

# The Screenplay Problem

[Adam Westbrook](#)

If you want to be a great storyteller, don't write screenplays.



Image: Adam Westbrook

***An edited version of this essay first appeared in [The Third Something](#), a free newsletter about telling visual stories. [Subscribe!](#)***

Five years ago Laura Olin wrote [a hilarious and insightful review of the Aaron Sorkin Masterclass for \*The Awl\*](#). It's called 'Aaron Sorkin Teaches You How To Win the Lottery' and, as the title suggests, Olin is skeptical of these expensive screenwriting courses that promise they can help you write a winning script.

Why? *The Atlantic* [reports](#) that 50,000 screenplays are registered with the Writers Guild of America each year; over

the same period about 150 new films get released through the Hollywood system. If you include the independent market and Netflix, that last number creeps up to, I don't know, maybe 300 films? Oh, and these are pre-pandemic numbers!

So, *optimistically*, about 0.6 percent of screenplays get produced each year; the other 99.4 percent lie in a draw or rotting on a hard drive.

Which, to be honest, *should* be fine.

I mean, what odds does a painting have of ending up at the Met, or a poem of making its writer rich and famous? That doesn't stop people quietly painting and poem-ing and deriving huge pleasure from it.

But it isn't fine with screenplays.

## **The Screenplay Problem**

The problem with a screenplay is that it is not a self-contained thing in and of itself.

It is just a blueprint: an architectural drawing in need of a builder; a symphony manuscript with no orchestra to play it. If you want your story to be seen, your self-expression heard and understood by someone — *anyone!* — the only route is to have it produced into a movie.

And that makes it darn-near pointless.

Laura Olin articulated this so well, I still think of her argument years after reading it for the first time:

*“Unlike so much of continuing education — knife skills, art history, woodworking, photography — screenwriting is nearly useless as a form of art to practice or enjoy in its own right. A script, historically, is not a consumable product on its own. You can’t Kickstart or self-publish it. The movie is the product, and movies (and TV shows) have one of the highest barriers to production imaginable because they are, for the most part, fucking expensive to make at even minimum levels of quality.”*

If your screenplay does not become a movie — and remember there is a 99.4% chance of that — then you’re left with something that you can’t show to anyone.

A poet can, at the very least, print their poems and give them away; an artist can sell a canvas, or upload a photo to

Instagram.

Not only does that rob the aspiring screenwriter of that feeling of accomplishment, it also denies them of the chance to improve. *If it can't be consumed by an audience, how are you supposed to know if it is any good?*

If your goal is to be good at telling dramatic, visual stories, screenwriting isn't much use.

## **Can we solve The Screenplay Problem?**

This problem has tugged at me for several years now and I have a few ideas for ways around it:

1) **Make screenplays consumable**: is there a way to make screenplays an enjoyable reading experience? At one point I wondered about publishing a script I had written one scene at a time, like old victorian serials that got printed in the paper. Would you enjoy receiving a story that way?

2) **Change medium**: if your goal is to be good at telling dramatic stories, then switching to playwriting might be a smart move. It is relatively fast and inexpensive to rent a theatre space and put on a play. If your goal is to be good at telling visual stories, then are graphic novels or comics a better form of practice? Collaborating with an artist you could write a webcomic or even a graphic novel.

3) **Literally invent a new form of film story**: Is there a way

to strip down a screen story into a format that can be made on a low budget (but where everyone gets paid fairly)? I have always had faith in this, but over the last decade I haven't seen any evidence of it happening, so now I wonder if it's just not feasible.

If you genuinely enjoy the screenplay as a form or are hell-bent on becoming a successful industry screenwriter then all power to you. But as a form of self-expression, screenwriting is a strange one.

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