

# LIGHTS! CAMERA! ACTION!

BEHIND THE SCENES  
OF PLAYS AND  
SCREENPLAYS

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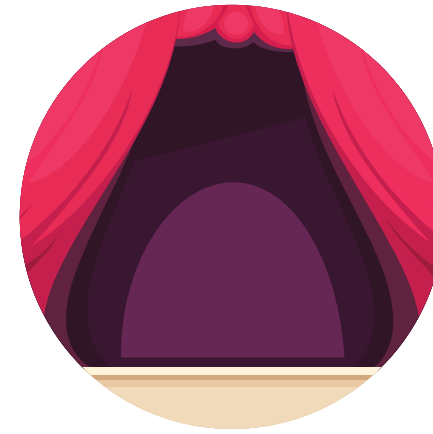
# IT'S EASY TO UNDERSTAND THE ALLURE OF SCREENWRITING AND PLAYWRITING:

Who wouldn't want to see their work literally come to life on the big screen or Broadway? And it certainly doesn't hurt that the page count is about a third less than that of a full-length novel. Yet while on the surface these two genres may seem similar, the reality is that they are very different art forms.

When crafting a novel, an author can tell the story via many elements: scenes, setting, the five senses, dialogue, action, inner thought, etc. Everything authors want to convey must be accomplished on the page in a compelling and intriguing story that keeps readers engaged in the writer's fictional world. In a play, however, the story is typically told in two acts, with

limited scene/set changes, and primarily driven by dialogue. Movies also heavily use dialogue to tell any given story, but they generally have more freedom to use imagery, action, or other visual clues to convey meaning.

As with novels, plays and movies hinge on great storytelling. In Robert McKee's popular book on screenwriting, *Story*, he says, "A beautifully told story is a symphonic unity in which structure, setting, character, genre, and idea meld seamlessly." *Story* is key in all genres, but the way it's achieved varies with each medium. Before choosing the direction you want to go, think about the structure, constraints, and conventions of each type.



## PLAYWRITING

### Creating action onstage

Plays can vary from an intimate one-person show to a large and lavish Broadway production. John Cariani, a Tony-nominated actor, playwright, and creator of the acclaimed play *Almost, Maine* says, "We think of playwriting as an academic pursuit, and it's just not. It's not really even 'writing' because plays are not meant to be read but performed. What playwrights are doing is creating action – things for actors to do on a stage and for audiences to experience."

Understanding what goes into that experience is at the core of any successful play. Kevin Hart, an award-winning actor, playwright, and screenwriter (though not the actor/comedian from *Ride Along* and *Jumanji: The Next Level*), says his No. 1 rule in playwriting is to understand that the action is driven by dialogue.

"If you want to write a play, adhere to the idea that you are going to use dialogue mostly to tell the story," says Hart. "Your best bet is to create a circumstance that is urgent where the characters have to talk." He cites the play he's currently performing in, *Murder on the Orient Express*, as a perfect example of this because a murder has occurred, all the suspects are still on the train, and the characters must find out who committed the crime – an act that requires conversation among the cast. Though the play is an adaptation of an Agatha Christie novel, there's an abundance of dialogue in the story, which is why it works especially well onstage.

Jessica Kahkoska, a writer, dramaturg, and researcher, believes it's helpful to think about what key elements each script needs to make it successful. "Maybe it's a giant twist in the plot,

maybe it's a zany structural overhaul, maybe it's a flying horse character who comes into the second act with some fantastic monologue and leads the audience in a disco dance break... Something I love about theater is that when you're creating a project, these dramatic and storytelling elements are all tools to explore and execute your vision, so there's no one formula that makes every play successful."

### Plot, character, and setting

Just like in novels, plot and character are intertwined in playwriting. "A compelling plot includes actions that compound and change the characters in the play," Cariani says. The stakes must be high, and the tension must be maintained from start to finish. One thing Hart suggests when crafting a high-stakes play is to stop thinking of the plot in terms of "this happens *then* this happens" and start thinking of it as "this happens *because* this happens."

Another constraint for plays is the setting. Because you only have the stage to work with, instead of a more robust film production and set budget, you have to confine your settings to places that would work well portrayed in a theater's given performance space. Anytime a play stops for a set change, the audience is temporarily pulled out into the real world. In *Orient Express*, for example, Hart says the production only has two places where action occurs (the dining car and the sleeping compartments).

Cariani grew up in northern Maine, which ultimately became the inspiration for *Almost, Maine*. "It's a beautiful place to recreate in a theatrical setting," he says. *Almost, Maine* is an example of how a play's location can serve a larger function than indicating time and place: The play started out as short two-person scenes that Cariani realized could be incorporated into one larger collection of short plays, all set in the fictional town of Almost, Maine. But setting isn't the only facet that unites the shorter plays: Love is another unifying theme in the collection, Cariani says. "I was interested in love stories for people who aren't hot. That's what *Almost, Maine* is, a bunch of love stories about – and for – regular working people. You could be anything and be in that play, any shape, any color, any size."

### Research, research, research

With her background in dramaturgy, Kahkoska (who is currently working on *six* different plays and musicals) begins each project with lots of research. “This could be working in an archive with original documents, this could mean oral history interviews, this could mean just spending time in a specific place to soak up the world and its details,” she explains. During this stage in her process, she turns her critical and planning brain off and instead becomes a research sponge, paying attention to the way that people are talking, what feels important in each source, and what specific moments in each story jump out to her as key dramatic fodder.

When beginning *The Death of Desert Rose* with her co-writer, Elliah Heifetz, she knew she wanted to both explore and update the Western genre. “We read and watched a lot of Western films, stories, and scripts,” she says. “I also spent last summer as writer-in-residence at Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre, in the same town [Trinidad, Colorado] our musical is set, and spent much of my time in the history room of the Carnegie Library of Trinidad, reading old microfilms, pulling images, and learning about the real people who lived in Trinidad during the time of our show.”

Following her research, Kahkoska created an outline that provided structure to the project. “Even if the story and ideas change, creating an initial map can make the prospect of writing a draft feel manageable.” She then dives into what she calls her “bad first draft,” a messy writing period when she doesn’t stop for typos. If she has two ideas for a line, she writes them both down, and she puts notes in the margins. When it’s finished, she begins rewriting, clarifying, and workshopping the piece. “My favorite part of theater is that much of our development happens with collaborators – actors, directors, and designers – so it’s always exciting to get new voices into the room to explore and develop the piece in different ways.”

### Stage before page

Hart, Cariani, and Kahkoska all have acting experience. Cariani believes this is important. “If you want to write for theater,” he says, “you have to know what it’s like to be on stage. You need to know how to use that space. It doesn’t mean you

can’t write a play if you haven’t been on stage, but it helps a lot because you understand the limitations of it, and you understand the two-dimensionality of it.”

When Cariani teaches playwriting, he takes improv and acting exercises and converts them into writing exercises his students can do in pairs. “Too often people get stuck in their heads, and I try to free them from their heads. I try to get them to write from their guts and their hearts a little more, so that they are using all the ways we process information and think and feel.”

### Selling it

Plays are intended to be performed. So how do you sell one? While traditionally published novel writers must find an agent who then finds an interested publisher before a book deal is secured, playwrights have different options.

“Sometimes, a playwright will write a play and then find a home for it at a theater or with a company,” Kahkoska says. Other times, a playwright will partner with a theater company or producer to build the play in a more collaborative way.” Play development is a community practice, she explains, and something a playwright can’t develop by themselves. “So rather than a pitching process, I would say playwrights experience a process of trying to find the right community, collaborators, and audience for a piece and its needs as it develops.”

### Advice for budding playwrights

If writing plays appeals to you, what should you do next? Cariani suggests you attend plays in your area. “Get to know the actors in your community. Getting your play published doesn’t mean anything – it’s getting your play produced that matters. The best thing about writing a play is you can finish a scene or two and share it with your friends. It’s a communal experience, and you need to collaborate to create.”

Kahkoska also says to pay attention to what inspires you: “Maybe it’s images, maybe it’s travel, maybe it’s a newspaper article.” She adds that it’s also important to find the people who are doing work that intrigues you and follow them. “Sign up for their emails, go see their stuff. Writing can be isolating and difficult, so it’s important to find your community.”



## SCREENWRITING

### Creating action onscreen

Screenwriting is a unique mode of storytelling, and one that differs greatly from plays. While a play centers around dialogue, a movie is more focused on the visuals. Dialogue is generally secondary to what the audience sees on screen. There can be an entire scene in a film where no one says a word, but that scene is still essential for moving the story forward.

Hart says that when you watch a movie, there are visual motifs, or certain imagery that are used to tell the story. “For example,” he says. “In *Casablanca*, there’s a very small scene when the German officer lands at the airport in *Casablanca* to greet the French constable. They wanted to establish a relationship without words, so what they did was, in the frame, they had the two men walking and talking. The general almost fills the entire screen, and a small spot is left for the constable to talk to him. Immediately you get the message that the general dominates. That helps tell the story. Can’t do that in a play.”

In a screenplay, you have less time on the page to tell the story than in a book. While a standard commercial novel is about 350 pages, a screenplay is about 110 pages, with each page representing one minute of screen time.

### Economy & efficiency

Trai Cartwright, MFA, has over 30 years of experience in the industry. She is a screenwriter, writing consultant, university instructor, and independent film producer who’s worked as a story consultant for major Hollywood studios. She explains that movies require an efficiency in

storytelling. “Economics is everything,” she says. “The different layers in a screenplay allow you to have just as deep an experience [as a novel], but you’re using different things. In screenplays, it’s not about the dialogue. A successful story is one that can be followed even if there’s no sound. If you are watching a movie and you can’t hear the dialogue, you should be able to follow the basic story.”

In novels, you can show characters in their own heads, ruminating about their next move or thinking about their feelings. “In screenwriting, you don’t get to do interiority,” says Cartwright. “If you can’t see it on the screen, you don’t write it. This can trip people up who are coming from fiction writing. They are used to using the entire mental landscape of the character.”

David Flanagan, a screenwriter and author from Sacramento (no relation), has been in the industry for over two decades. At one point in his career, one of his jobs was screening scripts – and he’s read hundreds of them. “A lot of them were just fragmented,” he says, “and it was unclear what was happening. I just wasn’t engaged in the character or story. Then a screenplay would pop up, and it was so fun to read and moved me emotionally in some way very quickly. It was easy to tell that this writer knew exactly what they were doing, and they were doing it well. It was well-crafted, and I could tell it wasn’t their first script.”

As with any genre, there are certain conventions that need to be followed, especially when you are first starting out. Flanagan says you need to understand the three-act structure (setup, confrontation, and resolution), a model that drives most scripts. “Is that a formula? Yes it is,” he says. “A lot of creative writers want to rebel against that. You need to learn the structure first before you can break the rules. When you break the rules, you need to know how and why you are breaking them. To say that anybody can tell a story any way they want is a recipe for getting lost in the woods. In Hollywood, it’s a ticket nowhere.”

### How to write a successful screenplay

Structure is the foundation of every screenplay and is important. Audiences know what to expect from a typical film, and your job as a writer is to

# “A GREAT WRITER IS ACTUALLY A GREAT THINKER, NOT JUST SOMEONE WHO CAN PUT WORDS DOWN ON PAPER.”

creatively live up to those expectations. Hollywood still expects stories to follow the basic model laid out in Blake Snyder’s classic screenwriting book *Save the Cat!*, which breaks down like this:

1. Act one is 20% of the script.
2. Act three is 20 to 25% of the script.
3. Act two is everything in between.

Before you sit down to write, Cartwright suggests contemplating your story. Who are your characters? What do they want in this world? What is going to be the thing that fixes their problems? What are they trying to get done? Now: What’s the *worst possible thing* that could happen to them, something that’s going to force them to look at the world differently? Force them into situations where they can learn and evolve.

Then she suggests thinking about where you want your characters to land at the end of the movie in addition to how you want the audience to feel when your characters have accomplished everything, understanding that your characters should generally become the opposite of what was portrayed in the beginning.

## The inciting incident

A major component of a screenplay is the inciting incident that happens at the end of act one, which generally happens between pages 8-12. Even in the most low-key movies, you have a triggering event that sets the story in motion.

Cartwright uses the original *Star Wars* as an example to illustrate this point to show when and why this happens. “This is when Luke comes back to the dirt farm, and the Empire has wiped out his family. He has no home to go to now. There is no reason for him *not* to go on this adventure now. Is he a hero because he decides to work with Ben Kenobi? No, it’s just the first step toward him becoming heroic. He has been pushed out of his normal world, and the normal world is what act one is all about. How do they [Luke and Ben] move through the world? Who’s there with them? Luke has dreams of going to the academy when we first meet him, but he can’t – his family needs him too much. We also know that if the universe didn’t come in

and wreck stuff for him, *at some point* he would have gone to the academy to be a pilot. He thought that would be the fix he needed. He craved the adventure. But we needed him in motion faster, so enter stormtroopers, death, destruction, and mayhem.”

## Pitfalls new screenwriters fall into

As with any form of writing, there are common mistakes. One of the biggest errors Flanagan has seen while reading screenplays is scripts that are too dialogue-heavy. “We need to be careful,” he says. “As writers, we write in words, but filmmaking is a very visual medium. A lot of times, what the actor says is not written on the page but on their face or in the scene. You want to write a script that an actor can really act, but it doesn’t always have to be relayed in words. A great writer is actually a great thinker, not just someone who can put words down on paper.”

Cartwright sees many new screenwriters overwriting their scenes, which impacts the overall pacing of the story. “[An] average scene is a page to page and a half,” she says. “This can be mind-blowing for people first coming to screenwriting because they are used to books where your scenes last as long as you want them to.”

She also finds that writers who are content with their first draft and don’t believe in the power of revision are missing out: Any time you

are willing to let go of your current draft, it opens up the next draft to be even better than you could have imagined.

Author and screenwriter Tim Northburg understands the value in hard work and learning everything you can to understand the genre you want to write. Early in his writing journey, he immersed himself in fiction and nonfiction, publishing 11 books in the process. Over the past five years, his interest shifted to screenwriting. Knowing success doesn’t happen overnight, he studied the craft.

“Learning how to write within that structure was a big change,” he says. “When writing fiction, you have to include lots of prose, be descriptive, add lots of details – sight, smell, taste, and all the things your character is thinking. Screenwriting is a lot quicker. It’s more the bare bones.”

Northburg put many hours into reading, studying, and dissecting screenplays. He also took classes on the craft and business of screenwriting, learning the nuances of this medium. Over the course of four years, he wrote four screenplays in a variety of genres (romantic musical, sci-fi drama, romance, and Western).

Ready to put his work out there, he started submitting to contests but didn’t have much luck. It wasn’t until he hired a script consultant to help him refine and revise his screenplays further that he began seeing results. He ultimately felt confident enough to send his work out to multiple competitions at film festivals. “Last year, I did make the finals in a competition, so I decided to attend. It was my first-ever film festival.” The festival in question was Wild Bunch Film Festival, where he made lots of connections and his Western screenplay won a Festival Director’s Choice Award. The other scripts he sent continued to make it into the finals at six different competitions, with three winning awards.

## Selling a screenplay

As Northburg found, once you have one or more screenplays ready, it’s time to get your script into the hands of those in the business who have the means to turn it into a movie. Cartwright suggests these approaches:

1. Enter contests and apply for fellowships. If you reach at least the semifinals, they send your

logline (a one-sentence description of your script) around, and you can get an invitation to submit your full script.

2. Consider posting your screenplay’s logline and summary on The Black List.

3. Check out pitch slams in Los Angeles or reputable slams online, and pitch your script to as many executives and agents as possible.

4. Research what agents and production companies are in the same storytelling sandbox as you and send them a query.

## Advice for budding screenwriters

Cartwright recommends new screenwriters follow Ray Bradbury’s classic advice: “Quantity produces quality.” Write a ton. Accept the fact that most of it is not going to go anywhere. That’s not the point of it. All of it is to get you ready so that when the right idea comes along, you have the ability to deliver on it. Have faith in the process. By putting in the hours, you will naturally get better.”

She also suggests seeing what your community has to offer in terms of classes and to also find a writer’s group. “Writers who write alone simply don’t get as far as fast as the writers who have built that support system.”

“If you are considering writing a screenplay,” says Flanagan, “would you consider writing 10 screenplays? Because that’s the mindset you need if you are going to have any kind of ‘success.’ Think long term and become a screenwriter and *not* a single script writer.”

Flanagan closes with advice from *Finding Nemo* that fits no matter if you’re writing a screenplay or a play. “Dory the fish said it best: ‘Just keep swimming.’ It is a long journey and very fulfilling. Just keep going. Don’t let success or the lack of success keep you from being the writer you are. Too many great writers give up. Overnight success takes a long time.” 🎬

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