

Chapter 1

Introducing the Art of Screenwriting

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting an overview of the screenwriting process
 - ▶ Putting your ideas on paper
 - ▶ Revising your work
 - ▶ Selling your script
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Screenwriting is a craft, and like any craft worth pursuing, you can never know too much about it. You wouldn't tell a doctor to stop scrutinizing advances in medicine, would you? Can a teacher ever learn enough about education? This chapter provides a glimpse of screenwriting and alerts you to where in the book you can go to find it. Consider it your preview of coming attractions.

Thinking Visually

Quick — in what children's book does a character require green glasses to enter a city gate? If you answered *The Wizard of Oz*, you're absolutely right. Dorothy needs green glasses to enter the Emerald City. And while they cut this detail in the film version, the question is nevertheless relevant to screenwriting. It's a question of vision — what do you need in order to see where you're going?

Screenwriting requires a unique vision, eyes trained to scan the world with particular acuity. It seems silly to say that screenwriters look at the world with a visual eye. Of course, they do. Doesn't everybody? After all, looking is a visual act.

And yet, there's a distinct difference between what screenwriters see and what people in other occupations see. Screenwriters break the world down into visual clips or scenes — in other words, into moving pictures. And screenwriters see with more than their eyes. Consider for a second that it's possible to see moving pictures while

- ✓ Observing the world around you
- ✓ Reading a novel, a play, or a poem
- ✓ Reading the newspaper
- ✓ Listening to music
- ✓ Listening to someone else's story



Screenwriters look for moving pictures in everything, though some sources yield more than others. Want to know how your vision stacks up? Find a public place, sit down for a while with a pad and pen, and write down what you notice. Then, flip to Chapter 2 and find out how visual your eye really is.

Developing the Writer's Mind

Imagine a storage facility, with aisles and aisles of file cabinets, some overflowing and some empty but for one scrap of paper. Or imagine a playground full of children, yes, but other people as well, people you wouldn't expect to see. Maybe two construction workers are playing basketball, or a few CEOs are eating donuts on the lawn; students and couples and blue-collar employees are all in the same space. Or imagine a long hallway full of doors. Occasionally, people emerge, have an exchange of some sort, and return behind those doors. Now, imagine a blank canvas. Paints and brushes sit nearby, but they remain, as of yet, unused. Any one of these spaces may resemble the mind of a writer.

Writers collect and store tons of details. They amass images, pieces of conversation, intriguing characters, sounds, expressions, slang, and more. They also costume what they find, envisioning different outcomes. Add some boots, some dust, and a gun — *voilà*. You're in a western. Dim the lights, strip away the color, and give everyone a cigar — presto! You have the black-and-white, suspense-filled world of a film noir. Introduce a spaceship or a time machine, and suddenly, the world becomes science fiction. This is how writers spend much of their time — not exactly a dull profession. So, I suppose that the question here is, What does your mind look like? If you want to find out, turn to Chapter 3.

Approaching Screenwriting as a Craft

Writers take their vocation very seriously. They'll do almost anything to inspire that muse, and I do mean anything. Rumor has it that

- ✓ Alexander Dumas color coordinated his paper with the type of fiction that he was writing. Blue paper was for novels, yellow paper was for poetry, and rose-colored pages were reserved for nonfiction.
- ✓ Mark Twain and Truman Capote had to write lying down.
- ✓ Ernest Hemingway sharpened dozens of pencils before he wrote.
- ✓ Willa Cather read the Bible before writing each day.
- ✓ Poet John Donne liked to lie in an open coffin before picking up a pen. Now, there's a story for you.

I'm not implying that to take up the craft of writing you have to become an eccentric, but that may happen of its own accord. Writing is both fun and frustrating; it requires flights of whimsy as well as hard work. It's equal parts imagination and preparation. Striking a balance between the two worlds is a constant challenge. Catching the muse is one thing, but keeping her with you is another — that's where the tools of the trade come in handy. If you want a glimpse of some of those tools, turn to Chapter 4 where I discuss the craft of screenwriting. You find advice on how to flex your imagination, channel it onto the page, and maintain the writing schedule necessary to do both.

Finding Your Screenplay's Story

So how do writers find material? It depends on the writer, of course, but in their ongoing quests for stories, writers resemble any or all of the following:

- ✓ Archaeologists
- ✓ Detectives
- ✓ Gardeners (plant a seed, and it will grow)
- ✓ Reporters
- ✓ Research analysts
- ✓ Scavengers
- ✓ Secret agents
- ✓ Voyeurs

Great stories abound; you just have to know how to catch them, or hunt them down, as the case may be. You should also know what details attract you to a story. Are you a people person? Do locations draw you in? Are you compelled by certain kinds of events? You want to consider these questions before your story search begins. Chapter 5 helps you find the perfect story and discover which material you naturally gravitate toward.

Working through the Writing Process

As soon as you get an idea, you have to develop that idea. The development process isn't unlike chaperoning several restless children across the country in a small car. You're likely to hear the following questions over and over:

- ✓ How does the whole thing start?
- ✓ What happens next?
- ✓ Who are these people?
- ✓ What happens next?
- ✓ What's the problem?
- ✓ Does that make sense?
- ✓ What happens next?
- ✓ Can we go any faster?
- ✓ Are we there yet?
- ✓ Why, why, why, why, why?

The whole journey can drive you nuts without a good road map, and in screenwriting terms, that map is known as *plot*. I consider plot to be so important that I dedicate three chapters to it — Chapters 6, 7, and 8. After all, every story has a beginning, middle, and an ending, and the same questions apply to each part. There's a whole other set of questions for character building in Chapter 9 and yet another chapter (you guessed it — Chapter 10) dedicated to orchestrating vibrant language for those characters once you know who they are. As you may suspect, without a navigation panel, you're in for a long, bumpy ride. So if you want to pacify that back-seat yammering, turn to Part II and start reading. Otherwise, you're liable to pull the car over and walk home.

Formatting Your Screenplay

Here are a few things that I've figured out about the screenwriting trade:

- ✓ Always look before you leap.
- ✓ People do judge a book by its cover.
- ✓ Actions speak louder than words.
- ✓ Brevity is the soul of wit (and most films, I might add).
- ✓ Try to make a long story short.
- ✓ You never get another chance to make a first impression.

You don't have much control over most aspects of the screenwriting profession. Ideas often arrive unbidden, characters sometimes dictate what they want to say, the ending of your story may change several times, and you may even find yourself in a different genre. And when you're talking about Hollywood, forget it. The business is always in flux. One day, they're looking for war films, and the next day, they want candy and roses. They may be searching for a script with the word "wedding" in the title; you just never know.

One of the only things a writer has complete control over is the script's appearance, and in this industry, appearance is everything (at least at the beginning). So how wide should your margins be? How do you introduce a scene? Where do you insert special effects? And how long is too long? Getting readers to flip past the cover is half the battle, and correct formatting may ensure that they do so. (For more on formatting your script, flip to Chapter 14.)

Constructing Your First Draft

By the time you sit down to write your first draft, you'll be armed and dangerous. Among other things, your arsenal will include the following:

- ✓ Strong characters
- ✓ Equally strong conflicts
- ✓ Character goals and dreams
- ✓ Locations
- ✓ A series of events
- ✓ Remedies for writer's block
- ✓ Outlines of the action
- ✓ A solid writing routine

So, now that you're considering a first draft, how good are you at puzzles — or at weaving, matching, or redecorating? Screenwriting requires all these skills. Crafting a draft is really a matter of arranging your arsenal of information into some desired form and then linking those moments together.



In screenwriting terms, your *catalyst* or *inciting incident* propels the action into the big event, which then shuttles the story toward a *midpoint* after which it rises to a *climax* followed by a *resolution* of some sort. Make sense? If not, don't fear; just read Chapter 16.

Rewriting Your Script

So, what do you have in common with Plato, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, and screenwriter John Logan? Before trying to answer, consider the following facts:

- ✓ Plato revised *The Republic* 50 times.
- ✓ Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times.
- ✓ Katherine Anne Porter took 20 years to finish *Ship of Fools*.
- ✓ John Logan spent more than ten years rewriting his play *Never the Sinner*, during which time he removed a dozen characters.

So where do you fit in? All these anecdotes involve revision, and if you're serious about completing a script, you're going to encounter that process as well. Have you heard the phrase "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"? Well, in screenwriting, success arrives in stages, and you almost always have to try, try again. After you outline the action and throw the story onto the page, you'll probably want to try, try again. First drafts are generally dynamic, but they're also unruly, which is why many writers believe that the real writing occurs in revisions. The phrase most often applied to this principle is "Writing is rewriting." Your first draft is written for the story and for you. Your internal editor isn't invited. But in the revision stage, the editor emerges in full form, sizing up each moment and weighing how it affects the whole. And will your revisions take you 20 years to complete? I hope not, but if you're worried that they might, flip to Chapter 17 for extensive advice on revisions.

Adapting Your Screenplay from an Outside Source

Have you ever read a story or watched a play and thought, "This would make a great film!"? If so, you've experienced the first step in the adaptation process: identifying a source. You can adapt all kinds of material for the screen. *Memento* began as a short story written by the director's brother, *Chicago* was originally a stage musical, *A Beautiful Mind* was first a biography. Strong primary source material abounds.

Adaptations are challenging for many of the same reasons that writers are drawn to them. They provide instant character recipes, events, and themes that seem perfect for the screen. Somehow, a writer must find a way to make an original piece out of what he or she is given. Separating from the primary source is a difficult but necessary endeavor. In a way, adapting is like getting two pieces of art for the price of one. So if you're interested in adapting a work into a screenplay, flip to Chapter 18 for a few tips on the process.

Just for fun

Are you a movie buff? Here's a little project to test your movie-trivia expertise. Know nothing about films but interested nonetheless? Consider this a project to launch your movie-trivia expertise. After all, you can never know too much about your craft of choice.

1. "I gave her my heart; she gave me a pen."
2. "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."
3. "If you build it, he will come."
4. "I see dead people."
5. "I do wish we could chat longer, but I'm having an old friend for dinner."
6. "When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with someone, you want the rest of your life to start right now."
7. "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father, prepare to die."
8. "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads."
9. "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop to look once in a while, you could miss it."
10. "It's not the years, honey, it's the mileage."
11. "You're gonna need a bigger boat."
12. "You can't handle the truth."

In the left-hand column, I list famous film quotations. In the right-hand column, I include the films that made them popular. How many lines can you trace to their source?

- a. *Back To The Future*
- b. *The Princess Bride*
- c. *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*
- d. *Say Anything*
- e. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*
- f. *Jaws*
- g. *A Few Good Men*
- h. *Field of Dreams*
- i. *Silence of the Lambs*
- j. *When Harry Met Sally*
- k. *Gone with the Wind*
- l. *The Sixth Sense*

Answers: 1-d, 2-k, 3-h, 4-l, 5-i, 6-f, 7-b, 8-a, 9-e, 10-c, 11-f, 12-g

Selling Your Screenplay to Show Business

With all the creative work that you're doing, you can easily forget that film-making is a business as well as a craft. When you're through with revisions, you become the CEO of your own private company. That company is you. Selling your work is an entirely different part of the process; therefore, it requires a new arsenal: determination, confidence (even if it's feigned), a positive attitude, a marketing strategy, a creative network, and a knowledge of the business and its players.

Hollywood has so many paths that lead into it that you almost need a map to know where to begin. Should you approach an agent first, and if so, how? Should you send your script to producers, and if so, how? Should you be seeking out studios or independents, contests or festivals, television or film? And how, oh how, do you protect yourself and your work in the process? Part IV is dedicated to strategy, both personal and professional. Consider that part your map.