

# Reader Question: Are there any script rules that really shouldn't be broken?

[Scott Myers](#)

Or this: "How can you break screenwriting rules if there are none?"

From @CaveDude21:

*I know all rules are made to be broken, but are there any Script rules that really shouldn't?*

# RULES

1. YOU CAN....

2. YOU CAN'T...

3. YOU CAN....

4. YOU CAN'T

I don't think there are any *rules* for screenwriting. There are important principles, and dozens of tips and techniques. There is also a lot of 'conventional wisdom' floating around that gets transmogrified into being *perceived* as rules, and that is where the problem lies.

Stories are organic. Even in a screenplay, which is heavily structured by virtue of it being the blueprint for producing a movie, the underlying story — that universe, its characters, the events that transpire there — all have to feel alive, spontaneous, and native to that narrative environment.

Enter the plethora of screenwriting approaches, theories, paradigms, models, and formulas. While some of them reflect dynamics that are innate to story itself and what people expect when they read or see a story, once they get codified in the minds of writers, a big problem arises: The writer can write to the formula instead of to the story. Hence all the complaints from moviegoers about formulaic movies. And by the way, the complaint exists within Hollywood script development circles, too, as folks there often lament being forced to read one formulaic script after another.

Besides if you give me a supposed screenwriting rule, I am 99% positive I can come up with a movie that breaks it.

**Movies have to be told with a linear narrative.** Consider *Memento*, *Pulp Fiction*, or *Betrayal*.

**Movies have to have a sympathetic Protagonist.** Consider *Sideways*, *As Good As It Gets*, and *Taxi Driver*.

**Movies always have to have a happy ending.** Consider *Citizen Kane*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *Manon des sources*.

There are scripts where the screenwriter breaks the 4th wall and 'talks' to the script reader [*The Last Boy Scout* by Shane Black]. There are scripts that have sides of dialogue one page long or longer [*Network* by Paddy Chayefsky]. I remember reading a script by Justin Zackham [*The Bucket List*] that was in the 2nd person ["You turn on the light. You open the door."]

Should we let 'rules' restrict our creativity? I should think not!

My advice: Learn the conventional wisdom, what is pretty much the standardized approach to screenwriting. It's not hard to do, you can go virtually anywhere online and pick up the supposed 'rules' in a matter of a few months.

Then write. Experiment. Read scripts. Write some more. You are developing your own voice, your own style, gaining confidence in who you are as a writer.

Then if you develop a story that requires you to break a supposed 'rule,' absolutely will make for a better read if you go against convention, do it. You have to be smart, you have to be judicious, and you have to know what you're doing. Most of all, you have to believe in yourself and in your story. But you should have the freedom to make those choices and dismiss the negative nabobs of negativism [homage to Spiro Agnew there].

That's it, my only screenwriting semi-rule. As far as the other 'rules' go, you have to figure them out on your own, then become your own writer.

My advice: In all cases, story trumps formula, story trumps 'rules,' story trumps all.

In other words, the story rules.

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