

The Business of Screenwriting: Going to the Movies

[Scott Myers](#)

One of the most important ways you can learn the craft of screenwriting is by watching movies. Studying them. Breaking them down sequence by sequence, scene by scene. Tracking the story's pace and the flow of its narrative.

Beyond that movies serve as a reminder...

Of film as visual storytelling...

Of the power of this wonderful medium...

Of your ultimate goal: to see your movie up on that screen.

You may think once you break into Hollywood as a screenwriter, you can slack off on going to the movies.

You would be wrong.

In fact now you have to add some items to the movie-watching agenda:

- Track movie trends
- See how narrative is handled in various genres
- Follow the transition of a project from script to screen

- Appraise the work of actors and directors with whom you may one day work
- Stay informed about the latest projects for meetings with producers and studio execs involved with those same projects

Even if you are a successful screenwriter, it is imperative you continue going to the movies.

Now this may seem like unnecessary advice. *Of course, I'll go to the movies. I love movies.*

You say that now. But if your entire life is about movies — the news you track, days spent writing, nights spent brainstorming, every conversation you have inevitably winding its way toward The Biz, every coffee joint you go to inhabited by dozens of people hunkered over laptops open to Final Draft — you'd be amazed at how sick you can become of that thing you profess to love.

Think about it: If there are 4 major releases each weekend, plus another 2–3 indie films opening in theaters, you may have to average seeing a movie every day just to keep up with what's out there.

That can get old.

What to do? Spice things up!

Let's assume you're living in Los Angeles.

First, there are premieres and industry screenings, as

discussed [here](#). If you can't get pumped up to see a movie at an event like this, then you are really in need of a life-injection. Premieres and industry screenings are fun. And even if the movie stinks, you get to network, make connections, and drink free booze.

The next best thing: Go to a screening on a movie's opening night. Personally my preference are the theaters in Westwood:

Standing in line with people who are motivated enough to show up on opening night, then sharing the movie experience with that same excited crowd can give you a nice emotional jolt.

Then there's the [WGA Film Society](#) which screens movies at the Writers Guild Theater on Doheny in Beverly Hills:



It's a great deal with the cost per movie about \$1. Also since they don't allow refreshments in the theater, you don't have to put up with the slovenly dumbass directly behind you pawing endlessly at their jumbo tub of popcorn or Hooverizing an Icee. This venue is for serious movie people who are there to watch a film. Added benefit: All the kvetching you hear afterward from fellow writers. No one disses movies better than a gaggle of bitter screenwriters.

For a completely different experience, I'm a big advocate of going to a screening in the middle of the day. No crowds. Your mind is alert. You can spread out. And avoid that same damn dumb-ass with the jumbo tub of popcorn

by moving five rows away.

Another thing to do: See multiple movies in one day. For my first two years in L.A., I did this a lot. It not only allows you to cover most of the week's new releases in one fell swoop, I find I also make interesting connections and comparisons between the films I see: tone, pace, intensity levels, scene constructions, visual style, and so on. A sort of *Gestalt* cinematic experience.

Every so often, be sure to check out some of the revival theaters like the New Beverly Cinema [on Beverly Blvd one block west of La Brea] or the [Nuart Theatre](#) [just off the 405 on Santa Monica Blvd]. American Cinematheque is also a great resource, they show classic films at the Egyptian and Aero theaters.

There is nothing like seeing a classic movie on the big screen. I still get chills thinking about the time I saw *Patton* when they opened the AMC theaters in Century City. Wow!

This one is critically important: At least once a month, go outside of L.A. and watch a movie. Why? Because real people live there. Ventura, Oxnard, Thousand Oaks, Camarillo. Those are my favorites. These moviegoers are much more representative of what the rest of America is about than folks in the 405–10–110–101 Bubble. And in a very real way, they are your audience, you are writing your stories for them. Trust me, this will be the single most

difficult thing for you to do as the 405-10-110-101 Bubble has this strange, but powerful gravitational pull making it *extraordinarily* difficult for you to leave its gestational womb. But you must stay in touch with people who don't work in the industry in order to have some sense of what plays and doesn't play out there in Real America.

Finally, here is a temptation you have to resist. As a member of the WGA come award season (December-March), you will get screeners (or access to movies at restricted sites online). Over the course of the year, you will have this conversation with yourself multiple times:

"Do I really want to pry my tookus off the Barcolounger, schlep across town to the movie theater, pay all that money for tickets, popcorn, parking, when in a few months, I can watch the movie at home for free with a screener?"

Yes, you do. While you can use DVDs and screeners to re-watch and analyze a film, you should watch a movie for the first time in a theater with a crowd, this unique group of strangers which gathers together for a mere two hours of time. Something remarkable can happen there, sitting in the dark, communing with these other souls as we laugh, cry, or shriek.

A movie theater is like a cathedral. We are the congregants. And the movie is the liturgical experience. Where once again we behold the magic of images and

words on screen, transporting us from this world to That World, and come to believe again... there is nothing like a movie.

As successful and inside the business you get to be as a screenwriter, it's easy to lose sight of that magic.

Finally there's this: The pandemic has dealt a massive blow to the movie theater business. It's important not just *watch* movies via various streaming services, but actually **go to the movies!** I'd rather sit in a theater masked and share the crowd response to *Cocaine Bear* or *65*, than wait for the film to become available online.

Support the exhibitors and feed your creative soul ... by **going** to the movies!

The Business of Screenwriting is a weekly series of Go Into The Story posts based upon my experiences as a complete Hollywood outsider who sold a spec script for a lot of money, parlayed that into a screenwriting career during which time I've made some good choices, some okay decisions, and some really stupid ones. Hopefully you'll be the wiser for what you learn here.

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