Obviously, if I have thoughts and observations, I don't chase them away. Rather I quickly jot them down, then move on.

The main point of a first pass is to read it straight-through in one sitting, trying as much as possible to stay *within* the story universe. Save the analysis for later.

Here is the proviso: Perhaps the single hardest aspect of reading a screenplay in today's world is simply finding the time, space, and quiet in which to do it. If you are thumbing through a script on your smart phone while standing in line at the grocery store, you are 'reading,' so to speak, but what are your eyes really seeing? If you read a script yet allow yourself to get interrupted every five minutes by emails or Tweets, again you are 'reading,' but how can you enter into a story universe if this one keeps yanking you back?

And so the hard part: If you really want to read a script in order to analyze it, you have to shut everything else down. I know, I know, how can you possibly give yourself permission to set aside 90 minutes or so to read a script

with no breaks, no interruptions, no distractions, just you and the story?

Let me put it to you this way: Are you serious about learning the craft? If you are, then you will find the strength of will to shut everything down when you read and engage a script. If you aren't, well... go ahead and answer you email.

In order for stories to reveal themselves to us requires a mindfulness on our part. We have to be here now in order to enter fully into a story universe, muck around in there, break things apart, and explore the vital parts of the whole. Indeed this is great training for us and our writing because it requires the same immersion and intensity as sitting down to write.

So try this: Pick a screenplay for a movie you think you know well. If reading a script as a PDF on an electronic device makes it too tempting to slip over onto the Internet, you may have to break down and print out a copy. [Bad for the environment, I know, but the next time you go into town, don't drive your car, ride your bike to balance out the impact.]

Then go into a quiet room, shut the door... and read. Give yourself over to the characters. Let yourself flow into the story universe. Read all the way through from FADE IN to FADE OUT.

And that is your first pass. Here you form general impressions, make initial observations, but perhaps the

most important thing is to note what you felt while reading the script. Then ask yourself this: "Why did the story make me feel the way I did?" That is the first step in an analytical process which leads to tomorrow's post: The Scene-By-Scene Breakdown.

Part 3: Plotline Points and Sequences

Part 4: Subplots, Relationships and Character Functions

Part 5: Metamorphosis

Part 6: Themes

Part 7: Style and Language

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