

SCREENWRITING SERIES · SUBJECT 1 OF 11

Deep dive document

WHERE SCREENPLAY IDEAS COME FROM

HOW SCREENWRITERS FIND AND TEST IDEAS

WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

This is the first chapter of a working series on screenwriting craft: The stage that comes before outlining, before structure, before a single scene is written: the moment an idea arrives, and the decision about whether it is worth a year of your life.

HOW TO USE IT

Read passively and this is a lecture. Do the Practice sections and you finish it holding a tested premise, on one page, ready for Chapter Two.

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WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

The chapter is informational. It describes how ideas have actually been found and developed by working screenwriters, using produced films as evidence, and it separates terms that are commonly confused in casual conversation but which mean very different things in a development meeting.

Every method here is followed by a section headed Practice. Theory that cannot be used on a Tuesday afternoon is decoration. Where a technique is described, it is described with the steps required to run it, and with at least one named film in which the same logic can be observed.

No claim is made that ideas can be manufactured on demand. The claim is narrower and more useful: ideas can be hunted deliberately rather than waited for, and once caught they can be tested before they cost you anything.

1.1 HOW TO USE THIS CHAPTER

- Read section 2 in full before anything else. The vocabulary defined there is used throughout the series, and confusion between concept and premise is the most common reason a promising project stalls.
- Sections 3 and 4 are the hunting sections. Do the Practice work in them. By the end of section 4 you should have five candidate ideas written down.
- Sections 5 to 8 are the testing sections. They take those five ideas and reduce them to some.
- Sections 9 and 10 are administrative. Section 9 will save you more work than any other page here.
- Section 11 is a complete worked example, from the first sentence of raw material to a tested premise.
- Section 12 tells you exactly what you should be holding before you begin Chapter Two.

Read this passively and it is a lecture. Do the Practice sections and you finish it holding a tested premise.

WHAT THIS DOCUMENT IS

FOUR WORDS THAT GET CONFUSED

Writers lose months to a vocabulary problem. A producer says the concept is strong but the premise is weak, and the writer nods, goes home and rewrites the wrong thing. These four terms sit on a ladder, each rung more specific than the last.

2.1 IDEA

An idea is raw material. It has no obligation to be dramatic. It can be an image, a place, a fact, a character trait, a line overheard on a bus, a question you cannot stop asking.

Examples of ideas:

- A man who cleans crime scenes for a living.
- A city that has run out of water.
- The feeling of driving home from a funeral.

None of these is a film. None is even close. Ideas are cheap and should be treated as cheap. The professional habit is not to have fewer ideas but to have many, and to be ruthless about which ones survive section 5.

2.2 CONCEPT

A concept is an idea shaped into a situation that generates conflict. The test is one question: does the sentence contain a collision?

- The man who cleans crime scenes cleans one and recognises the victim.
- A private detective in the drought city discovers that the drought is manufactured.

The situation now contains pressure, and pressure implies events.

Concepts are often described as high or low. A high concept is one whose central situation is fully communicated in a single sentence, and where that sentence alone creates appetite. A low concept film is not a worse film; it sells on execution, voice, performance or subject rather than on situation.

- High concept: in *Jaws* (1975), a shark begins eating swimmers at a beach resort, and the police chief who wants to close the beach is overruled by a town that needs the summer money.
- Low concept: in *Nomadland* (2020), a woman in her sixties who has lost her job and her town moves into a van and joins the seasonal migrant workforce. It won Best Picture.

FOUR WORDS THAT GET CONFUSED

2.3 PREMISE

A premise is a concept with a protagonist attached, expressed as a dramatic problem. It answers four questions at once:

- Who wants something.
- What they want, in visible terms.
- What stands in the way.
- What it costs them to fail.

This is where most stalled projects are actually stuck. A writer has a strong concept and no premise, which means a world and no engine, and the second act collapses because nobody in it wants anything badly enough to keep generating scenes.

There is a second and older use of the word, from Lajos Egri, in which premise means the argument the story proves, written as cause and effect: great love defies even death. Both uses are current. When a producer says premise they usually mean the dramatic problem. When a script editor says it, they may mean the argument. Ask which one is meant.

2.4 LOGLINE

A logline is the premise compressed into one or two sentences built for transmission. It is not the story and not a summary. It is a device for making a stranger want to read ninety pages, and it is treated in full in section 6.

2.5 STORY

Story is the premise executed: the specific sequence of events, in a specific order, with a specific ending. Two writers given the same premise produce different stories. This is why premises cannot be copyrighted, and why the same premise can support a masterpiece and a disaster in the same year.

FOUR WORDS THAT GET CONFUSED

2.6 THE LADDER, WORKED ON ONE FILM

Using Parasite (2019):

- Idea: a family of con artists.
- Concept: a poor family infiltrates a rich household one member at a time, each posing as an unrelated professional.
- Premise: an unemployed young man talks his way into a tutoring job with a wealthy family and installs his entire household as their staff, until the discovery of another parasite already living in the house forces him to defend a lie that is destroying both families.
- Argument, in Egri's sense: a society that separates people by class will make them destroy each other rather than the system.

The same material sits on all four rungs. Notice that only the third one tells you what the second act is.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

Origin stories of produced films cluster into a small number of recurring sources. Knowing them is practical: when you are dry, you are usually dry because you are drawing from one source only.

Each source below ends with a Practice section. Run at least three of the eight. Keep everything you produce, including the material you think is weak.

3.1 PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND PRIVATE OBSESSION

The most common source and the most misunderstood. The material is not your life. The material is the pressure your life put on you, transposed into a situation that can carry it, and then escalated well past what actually happened.

- Whiplash (2014). Damien Chazelle played drums in a highly competitive high school jazz programme. The film is not a memoir of that programme. It is an escalated two hander between a student and a teacher in which ordinary pressure is pushed to the point of physical danger. Unable to finance the feature, he shot a section of it as a short film, took it to Sundance in 2013, and used it as proof of concept.
- Back to the Future (1985). Bob Gale found his father's high school yearbook in a basement and wondered whether, if they had been the same age, they would have been friends. The wondering is the idea. The time machine is the machinery built to deliver it.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

- Taxi Driver (1976). Paul Schrader wrote it during a period of isolation in Los Angeles in which he was living largely in his car, drifting through the city at night. The loneliness is the source. The gun and the mohawk are the concept engineered to dramatise it.
- Past Lives (2023). Celine Song sat in a New York bar between her childhood sweetheart from Seoul and her American husband, translating between two men who could not speak to each other, and understood that she was standing at the centre of her own story.

PRACTICE

Do not ask what happened to me. Ask these three questions and write one line for each:

- What pressure have I been under that I never resolved?
- What situation would put a stranger under that same pressure, harder and faster than it happened to me?
- Who would be standing opposite them, making it worse?

3.2 RESEARCH AND THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Ideas found in libraries and archives have a specific advantage: the research supplies texture and plot at the same time, and it gives you material no other writer happens to have read.

- Chinatown (1974). Robert Towne built a detective story on the water politics of southern California, drawing on the historical seizure of water rights that allowed Los Angeles to grow. The murder plot is invented. The crime underneath it is not. That is why the film feels larger than its case.
- All the President's Men (1976) and Spotlight (2015). Investigative journalism arrives pre structured: the investigation itself supplies escalation, obstruction and a clock.

PRACTICE

- Spend one hour in a source that has nothing to do with film: local history, industrial history, court judgments, technical manuals, auction catalogues.
- Copy out every sentence that makes you sit up. Do not evaluate while copying.
- Afterwards, look at what you copied. The sentence is usually the concept. The surrounding chapter is usually the second act.

3.3 NEWS AND TRUE EVENTS

News gives you a situation that has already proved it can hold attention. What it does not give you is a protagonist with a want, and that is the work.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

- Dog Day Afternoon (1975) came from a magazine account of a bank robbery that turned into a hostage siege. It becomes a film because the writing finds the man inside the robbery rather than the robbery itself.
- Argo (2012) came from a magazine article about a rescue operation run under cover of a fake science fiction production. The absurdity of the cover story is itself the engine.

The single most useful discipline with true material is to identify the twenty four hours, or the six weeks, that contain the change. Films fail on true material when the writer feels obliged to include the whole life.

PRACTICE

- Take a news story that has stayed with you for more than a year.
- Name the person inside it whose decision mattered most.
- Name the moment they could have chosen otherwise.
- Write one line that begins at that moment. That is your opening, not the background to it.

3.4 ADAPTATION

A large share of produced features begin as something else: a novel, a short story, a play, an article, a work of nonfiction, a comic, a game, an existing film in another language.

The classic canon runs on it:

- Casablanca (1942), from an unproduced play, Everybody Comes to Rick's.
- Rear Window (1954), from a Cornell Woolrich short story.
- Psycho (1960), from Robert Bloch's novel.
- The Godfather (1972), from Mario Puzo's novel.
- Die Hard (1988), from Roderick Thorp's novel Nothing Lasts Forever.

The contemporary canon runs on it equally:

- Moonlight (2016), from Tarell Alvin McCraney's unproduced play.
- Arrival (2016), from Ted Chiang's novella Story of Your Life.
- Nomadland (2020), from Jessica Bruder's nonfiction book.
- Oppenheimer (2023), from the biography American Prometheus.

The craft question in adaptation is never how do I include everything. It is: what is the one dramatic problem in this material, and what must I destroy in order to expose it. Rights are covered in section 10 and must be settled before you write.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

PRACTICE

- Choose a short story published before 1930, so that it is almost certainly out of copyright in most territories.
- Reduce it to a single premise sentence containing protagonist, want, opposition and stakes.
- List the three things you would have to cut entirely to make it a film.

This teaches compression faster than original work does, because you cannot hide behind invention.

3.5 COLLISION AND GENRE INVERSION

Two familiar elements forced together produce something that reads as new while remaining legible. This is the most reliably teachable of all the sources.

- Alien (1979) was famously pitched in three words as Jaws in space: a monster picture built with the rhythm of a shark thriller and relocated to a spacecraft. The audience knows both halves. Nobody had seen the combination.
- Get Out (2017) inverts the polite social drama in which a young person brings a partner home to be accepted, a form the audience knows from Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967), and rebuilds it as horror in which the family is the threat.
- The Shape of Water (2017) comes from Guillermo del Toro's childhood response to Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954), in which he wanted the creature and the woman to end up together.
- Shaun of the Dead (2004) collides a domestic comedy about a man who cannot commit with a zombie outbreak he barely notices.

PRACTICE

- Write list one: twelve genres and forms you know well.
- Write list two: twelve worlds, jobs, subcultures or institutions you know well or want to research.
- Cross them at random. Twenty pairings, twenty minutes, no evaluation while writing.
- Afterwards, discard everything that produced no physical reaction. Keep the two or three that did.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

3.6 THE WHAT IF QUESTION

The purest conceptual source. A single counterfactual is proposed, and the film is the disciplined working out of its consequences.

- The Truman Show (1998): what if a man's entire life were a television programme and he alone did not know.
- Groundhog Day (1993): what if a man repeated the same day until he changed.
- Toy Story (1995): what if toys were conscious and hid it.
- Her (2013): what if a man fell in love with an operating system.
- Being John Malkovich (1999): what if there were a door into another person's head.

The strength of the what if is that it generates a second act almost automatically, because each consequence suggests the next. The weakness is that it produces concept without character with unusual ease, which is failure mode 8.2.

PRACTICE

- Write your counterfactual as one sentence.
- List the ten consequences it forces, in order of increasing seriousness.
- If you cannot reach ten, it is a sketch. If consequence ten is more interesting than consequence one, you have a feature.

3.7 CHARACTER FIRST

Some films begin with a person rather than a situation: a voice, a contradiction, a way of moving through a room. The work is then to build the situation that exposes the contradiction.

- Michael Clayton (2007): a fixer at a law firm who cleans up other people's disasters and cannot manage his own life.
- Tár (2022): a conductor at the height of institutional power, for whom control of an orchestra and control of the people around her are the same instrument.

In both, the character is the engine and the plot is engineered to apply maximum pressure to one specific flaw. The reliable method is contradiction: a character worth ninety minutes wants two incompatible things at once, and the plot is the machine that forces the choice.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

PRACTICE

- Write a character as two sentences that contradict each other and are both true.
- Design the single situation in which both cannot remain true.
- Name the person who will force that situation to occur.

3.8 IMAGE, PLACE AND CONSTRAINT

A film can begin as a picture in your head with no story attached. The discipline is to interrogate the image until it produces a situation.

- *Parasite* (2019) begins from a semi basement apartment whose window sits at street level, so that the residents watch the world from below. The image is the class structure.
- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) began from the idea of a chase that starts almost immediately and effectively never stops.
- *Locke* (2013) is one man, one car, one motorway at night and a telephone.

Constraint belongs in the same section, because a limitation is a generator and not a restriction. One room. One night. Real time. Each of these limits produced a film precisely because the limit forced invention.

PRACTICE

This exercise turns a static image into a situation. Do it in writing, in this order.

- Step one. Describe an image you cannot shake, in two lines. Only what is visible. No explanation, no backstory. Example: a woman in a wedding dress sitting alone on the kerb outside a petrol station at four in the morning.
- Step two. Ask who is standing just outside the frame, and write them down. Example: the person who drove her there, the person she is waiting for, the man watching from behind the counter.
- Step three. Ask what happened in the five minutes before this image, and write one sentence. This usually gives you the inciting incident.
- Step four. Ask what is the worst thing that could walk into this frame right now, and write one sentence. This usually gives you the antagonist or the complication.
- Step five. Combine steps two, three and four into a single sentence containing a person, a want and an obstacle. That sentence is your first draft of a premise.

The same five steps work on a constraint instead of an image. Replace step one with a limitation chosen in advance, for example one house and one night, and then run steps two to five inside it.

THE EIGHT SOURCES

3.9 ASSIGNMENT, COMMISSION AND EXISTING PROPERTY

Worth naming honestly, because a large proportion of professional screenwriting work begins with somebody else's material and a deadline. A studio owns a toy, a game, a dormant franchise or a remake right, and hires a writer to find the film inside it.

The craft in this position is identical to adaptation: find the one dramatic problem the property can carry, and be prepared to argue for it. Writers who treat assignment work as beneath idea generation tend to produce the weakest assignment work.

BRAINSTORMING AND FOUR DEEPER TECHNIQUES

Section 3 told you where to look. This section tells you how to run a session so that looking produces something, and adds four techniques that do not belong to any single source because they can be applied to material from all of them.

4.1 WHAT BRAINSTORMING ACTUALLY IS

Brainstorming has a bad reputation because most people run it wrongly, in one continuous phase where ideas are proposed and judged in the same breath. That does not produce fewer bad ideas. It produces fewer ideas, and then it produces the safest one in the room.

The whole method rests on one rule: generation and selection are two separate activities and must never happen at the same time.

- Phase one, generation. The only measure is quantity. Nothing is judged, nothing is deleted, nothing is discussed. Bad ideas are not obstacles to good ones, they are the road to them.
- Phase two, selection. Everything is judged, without mercy. Ideally on a different day, and never in the same sitting as generation.

The gap between the two phases is doing real work. It filters enthusiasm from genuine interest. An idea that still produces a reaction on Thursday, when the excitement of Tuesday has gone, is an idea with something in it.

BRAINSTORMING AND FOUR DEEPER TECHNIQUES

4.2 BRAINSTORMING ALONE

The solo version has to be forced, because nothing external is pushing you. Structure it like this:

- Set a timer and a target number, and set the target uncomfortably high. Thirty what if questions in twenty minutes. Twenty forced pairings. Ten rungs of escalation without pausing.
- Write by hand, or in a plain file with no formatting. Formatting is a way of thinking about presentation instead of thinking.
- Never delete. Never reread while generating. If you catch yourself going back over the list, you have already switched to selection and the session is over.
- Expect the first third of the list to be material you had already thought of and were storing. Expect the middle third to be obvious. The last fifth is why the exercise exists, and it only appears because the target number forced you past comfort.
- When the timer ends, close the file. Do not read it again for at least a day.

One additional solo technique that works well: state the problem out loud as a question before you start, and record yourself talking for ten minutes without notes. People generate differently when speaking than when writing, and the transcript almost always contains one line you would not have written.

4.3 BRAINSTORMING IN A GROUP

Groups are worth the logistics for two things: range, because five people have five sets of obsessions, and combination, because somebody will pair two of your elements in a way you would not have.

Groups also fail faster than individuals, and always for the same reason. One person begins evaluating during generation, everybody else notices, and from that point on everyone silently pre filters their own contributions. What is left is the safe material.

Practical shape for a session that works:

- Three to six people. Below three there is no range. Above six, people stop contributing.
- Forty minutes, timed, with the question written on the wall before anyone speaks.
- One person records everything on a visible surface and does not judge, including with their face. Evaluation by expression is still evaluation.

BRAINSTORMING AND FOUR DEEPER TECHNIQUES

- Explicit permission to build on somebody else's line rather than defend your own. The most useful sentence in the room is yes, and then what if.
- No idea is attributed to anyone. Ownership makes people defensive, and defensive people stop generating.
- At the end, stop. Do not discuss which ones are good. Send everyone away with the full list.

Then select alone, or in pairs. This is not a matter of taste. Groups select badly, because a committee converges on the option nobody objects to, and in dramatic material the option nobody objects to is reliably the weakest one. Groups generate range. Individuals choose.

4.4 KEEPING WHAT YOU THROW AWAY

Record everything from every session, including the material you rejected in the first minute. Ideas discarded as premises come back later as antagonists, settings, second act complications or single scenes, sometimes years afterwards. The filing system for this is in section 9.

4.5 THE UNFINISHED ARGUMENT

Start from a question you genuinely cannot answer and want answered. Whether a person can be forgiven. Whether ambition is worth what it costs. Whether the truth helps.

Then invent the two people who would answer it differently, and the situation that forces them into the same room.

A film built from a question you have already answered becomes a lecture, and the audience feels the writer's thumb on the scale. A film built from a question that still bothers you stays alive through eleven drafts, which matters more than it sounds when you are on draft seven and no longer remember why you started.

PRACTICE

- Write the question as a question, not as a statement.
- Write the two characters who would answer it in opposite ways, and make the one you disagree with the more articulate of the two.
- Write the situation that traps them together and does not allow either to leave.

BRAINSTORMING AND FOUR DEEPER TECHNIQUES

4.6 WANT AND NEED INTERROGATION

This is the technique that turns a character sketch into a plot engine, and it can be run on any starting material.

- Write what the character wants, in concrete and visible terms. Something a camera could photograph them getting: the money, the job, the confession, the body out of the house before dawn.
- Write what they need, which they cannot yet name and would deny if you told them.
- Then design the plot so that getting closer to the want makes the need harder to reach.

That tension, want pulling against need, is the most common structural engine in commercial narrative cinema. In Michael Clayton (2007), the want is to make the problem go away and keep the job. The need is to stop being the man who makes problems go away.

4.7 THE ESCALATION DRILL

The most efficient single exercise in this chapter, because it tests whether an idea can sustain a second act and produces the second act while testing.

- Write the situation in one line.
- Write and then it gets worse, ten times.
- Do not repeat a category of worse. Rotate through physical, social, financial, moral, temporal and relational.
- Do not solve anything before line ten.

Applied to Jaws (1975): a shark kills a swimmer, so the chief wants to close the beach, so the town overrules him because it needs the season, so it kills again in front of witnesses, so the money now has to be paid to hunters, so the wrong shark is caught and the town relaxes, so the real one attacks with the chief's own son in the water, so the chief who is afraid of water has to go out on a boat, so the boat is inadequate, so the boat sinks. Each rung is a different category of worse.

4.8 THE OBSESSION AUDIT

Not a technique for generating ideas but for locating where your ideas will have energy. Run it once, honestly, and keep the result.

BRAINSTORMING AND FOUR DEEPER TECHNIQUES

- Every subject you have researched voluntarily in the last five years without being paid to.
- The arguments you keep having with people.
- The three films you rewatch when unwell.
- What you are afraid of that you have never told anyone.

Writers routinely spend years on projects that intersect no part of this list. The resulting scripts are competent and lifeless, and nobody in the process can identify what is wrong, because nothing is wrong. That failure is 8.8.

4.9 PRACTICE: ASSEMBLE FIVE CANDIDATE IDEAS

Everything up to this point has been generation. Stop generating and take stock, because sections 5 to 8 will operate on what you now have.

- Gather all the material produced in the Practice sections of section 3 and section 4. Put it in one place, in whatever state it is in.
- Read through it once, quickly, without stopping to improve anything.
- Choose the five that produced the strongest reaction. Not the five that seem the most commercial, and not the five that are the most developed. The five you keep thinking about.
- Write each of the five as a single sentence, on one page, numbered one to five.
- Leave everything else where it is. You are not deleting it, you are setting it aside.

One page, five sentences. That page is the input for the rest of this chapter, and by section 12 it will have become a single tested premise.

FROM IDEA TO PREMISE: FIVE TESTS

An idea that has survived generation must now survive testing. Testing costs an hour. Writing an untested idea costs a year. An idea that fails these tests is not necessarily dead, and section 5.6 shows how to rebuild one that fails, but writing it in its failed state is the most expensive mistake available to a screenwriter.

Run all five tests on all five ideas from 4.9. Write the answers down. An answer you only think is not an answer.

BRAINSTORMING AND FOUR DEEPER TECHNIQUES

5.1 TEST ONE: IS THERE A PROTAGONIST WITH A VISIBLE WANT

Not a state of mind, not a wish, not a theme. A want that can be filmed, and that has a moment of achievement or failure.

- To find the killer.
- To get the money across the border before morning.
- To keep the beach open, in the case of the mayor in *Jaws* (1975), and to close it, in the case of the chief.
- To get the family out of the house before the owners come back, in *Parasite* (2019).

If your answer is that the protagonist wants to understand herself, or wants to be happy, the test has failed. Those are needs. Needs are real and they matter, but they are served through wants, and a camera cannot photograph one.

5.2 TEST TWO: IS THE OPPOSITION ACTIVE

Opposition has to push back with intent, and has to be at least as strong as the protagonist.

- Weather is not opposition unless somebody profits from it.
- Sadness is not opposition.
- A society is opposition only when it is embodied in specific people who make specific decisions.

The diagnostic question: what does the antagonist want, and would their version of this film be coherent? In *Get Out* (2017) the family's version of the film makes complete sense from inside. If the answer for your idea is no, you have a device rather than a character, and the second act will sag no matter how well you write it.

5.3 TEST THREE: ARE THE STAKES CONCRETE AND PERSONAL

Stakes must be specific, and must attach to the protagonist. The world will end is weaker than my daughter will die, unless the end of the world is made specific through somebody's daughter.

Complete this sentence, in writing, for each idea:

- If the protagonist fails, then this specific thing happens *to this specific person*.

If you cannot complete it without abstraction, the premise is unfinished. That is not a fatal diagnosis. It usually means you have not yet decided who the protagonist loves.

FROM IDEA TO PREMISE: FIVE TESTS

5.4 TEST FOUR: IS THERE A STORY ENGINE

The engine is the structural reason that scenes keep occurring. Without one, a writer has to invent every scene from nothing, which is why untested scripts stall around page forty five.

Engines are of two kinds. Structural engines are situations that oblige events:

- An investigation, as in *Chinatown* (1974): every lead produces the next scene.
- A countdown or deadline.
- A journey, a heist, a trial, a competition, a siege.
- A repeating day, as in *Groundhog Day* (1993), where the rule itself manufactures scenes.

Relational engines are conditions between people that oblige events:

- A lie that has to be maintained, as in *Parasite* (2019), where every new family member installed in the house is a scene the lie demands.
- A secret that must be kept from one specific person.
- A debt that has to be paid to someone who is present.

The test: can you name twenty distinct scenes that this premise obliges to happen, without inventing subplots? Take *Jaws* (1975): the first attack, the body found, the mayor's refusal, the beach opened, the second attack, the bounty, the wrong shark, the mother's accusation, the expert's arrival, the autopsy argument, the night search, the wrecked boat, the third attack with the son present, the beach finally closed, the hiring of the hunter, the departure, the cage, the first sighting, the sinking, the kill. Twenty, with no subplot invented.

If your own list dies at six, you have a short film or a first act. That is information, not failure.

5.5 TEST FIVE: DOES THE PREMISE CONTAIN A QUESTION THE ENDING WILL ANSWER

This test is often stated as whether you know the ending. That is the wrong question and it frightens writers unnecessarily. You do not need the ending in detail. You need to know what question the ending will be answering, because that question is what holds an audience across ninety minutes.

FROM IDEA TO PREMISE: FIVE TESTS

The question must be answerable yes or no, and the audience must be able to feel it being asked.

- Chinatown (1974): will he save her?
- Get Out (2017): will he get out?
- Whiplash (2014): will the teacher break him, or make him?
- Parasite (2019): will they be caught?

Notice that in each case the film delivers an answer that is more complicated than the question. That is allowed and it is usually where the value is. What is not allowed is having no question at all, because a premise with no question produces a script that stops rather than ends. This is the most common single note given on unproduced first features.

For each of your five ideas, write the question in six words or fewer. If you cannot, the premise has not yet identified what it is about.

5.6 WHAT TO DO WITH THE IDEAS THAT FAILED

Count how many of your five ideas passed all five tests. In most cases the answer is one, sometimes two, frequently none. That is the normal result and it is the reason this section exists.

An idea that fails is almost never a bad idea. It is usually an idea that is missing pressure, an opponent, or a clock. Here is the repair, run on a deliberately weak example.

Raw idea: a woman inherits her estranged mother's house.

- Test one fails. Inheriting is passive; there is no want. Repair: add pressure. She must sell the house within thirty days or lose it to the estate's creditors. Now she wants something and a camera can photograph her getting it or losing it.
- Test two fails. Nothing pushes back. Repair: add a person. Her brother has been living in the house for six years and will not leave. He wants to stay exactly as badly as she needs to sell. His version of the film is coherent.
- Test three fails. The stakes are financial and vague. Repair: make them specific and personal. If she fails, she cannot pay for her son's treatment.
- Test four now passes almost by itself. A thirty day clock, an obstructing co owner, and a house full of the mother's belongings, each object a scene.
- Test five now passes. The question is: will she choose the house or the money, and can the two of them survive the choice.

Nothing was added except pressure, an opponent and a clock. Total time, about twenty minutes. The idea failed all five tests in its original form and passed all five afterwards.

FROM IDEA TO PREMISE: FIVE TESTS

PRACTICE

- Take each of your ideas that failed, one at a time.
 - Identify which of the five tests it failed. Usually it is one or two, not all five.
 - Apply the corresponding repair: missing want means add pressure and a deadline; missing opposition means add a person who wants the opposite; vague stakes mean name the specific person who is hurt; no engine means find the lie, the debt, the investigation or the clock; no question means decide what the audience will be waiting to find out.
 - Rewrite the idea as one sentence and run the five tests again.
 - Count again. Ideas that fail twice, after honest repair, go back into the file from section 9. They are not dead. They are not ready.
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THE LOGLINE

The logline is a professional instrument, not a marketing afterthought. Writers who cannot write it usually cannot write the second act either, because both failures have the same cause: nobody in the story wants anything specific enough.

6.1 ANATOMY

A functional logline contains five components:

- An irony or hook, the element that makes this different from the neighbouring film.
- A protagonist described by function, not by name.
- An inciting incident.
- A goal, with active opposition.
- Stakes, or a deadline, or both.

A standard construction: when [inciting incident], a [description of protagonist] must [goal] before [deadline], or [specific consequence].

Names are omitted because a stranger cannot hold them. Adjectives are used sparingly and only when they carry irony: a police chief who is afraid of water, a grieving linguist, a hitman with a conscience.

6.2 WORKED EXAMPLES

Written fresh here for illustration, from produced films, to show the shape.

Jaws (1975). When a great white shark begins killing swimmers days before the summer season, a police chief who is terrified of water must convince a town that needs the tourist money to close its beaches, and then go out on the water himself to kill it.

THE LOGLINE

Arrival (2016). When a linguist is recruited to communicate with an alien craft that has appeared without explanation, she must decode a language that alters the mind of anyone who learns it, before the world's governments decide to fire first.

Parasite (2019). When an unemployed young man talks his way into tutoring for a wealthy family, he installs his entire household as their staff, until the discovery of another intruder in the house threatens to expose them all.

Note what each contains: pressure, a clock or a threat, and a cost. Note what none of them contains: theme, tone description, comparison to other films, or the word journey.

6.3 TEN WAYS A LOGLINE FAILS

- It describes a situation with no goal.
- It names four characters.
- It withholds the hook in order to preserve a surprise.
- It uses abstract stakes such as “everything will change”.
- It describes the theme instead of the plot.
- It is two sentences of setup and no consequence.
- It could describe forty other films.
- It contains the phrase “must learn to”, which announces a lesson rather than a conflict.
- It runs past sixty words.
- It describes a film the writer does not actually want to write.

6.4 PRACTICE: WRITE THE LOGLINE FOR YOUR SURVIVING IDEA

Take the idea from your five that passed the tests. If more than one survived, choose the one you cannot stop thinking about; if none survived, use the strongest of the ideas you repaired in 5.6.

- Write five loglines for that one idea. Not one, give.
- Make each one emphasise a different element. One that foregrounds the antagonist. One that foregrounds the clock. One that foregrounds the irony. One from the antagonist's point of view. One that is exactly twelve words long.
- Read them aloud in sequence. Mark the one that makes you want to write the film.

The exercise reveals what your film actually is. Very often version eight describes a better film than the one you were planning to write, and it is considerably cheaper to discover that now than in month five of a first draft.

PRESSURE TESTING BEFORE YOU WRITE

PRESSURE TESTING BEFORE YOU WRITE

A word about this section before it starts, because read cold it can sound discouraging, and that is not its purpose.

You are free to write anything you want. Nobody can stop you, no test here has any authority over you, and some of the best films ever made would have failed several of the questions below. Writing purely to find out what you think, with no intention of production, is a legitimate and necessary activity, and every working writer does it.

But if you want this particular screenplay to become a film, then at some point it stops being only yours. It will be read by people who must decide whether to spend money, time and reputation on it, and they will ask these questions whether or not you have prepared answers. The questions are not tests of your worth as a writer. They are the questions the project has to survive in order to exist in the world.

So the honest position is this: answer them now, while it is cheap and private, or answer them later in a room where somebody is watching you. Writers who have thought about them arrive calm. Writers who have not tend to lose the room to someone who has, with a weaker script.

These questions are also the foundation of pitching, and they are dealt with in far more detail, with the specific language used in meetings, in the pitching course later in this series. For now, answer them for yourself, in writing, in about half an hour.

7.1 THE SECOND ACT TEST

List twenty scenes the premise demands. Not scenes you could invent, scenes it obliges, using the method demonstrated in 5.4. If the list dies at eight, you have a first act premise, which is the most common condition of abandoned scripts.

7.2 WHY THIS, WHY NOW, WHY ME

- Why this: what does this story do that no other current film does?
- Why now: what makes it urgent and legible to an audience this year rather than in 1998?
- Why me: what do you know, have lived, have researched or believe that makes you the writer who should write it?

PRESSURE TESTING BEFORE YOU WRITE

The third question is often dismissed as sentimental. It is not. It is the question every meeting eventually asks in some form, and it is also the question that keeps you working when the draft stops being fun. If your answer is nothing in particular, that is worth knowing before you commit a year, and it usually points back to the obsession audit in 4.8.

7.3 FORM TEST

Determine what the material actually is before writing ninety pages of the wrong form.

- A single dramatic problem, resolved by one protagonist over a bounded period, is a feature.
- A world containing several ongoing problems with no natural end point is a series.
- A single idea with one turn is a short film. This is a respectable answer, not a demotion.
- A story whose interest is primarily factual, where the real people are more compelling than anything you could invent, may be a documentary. Recognising this early has saved careers.

7.4 COMPARABLES

Name two produced films that share your project's audience, tone or scale, and be honest about their box office and their decade. Comparables are not aspiration. They are evidence that an audience exists, and they are the vocabulary financiers use to describe risk.

- If you cannot name comparables at all, either the project is genuinely unprecedented, which is rare, or you have not yet identified what it is.
- If all your comparables are more than twenty years old, the market has moved, and you want to know that before the meeting rather than during it.

7.5 SCALE AND PRACTICALITY

Informational, not a restriction on ambition. Count the elements that drive cost:

- Number of locations, and how many are exteriors at night.
- Crowds, children, animals, water, vehicles.
- Period detail and visual effects.
- The number of days the story spans, which drives wardrobe, continuity and schedule.

PRESSURE TESTING BEFORE YOU WRITE

This does not tell you whether to write the film. It tells you which conversation you are entering. A first feature with four actors in one house enters a different conversation from a first feature with a sea battle. Both conversations are available. They are not the same one, and it helps to know which one you have chosen.

7.6 THE OUT LOUD TEST

- Pitch the premise verbally to someone who does not work in film, in under a minute, without notes.
- Watch their face rather than listening to their words. People are polite in language and honest in posture.
- Wait a week, then ask them to tell it back to you.

What survives a week in a stranger's memory is the actual concept. What they forget is decoration you are attached to.

EIGHT FAILURE MODES

Most weak screenplays fail at the idea stage and are then executed competently, which is why the notes they receive are so hard to act on. Nobody can point at a bad page, because there isn't one.

Each failure below is given in the same three parts: what the problem is, how to recognise it in your own work, and what to actually change. Read them against your surviving idea before you outline.

8.1 SITUATION INSTEAD OF STORY

The problem. A family is falling apart. A town is dying. A marriage is ending. These are conditions, not stories. A condition can be true for years without anything being obliged to happen, which means nothing in it produces a next scene.

How to recognise it. You can describe your project only in the present continuous tense. A woman is struggling with her father's illness. Nothing in your description has a beginning or an end. When you try the twenty scene test from 5.4 you can name atmosphere but not events.

EIGHT FAILURE MODES

The repair. Add an event with a deadline that forces a decision, and let the condition become the pressure the decision is made under.

- Before: a marriage is ending.
- After: they have eleven days to sell the flat before the buyer withdraws, and neither will move out first.

The marriage is still ending. It is now happening inside something that generates scenes.

8.2 CONCEPT WITHOUT CHARACTER

The problem. The what if is dazzling and nobody inside it wants anything. The film spends eighty minutes explaining its own rules. Common in science fiction and in high concept comedy.

How to recognise it. You can talk for twenty minutes about how the world works and less than one minute about who the protagonist is. When someone asks what he wants, you answer with what happens to him.

The repair. Find the person for whom this counterfactual is personally catastrophic rather than merely interesting, and tell it from there.

- Before: what if memory could be erased commercially.
- After: a man discovers that the woman he loves has paid to have him erased, and books the same procedure out of spite, then tries to stop it from inside his own disappearing memory. - *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004)

Identical concept. One version is a premise; the other is a rulebook.

8.3 THEME FIRST

The problem. You know exactly what the film is about and have not yet decided what happens. The result is characters arguing the writer's position at different volumes, and an audience that feels managed.

How to recognise it. You describe the project by its meaning rather than its events. It is about how capitalism destroys friendship. Every character who disagrees with the theme is either stupid, dishonest or punished.

EIGHT FAILURE MODES

The repair. Give the opposing position to the most articulate and sympathetic character in the film, and let it win at least twice, in ways the audience feels are earned.

- Practical version: write the scene where the character you disagree with is completely right, and the protagonist has no answer. If you cannot write that scene, you are writing an argument, not a story.

8.4 THE ANECDOTE TRAP

The problem. Something remarkable happened once, and it makes a superb story at dinner. It is four minutes long. Expanded to ninety it becomes padding around a single turn.

How to recognise it. When you pitch it, you tell it in ninety seconds and then stop, and the other person says, "and then what" and you have nothing. The escalation drill in 4.7 dies at rung three.

The repair. Two honest options, and both are respectable:

- Use the anecdote as one scene inside a larger premise, usually as the inciting incident or the midpoint.
- Accept that it is a short film, and make an excellent short film. *Whiplash* (2014) reached the screen because a short film was made first.

8.5 BIOGRAPHICAL SPRAWL

The problem. A whole life, in order, because it all really happened. No dramatic problem, only chronology, and an ending determined by a death rather than by a decision.

How to recognise it. Your outline is organised by years. You are defending the inclusion of scenes on the grounds that they are true. You cannot name what the protagonist wants, because across a lifetime they wanted many things.

The repair. Choose the shortest period that contains the change, and treat everything outside it as backstory you will not dramatise.

- Ask which six weeks decided who this person became, and write only those weeks.
- Everything before that period becomes information delivered inside scenes, if it is needed at all.

EIGHT FAILURE MODES

8.6 THE TWIST THAT IS THE ENTIRE IDEA

The problem. The film exists to deliver a final revelation and has nothing to sustain the eighty minutes before it.

How to recognise it. You cannot describe your project without saying “you have to get to the end”. When you try to explain the second act, you find yourself protecting the surprise instead of describing events.

The repair. Assume the audience guesses the twist twenty minutes in.

- If the film is still worth watching, you have a film that happens to contain a twist. Proceed.
- If it is not, you have a twist looking for a film, and the work is to build a premise that would function even with the ending printed on the poster.

8.7 OVERLOADING

The problem. Four good ideas in one screenplay, each undernourished. Common in second and third scripts, when the writer is afraid there will not be another chance.

How to recognise it. Your logline needs two sentences joined by also. You have three protagonists and are unable to say which one the film belongs to. Every note you receive is about clarity.

The repair.

- Identify which of the ideas generates the most obliged scenes, using the twenty scene test. That one is the film.
- Put the other three in the idea file from section 9. They do not expire, and you will write faster without them.

8.8 BORROWED HEAT

The problem. The idea derives its appeal from a recent success and contains nothing you independently care about. It reads as competent and dead. This is the hardest failure to diagnose from inside, because nothing in it is wrong.

How to recognise it. Your best answer to why me is that this kind of film is doing well. You are not curious about the research. You would not watch this film if somebody else had made it.

The repair. Run the obsession audit in 4.8 and compare.

- If the project intersects the audit at no point, that is information about the project, not about you.
- If it intersects at one point, build the film around that point rather than around the trend, and it usually becomes a different and better project.

CAPTURING AND MANAGING IDEAS

CAPTURING AND MANAGING IDEAS

Unglamorous and disproportionately valuable. Professional writers are distinguished less by the quality of individual ideas than by having a system that ensures no idea is lost and none is developed prematurely.

9.1 THE IDEA LOG

- One file. One line per idea, dated. No elaboration, no evaluation, no formatting.
- The purpose is capture speed. An idea that takes four minutes to record will not be recorded.
- Everything goes in it, including material rejected in group sessions and ideas you are certain are bad.
- Review quarterly, not weekly. The ones that still produce a reaction after three months are the ones with life in them.

9.2 THE PREMISE SHEET

When an idea survives the quarterly review, promote it to a single page containing the following and nothing more:

- One line concept.
- Protagonist and their visible want.
- Antagonist and their want.
- The inciting incident.
- The stakes sentence, completed with a specific person and a specific loss.
- The story engine, named.
- The ending question, in six words or fewer.
- Three comparable films.
- The answer to why me.
- A list of twenty obliged scenes.

One page. If it runs to three, you have started writing the script instead of testing it, which is the failure this chapter exists to prevent.

9.3 INCUBATION AND PORTFOLIO

Ideas benefit from being left alone. The mechanism is not mystical: distance restores your ability to see the material as an audience rather than as its author.

The practical version is to keep three or four premise sheets alive at once and rotate between them. Working writers almost never have one project. They have a portfolio at different stages, which is also how they survive the periods when a project dies, and projects die routinely for reasons that have nothing to do with the writing.

CAPTURING AND MANAGING IDEAS

9.4 WHEN TO STOP TESTING AND START WRITING

- The five tests pass.
- Twenty obliged scenes exist on the sheet.
- You have begun to feel impatient with the sheet itself.

Impatience with preparation is a reliable signal that preparation is finished. Comfort with preparation, on the other hand, is usually avoidance, and it can last for years.

RIGHTS, REAL PEOPLE AND EXISTING MATERIAL

Informational summary only. This is not legal advice, and practice varies by jurisdiction. Anything you intend to sell should be reviewed by a lawyer who works in entertainment in the relevant territory.

10.1 UNDERLYING RIGHTS

If your idea comes from a novel, short story, play, article, comic or film, the right to adapt it belongs to somebody. Writing a full adaptation without securing an option is a common and expensive mistake: the resulting screenplay cannot be sold or produced, and can only be used as a writing sample.

The usual instrument is an option agreement: a payment for the exclusive right to develop and to purchase within a fixed period. Options on obscure material are frequently modest. Options on known material are not.

10.2 PUBLIC DOMAIN

Works whose copyright has expired can be adapted freely, subject to territory specific rules. Note that particular translations, editions and derivative versions may still be protected even when the original work is not, which catches people out with foreign language classics.

10.3 REAL PEOPLE AND TRUE EVENTS

- Facts are not owned. Nobody can stop you writing about an event that happened.
- Exposure comes from depicting identifiable living people, particularly where the depiction is invented, unflattering and presented as fact.
- Life rights agreements are bought less for permission than for two practical things: cooperation, which gives you access to detail no researcher can obtain, and protection, which reduces the likelihood of a claim. Financiers and insurers frequently require them.

RIGHTS, REAL PEOPLE AND EXISTING MATERIAL

10.4 CHAIN OF TITLE

The documentary record showing who owns what at each stage. No responsible producer will finance a project with gaps in it. If you write with a collaborator, agree the split and record it in writing before you write, not after the project sells.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ONE IDEA THROUGH THE WHOLE CHAPTER

Everything in this chapter, applied to a single piece of raw material, in the order the chapter presents it. Each stage names the section it comes from, so that the sequence can be followed rather than admired.

11.1 WHERE THE IDEA CAME FROM

Source: research and systematic trawling, section 3.2. One hour spent in a trade publication for the shipping industry, copying out any sentence that produced a reaction.

The sentence that survived: a container abandoned at a port becomes the property of the port authority after a fixed period, and these containers are then auctioned unopened.

At this stage it is an idea in the sense of section 2.1 and nothing more. There is no protagonist, no want, no opposition. It has exactly one useful quality: it contains a locked box and a deadline.

11.2 TURNING THE IDEA INTO A CONCEPT

Technique: forced collision, section 3.5. The shipping fact is crossed with an entry from list two, a person who needs money urgently and is not a criminal.

The pairing that produced a physical reaction: a nurse in her mid fifties whose hospital has closed.

Concept, in the sense of section 2.2: a woman with no criminal history buys an unopened shipping container at auction with money she cannot afford to lose.

There is now a collision in the sentence, so the idea has moved up one rung of the ladder.

Technique: the escalation drill, section 4.7. Ten rungs, rotating categories, nothing solved before the end.

RIGHTS, REAL PEOPLE AND EXISTING MATERIAL

11.3 GENERATING THE EVENTS

Technique: the escalation drill, section 4.7. Ten rungs, rotating categories, nothing solved before the end.

- The container is not empty.
- What is inside is worth far more than she paid, which is why somebody else wants it.
- The previous owner is alive and looking for it.
- The port authority holds a record of the sale with her name on it.
- Her daughter works at the port.
- The buyer she approaches is the one person she should not have approached.
- Selling the contents requires her to commit the first crime of her life.
- Keeping them requires her to commit a worse one.
- The previous owner reaches the daughter before he reaches her.
- The next auction is in three weeks, when the paperwork will be reviewed.

Ten rungs, six categories of worse. The drill has produced most of a second act while testing whether one exists.

11.4 FINDING THE PERSON

Technique: want and need interrogation, section 4.6.

- Want, visible and filmable: sell the contents and clear the debt before the paperwork is reviewed.
- Need, unnamed by her: to stop measuring herself by what she can provide for her daughter.
- Designed tension: every step towards selling the contents takes her further from the daughter she is selling them for.

11.5 RUNNING THE FIVE TESTS

Section 5, all five, written down rather than assumed.

- Test one, visible want: passes. Sell the contents, clear the debt. There is a moment of success or failure and a camera can photograph it.
- Test two, active opposition: passes. The previous owner wants the contents back and cannot involve the police, which makes him more dangerous rather than less. His version of the film is coherent, which is the diagnostic in 5.2.
- Test three, concrete stakes: passes. If she fails, she loses the flat her daughter lives in, and the daughter learns what she did.
- Test four, story engine: passes. Relational and structural at once. A lie that must be maintained, a debt that must be paid, a three week clock, and a locked object that everybody wants opened at a different moment.
- Test five, ending question: passes. Will she give it back, in six words. The film can answer that more complicatedly than it asks it.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ONE IDEA THROUGH THE WHOLE CHAPTER

11.6 THE TWENTY SCENE TEST

Section 5.4, applied. The auction. The transport. The first attempt to open it. The neighbour who sees. The contents. The night she tells nobody. The first approach to a buyer. The refusal. The second buyer, who is the wrong one. The daughter's shift at the port. The first visit from the previous owner, who says nothing incriminating. The debt collector. The decision to sell. The handover that fails. The moment the daughter finds out. The offer to give it back. The condition attached to giving it back. The paperwork review. The last night before the auction. The choice.

Twenty scenes obliged by the premise, no subplot invented. The idea has passed the second act test in 7.1.

11.7 THE LOGLINE

Section 6.1, using the standard construction, then compressed.

When a nurse who has lost her job buys an abandoned shipping container at auction and finds something inside it worth more than her flat, she must sell it before the port reviews the paperwork, while the man who left it there closes in on the only person who knows where it is.

11.8 PRESSURE TESTING

- Form, section 7.3: a feature. One dramatic problem, one protagonist, a bounded period of three weeks.
- Why this: a crime story in which the protagonist is not a criminal and the crime is administrative before it is violent.
- Why now: the economics of an abandoned container are immediately legible to any audience that has watched public services close.
- Why me: answered honestly by the writer, or the project is 8.8.
- Comparables, section 7.4: contemporary crime dramas in which an ordinary protagonist crosses a line under financial pressure, of which there are several from the last fifteen years at recoverable budgets.
- Scale, section 7.5: four principal locations, largely interior, no crowds, one vehicle sequence, three weeks of story time. A producer can price this in an afternoon.

11.9 WHERE THIS LEAVES US

Elapsed time from the sentence in a trade magazine to a tested premise with a logline and twenty scenes: under two hours across two sittings, with a night in between to separate generation from selection as required by 4.1.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ONE IDEA THROUGH THE WHOLE CHAPTER

Nothing has been written. No scene exists, no character has spoken, no structure has been chosen. Everything needed to decide whether to spend a year on it is known, and if the answer had been no, the cost of finding out would have been an afternoon.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE BEFORE CHAPTER TWO

This chapter has a deliverable. Chapter Two builds the world and the characters, and it assumes you arrive holding one specific thing: a single premise that has passed every test in this document.

Write it on one page. It must contain all of the following:

- A one line concept containing a collision.
- A protagonist with a want that a camera can photograph.
- An antagonist whose own version of the film would make sense.
- A completed stakes sentence naming a specific person and a specific loss.
- A named story engine, structural or relational.
- The ending question, in six words or fewer.
- A list of twenty obliged scenes.
- A logline under sixty words.
- Two honest comparables, with their decade.
- An answer to why me.
- Confirmation that any underlying rights are clear, optioned or in the public domain.

Eleven items. Between one and two hours of work if the ideas exist, and the ideas exist because sections 3 and 4 generated them.

Do not proceed with three candidates. Choose one. Chapter Two will ask you to build a world, a time, a place and a cast of people around a premise, and that work cannot be done in triplicate. The other candidates go into the idea log from 9.1, and they will still be there when this one is finished.

One page, one premise. That page is what Chapter Two begins with.

GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

- **Beat.** The smallest unit of dramatic change, usually a single exchange in which something shifts.
- **Chain of title.** The documentary record of ownership of a screenplay and its underlying material.
- **Comparable.** A produced film used as a reference point for audience, tone or scale.
- **Concept.** An idea shaped into a situation containing conflict.
- **High concept.** A concept whose appeal is fully communicated by its central situation in one sentence.
- **Inciting incident.** The event that disturbs the protagonist's normal condition and produces the want.
- **Logline.** One or two sentences constructed to transmit the premise and create appetite.
- **Option.** A payment for the exclusive right to develop and later purchase existing material.
- **Premise.** A concept with a protagonist, a want, an opposition and stakes. Also, in Egri's older usage, the argument the story proves.
- **Spec script.** A screenplay written without commission, on the writer's own initiative.
- **Stakes.** The specific consequence of failure, attached to a specific person.
- **Story engine.** The structural or relational reason that scenes continue to occur.
- **Treatment.** A prose account of the story, usually between five and thirty pages, written before or instead of an outline.
- **Want and need.** The visible goal and the unrecognised requirement, usually in tension with each other.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

FURTHER READING

Listed for orientation rather than endorsement. These books disagree with each other, which is the most useful thing about them.

- Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. The origin of premise as argument. Written for theatre, applies directly.
 - Syd Field, *Screenplay*. The paradigm that made three act structure the industry's shared vocabulary.
 - Robert McKee, *Story*. Dense and systematic, strongest on the relationship between value change and scene construction.
 - William Goldman, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*. A working screenwriter on how decisions are actually made.
 - Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat*. Commercially focused, strongest on the logline and on testing an idea before writing.
 - John Truby, *The Anatomy of Story*. Argues for premise and moral argument as the foundation of structure.
 - Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great*. Practical on development and rewriting.
 - John Yorke, *Into the Woods*. Traces why the recurring shape of stories recurs, across film and television.
 - Linda Aronson, *The 21st Century Screenplay*. The most useful treatment of non linear and multi protagonist forms.
 - David Mamet, *On Directing Film*. Short, severe and clarifying on the difference between story and decoration.
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WHAT COMES NEXT

Chapter Two takes the single premise you are now holding and builds the world and the people inside it: constructing the spatial and temporal context of a story, deciding what the audience needs to know about that world and when, and designing characters whose contradictions generate plot rather than decorating it.

Nothing in Chapter Two will rescue a premise that has not passed the five tests. That is the reason this chapter comes first, and the reason it ends with a deliverable rather than a summary.