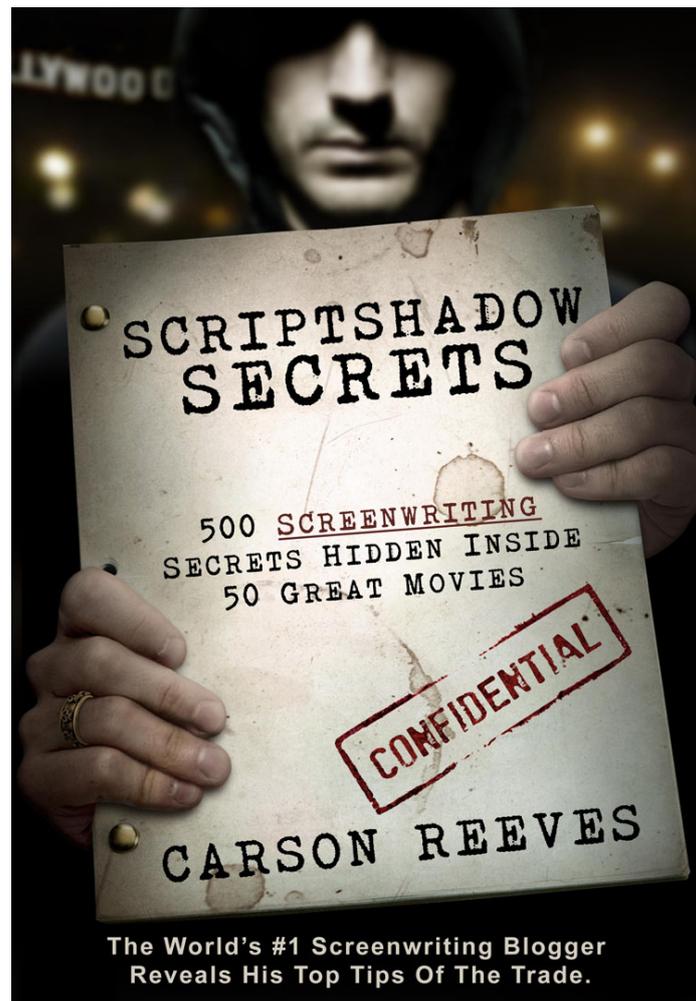A summary of the book

Scriptshadow Secrets

500 screenwriting secrets hidden inside 50 great movies

By Carson Reeves

Summary by Kim Hartman

This is a summary of what I think is the most important and insightful parts of the book. I can't speak for anyone else and I strongly recommend you to read the book in order to fully grasp the concepts written here. My notes should only be seen as an addition that can be used to refresh your memory after you´ve read the book. Use the words in this summary as anchors to remember the vitals parts of the book.

Contents

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Description from amazon

Scriptshadow Secrets is the first book from popular screenwriting blogger, Carson Reeves. The book was written as an answer to the glut of tired A-Z screenwriting books that have flooded the market over the years. Instead of another extensive How-To guide, Scriptshadow Secrets looks at 50 popular movies from the past six decades and offers 10 (give or take) screenwriting tips from each. The idea is to not only teach screenwriters valuable lessons, but show how those lessons have been incorporated into successful films. This way, writers learn by example, instead of having to take the author's word for it. From Aliens to Pirates Of The Caribbean to The Hangover to The Empire Strikes Back, Secrets teaches you screenwriting lessons from the greatest films of all time.

Author Carson Reeves began as a screenwriter himself, yet struggled to figure out the elusive formula for writing a successful screenplay. Then, about seven years ago, he started getting his hands on spec sale scripts and reading them. Within weeks, he'd learned more about screenwriting than he had in the past seven years combined. He then turned his attention from writing to helping others write.

The site blew up but quickly became controversial, due to Reeves breaking down material that Hollywood considered private. As such, the site's become a "love it or hate it" fixture in both Hollywood and the screenwriting community. Still, the site has tens of thousands of aspiring screenwriters who visit daily and make it the most popular screenwriting site on the web. The site's most popular feature, the "What I learned" section at the end of each review, was the main inspiration behind Scriptshadow Secrets, as Reeves saw how positively writers responded to quick context-relevant tips.

1.Structure

Act 1 (20-30 pages long)

- Act 1 introduces your hero then throws a problem at him. That problem will propel him into the heart of your story.

- The "inciting incident," which is a fancy way of saying, the "problem.

- We wouldn't have a movie if the hero stayed put, so your character always goes after the goal.

Act 2 (50-60 pages long)

- A lot of people get confused by Act 2, so let me remind you of its nickname: "Conflict." Act 2 is the act where all the resistance happens in your story.

- The more things you throw at your character, the more conflict he'll experience. And conflict is what makes your story fun to read!   In addition to this, every roadblock, every obstacle, every setback, should escalate in difficulty. Start small and keep building.

- Pages 55-60 in your script are referred to as the "midpoint." The midpoint is important because it's where your story turns. Whatever the first half of your story was about, the midpoint will shift it in a slightly different direction. By doing this, you keep the story fresh.

- Filler scenes are script-killers and will destroy everything you've worked so hard for.

- After the midpoint, keep upping the stakes of your story. Make the problems bigger and more difficult for your character.

- As the pages tick away in this section, so too should the attainability of your character's goal. The closer we get to the climax, the more dim your hero's chances of achieving his goal should get.

- This is often referred to as your hero's lowest point and will signify the end of the second act.

Act 3 (20-30 pages long)

- The final act of your screenplay is really about your hero's inner transformation.

- After your hero reaches his "lowest point," he'll experience a rebirth, finally realizing the error of his ways. If he's selfish, he'll see the value of selflessness. If he's fearful, he'll find the strength to be brave. He won't have completely transformed yet, but this realization will give

him the confidence to go after the girl or take on the villain or look for the treasure one last time.

- The "epiphany moment": it signifies that your hero is ready to take action.

2.Storytelling - Goal, Stakes, Urgency

Goal: You want your hero going after something in a story. That "thing" is typically referred to as a "goal." Why is it so important to have a goal? Because characters with goals move stories forward. As long as your character is pursuing something, he'll be running into challenges, encountering situations, and bumping up against other characters. Those are the things that make movies fun!

Stakes: Once you have a goal, you can establish what it means for your character to achieve that goal. The more the outcome affects your character, the more will be at stake. And the more that's at stake, the more invested your audience will be.

There need to be STAKES attached to the goal. If there are no stakes, we won't care whether the hero succeeds or not.

Urgency: One of the biggest problems with amateur screenplays is that they're sloooooooow. The writer doesn't infuse enough urgency into his story, turning the script into a Tempur-Pedic mattress with goose-down pillows. And yet, adding urgency is one of the easiest things to do. You simply impose a time limit on your character's pursuit,

3.Mini-goals

- We need a series of smaller goals to get us to the big goal. I call these "mini-goals."

- Screenplays follow a similar model. Your hero has a giant goal. But before he can reach it, there are a bunch of smaller goals he must complete first.

- As long as there's an immediate task (goal) for your character to accomplish, your script should move along at a brisk pace.

- Goals shouldn't be limited to your protagonist. They should extend to every character in your screenplay.

- The more people you have going after things, the more characters will clash with one another, and that's when it gets fun! Clash equals conflict and conflict equals drama and drama equals entertainment.

- Every scene you write, the characters in that scene should have a goal.

- In most good screenplays, goals are what keep the energy up and the story alive.

4. Demystifying dialogue

a) Structure the scene around a character goal

Find out what the primary character wants in the scene (his/her goal), and let the dialogue evolve from that.

b) Set up your dialogue ahead of time

The best dialogue is a result of what the writer did before the scene ever took place.

If your dialogue is weak, look for things you can setup before the scene to bring the dialogue to life.

c) Conflict

Conflict is so crucial is that it prevents your characters from easily getting what they want. Which means they have to work for it. And that's where dialogue comes alive, when people have to work for things. Dialogue between two satisfied people is like watching a tree grow. The key is identifying the force that will get in the way of your character's goal and building the scene around that.

d) Stakes

If there's a lot on the line, then every word each character says matters.

e) Subtext

Give one character something they're hiding and the subtext writes itself.

f) Off-the-nose dialogue

If someone asks, "Are you thirsty?" don't have the other character answer, "Yes. Could you get me some water?" That's the definition of on-the-nose. Have them say something less direct, like: "No, my lips always dry up and bleed like this."

g) Know your fucking characters (kyfc)

In the movie "There's Something About Mary", there's a scene where Mary's roommate, the old woman, asks Mary if her date is cute. Mary replies, "He's no Steve Young" (Steve Young is a famous Forty-Niners quarterback). Now this may not seem like an earth-shattering line of dialogue at first glance, but here's why it's a good line of dialogue: it's specific. It's something only Mary would say, because she's a Niners fan

General is BORING. And the less you know about your characters, the more of these general lines you're going to write, leading to a great big fat general screenplay. Get to know your characters. The more you know, the more specific their dialogue will be, and the more real they'll seem.

5. The 8 secrets to a great character

Who cares if your hero achieves his goal if we don't care about your hero??

a) Root-for-ability

If we're not rooting for your hero, we're not interested in your hero - you have to give us a reason to root for them. One of the easiest ways is to make them "likable." If we like your character, we'll want to follow him.

b) A Fatal Flaw

A fatal flaw is your character's defining weakness, the thing that's held him back his entire life, and when it comes down to it, the thing that makes him human.

Once you establish a fatal flaw, you can execute your character's transformation over the course of the story, culminating in them overcoming that flaw.

c) Relationships

One of the easiest ways to explore a character is through the people around him, or more specifically, via the relationships he engages in.

d) Backstory

One of the tricks to making characters feel real is convincing the reader that they existed before the script began. That's backstory. It's the character's entire life leading up to the moment where your story begins. There's a catch, however: all backstory in your screenplay must be story-relevant. In other words, backstory should only be revealed if it relates to important plot points in your movie.

e) Life Goal (your character's dream)

If you really want insight into who a person is, ask them what their life goal is - what they want to do more than anything in the world. This information often defines a person

f) Secrets

The secrets we keep define our private side, the side we don't allow the world to see. This side is often more interesting than the side people do see, which is the reason you should know your characters' secrets.

g) Characteristics, clothes, personality traits, grooming

The Joker always licks his lips. The Terminator always wears a leather jacket. Hancock always drinks.

h) Essence

You find essence by figuring out your character's life story. Where they grew up, their relationship with their parents, their high school experience, when they lost their virginity, their financial status, their vices, their social status, the most influential relationships in their lives, their favorite things to do, their least favorite things to do, what they were doing two weeks before your story began.

It's only when you know every crevice of your character that you can make them act, speak and feel like a real-life individual.

Theme: having a theme in your screenplay keeps the thousands of variables in your story in the same orbit.

Obstacles: Obstacles are really one of your best friends as a screenwriter because the more of them you throw in, the more interesting your story tends to be.

Conflict: conflict extends beyond the obvious. It can include passive-aggressiveness, unrequited love, lack of trust, lack of self-control, a secret one's keeping from the world - anything where there's an imbalance.

Exposition: Exposition is plot information, character information, and setting information. Because exposition is so boring and intrusive, it's your job as a writer to make it as invisible as possible. The best screenplays never feel like there's any exposition. And it's a writer's adeptness at hiding the exposition-monster that achieves this effect.

Motivation: to be hungry to look for peanut butter. But there must be something huge on the line if a character is going to risk their lives. That's the trick with motivation. It has to feel logical in order for us to believe that the character would do whatever it is they're doing

Plot point: Any moment that pushes your story through a major barrier can be considered a plot point.

Dramatic Irony: is when the audience is aware of something that one or all of the characters are not.

Midpoint shift: the midpoint shift is the moment in a movie where a shift occurs to make the second half of the film slightly different from the first. This shift prevents the film from getting repetitive/boring.

Scene agitator: The scene agitator introduces a distracting element that makes things a little (or a lot) more difficult for your hero.

6. Films

Alien

- Get into your story FAST.

- That first action has such an impact on the reader that it's imperative you introduce your character with traits or behaviors representative of who they are.

- Always look for ways to keep your hero active. If they're sitting in the background, allowing other characters to dictate the story, we'll lose interest in them quickly.

- we need to make an emotional connection with your main character, and the easiest way to do that is to give them a fatal flaw

- Write a "bonding moment" between the characters. This moment establishes the emotional connection between the characters so that when they start dying,

- Shit needs to be going wrong ALL THE TIME,

Stand by me

- Give your main characters names that start with different letters –

- Have your villain take something personal away from your hero. Not only does it make us love your hero (we feel sorry for him), it makes us hate your villain (for being extra cruel)

- If your characters read too similar, they'll blend together. Therefore, you have to make sure each character is distinct. In Stand By Me, we have the crazy kid, the cool kid, the goofy kid, and the smart kid. We never get these guys mixed up.

- PAINT THE PERIOD! if you're writing a movie like Stand By Me, which is set in the 1950s, there should be references to the Korean War and the Russians. We should hear songs by Fats Domino or Chuck Berry.

- The best films are the ones that take you through a range of emotions.

Up

- An outline is a 10-20 page breakdown of the story, with a few sentences breaking down each individual scene (you'll have 10-15 scenes in your first act, 30-35 in your second, and 10-15 in your third).

- give your secondary character a goal as well

- Avoid scenes where characters are sitting and talking at tables. Unless your table scene has TONS of conflict in it. Instead, have your dialogue scenes revolve around going somewhere or doing something. Or just put your characters in a unique location.

Raiders of the lost ark
- CLARITY. Each sequence starts out with a clear objective (a "goal") that the protagonist must achieve.

- convey to the audience just how big and important and impossible your hero's goal is

- Always give your character a secret strength and pay it off later!

The Bourne identity
- "the chase" is one of the easiest ways to add excitement to your script

- The reader should NEVER know more than the writer about his subject

- For maximum conflict, always put your hero in the last place he wants to be

District 9
- Introduce your characters doing something, trying to achieve something, or in the process of something.

- The scene where a character must ask for help from someone he screwed over earlier ALWAYS works.

The proposal
- The Trigger - Just like real people, characters don't become the way they are by accident. There was a trigger early on in their lives that made them that way.

The pirates of the Caribbean: curse of the black pearl
- An audience will always root for people who get screwed.

- An easy way to improve your dialogue is to make sure each character has their own vocabulary and unique way of speaking.

- Some of the best character descriptions ignore physical traits and focus instead on the character's essence.

- Whenever you create a character, try to give him at least one trait that goes against what you'd normally expect from that character.

- Not every major character has a fatal flaw, but every major character should have something they're trying to resolve before the story is over. An unresolved issue from one's past is a nice substitute for a fatal flaw.

Good will hunting

- The easiest place to find a hook is through irony. Good Will Hunting follows the story of a genius janitor. The movie Juno follows a pregnant teenager. The King's Speech follows a nation's speaker who can't speak.

- Even the tiniest characters should have a storyline

- (audiences LOVE characters who stick up for their friends

- Audiences LOVE the unconventional mentor, the unorthodox teacher who does things his own way.

Big

- Try to have two or three "trailer moments" in your screenplay, a scene or an image that's exciting and perfectly encapsulates your movie.

Avatar

- There are many jumparound devices available: Voice-over (Braveheart), a separate storyline (Titanic), a person reading a book (The Princess Bride). If people tell you your story is too complicated, consider adding a jumparound device

- Too many amateurs give their heroes weak or trivial reasons for doing what they're doing. So heed this advice: Your hero's motivation must be as strong as possible.

- The 20-page rule - If a character disappears for more than 20 pages, there's a good chance the reader's forgotten about them.

- Romantic relationships thrive when there's initial resistance from one of the characters

- A hero teaming up with a former enemy to take on an even bigger enemy always works.

- Before the third act climax, there needs to be that "calm before the storm" scene for your hero – a breather that adds perspective and gravitas to the upcoming battle (or exam, or tournament, or fight).

Die hard

- You have to find ways for the reader to identify with your hero.

- Only include character backstory that's relevant to the current story

- Rarely should characters reveal their own backstory –

- An excellent way to handle backstory is to have another character force it out of your hero.

- Your villain should be stronger than your hero - Make him smarter. Make him more resourceful. Give him an edge. Why? Because we need to believe your hero will lose.

- The less sure victory is, the more suspenseful the final scene will be.

Taken

- Use your first act to set up your characters

- A helpless vulnerable girl in danger always works.

- One of the best types of conflict between characters is underlying tension.

- You want your hero to have flaws, issues, internal conflict, mistakes he's made, vices he can't shake.

American beauty

- If you want to study how to write a character piece, American Beauty should be at the top of your list.

- Even if your script follows a cast of characters, like American Beauty, it's recommended you center the script on a dominant character, like Lester Burnham.

- I advise staying under 110 pages with your screenplay. It's the industry standard for unknown writers.

- In drama, comedy is your best friend - You need comedy to balance out your drama, or else you have melodrama, which is every reader's nightmare

- One of the things a writer must do is surprise the person who can't be surprised.

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind

- "Voice has to do with how an author interprets the world on the page. It has a lot to do with language choice, the rhythm and flow of words. Sometimes it has to do with the author's point of view (John Hughes) or sense of humor (Shane Black, William Goldman) or the creative dialogue (Quentin Tarantino) or quirky characters (most of the above). If you read a screenplay by an author with a distinctive voice, you will recognize it in other works by that author."

- If you truly want to sell a spec script, it's important to ask this question before you start: Will this script attract an A-list director and A-list star?

- Every character action represents that character. So when they act, have them act in a manner unique to them.

- A way to accelerate love in the reader's eyes is to have characters sharing something entirely unique together.

- One of the best ways to get noticed in the spec world is to write a screenplay that plays with time in some unique way –

- It's a lot easier to sell an average script with a great hook than it is to sell a great script with an average hook –

- As an unknown screenwriter, your concept has to be a selling point.

Star wars

- Try to introduce your main character first - If you don't give them that guide, they start feeling lost, antsy, and confused.

- Make sure each successive goal in your story gets BIGGER – This creates a building sensation.

- If you want the audience to sympathize with your bad guy, add a villain who's even worse than him

- Kill a main character off - If nobody's ever in danger, the audience feels safe. If the audience feels safe for too long, they start getting bored. By killing off a main character, you let the audience know: NO CHARACTER IS SAFE IN THIS STORY.

Lethal weapon

- Avoid using camera directions (PAN, TRACK, CRANE, etc.) in your script –

- Most readers are looking for anything that indicates they're dealing with an amateur, because amateur scripts notoriously get worse as they go on. Once a script tallies up enough "amateur" red flags, they can start skimming, which obviously means they've given up on you

- Dialogue is 20% words, 80% context

- Dialogue itself means nothing. It's the situation you build around your dialogue that creates the entertainment.

Back to the future

- How can you be sure your concept rocks? Mix up your logline with nine other loglines. They can be recently sold specs, dummy loglines, friends' loglines. But make sure they're all solid story ideas. Then ask your friends, without telling them which one is yours, to rank the list from best to worst. If your logline consistently finishes near the top, you've got a good idea.

- Good stories usually FLY BY. An easy way to accomplish this is to make it so your hero ALWAYS HAS TO BE SOMEWHERE. As soon as he's done with one thing, he needs to get to the next thing.

- As long as there's an imbalance in the relationship, there's conflict.

- The second act should always be working against your hero –

- One of the keys to becoming a professional writer is not settling for the obvious choice, whether that choice be a concept, a character, a scene, or a line of dialogue.

- Once you hit your final sequence, it's time to pay off all your setups.

Fargo

- if you want excitement, make your character desperate

- For some great conflict, place your characters in an environment that is their opposite –

- The Pre-Agitator - A great way to ignite a scene is to inject it with conflict before it starts.

- If you have a scene or section of your script that feels boring, I'm going to give you a great tip. Ask yourself, "What would the Coens do?" The Coens rarely make an obvious choice. They treat clichés like cancer.

- The easiest way to make a scene interesting is to have two people want different things out of the scene. This creates conflict, which leads to drama, which leads to entertainment.

Ferris bueller's day off

- Arguments are great places to hide backstory because we're focusing more on the argument than the information being fed to us.

- Each character should have a DEFINING TRAIT, something that distinguishes him/her from every other character in the movie

The fugitive

- One of the most powerful sympathy cards you can create for your protagonist is the loss of a loved one.

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- Another one of the most powerful sympathy cards is a hero who's been wrongfully convicted.

- A "character emergency" is when your character is placed in a situation where he has no choice but to act.

- Deliberately write your characters into situations that are impossible to get out of, then figure a way to get them out of them

The hangover

- No matter what aspect of writing we're talking about, you need to find a unique take, a different way in that audiences haven't seen before. This is the easiest way to get producers, agents, and managers excited about your material.

- There isn't a genre out there more dependent on GSU than comedy.

- Your typical scene should be short and sweet, roughly two pages long.

- If we took away the laughs from your comedy, would you still have an interesting story?

Crash

- Always be unpredictable in your writing.

- Bad writers do the obvious. Good writers look at a location and say, "How can I do this differently?"

- Without a clear character goal, your script will struggle to find an ending

Notting hill

- Never make us wait while your characters exchange technical information –

- One of the BEST ways to reveal character is by putting a bunch of characters in a scene and forcing them to react to something. Since each character will react differently, we'll see how each of them is unique.

Inception

- The longer you have characters explaining things, the more bored the reader's going to get.

- Sitting two characters in a room together is one of the most boring dialogue situations you can write.

The empire strikes back

- the more powerful the engine of your story, the less structure matters

- Intense sequences should always be followed by a "cool down" scene, preferably one with humor

- One of the most compelling characters you can write is someone who's good but tempted by evil. That inner struggle is one that audiences enjoy because it's one in which they can relate to.

- Audiences connect with anybody who's relatable, and temptation is relatable.

- Whenever your characters are stuck in a tough situation, make it worse for them –

- Always look for opportunities to flip expectations on their head, especially with your characters!

- Look at every single character in your movie and ask, "What's their goal at this very moment?" If they don't have one, give them one!

- Bravery is a surefire way to make us LOVE a character.

Bridesmaids

- Anybody can write a fart joke. Or a pratfall. Or drop in the ubiquitous "swearing grandma." For comedy that gets real laughs though, the humor should stem from the character

- An easy way to make a hero likable is to have her get screwed over by someone else.

- Ironic situations always lead to funny scenes

- Your hero should hit rock bottom right before the third act –

- After the lowest point, you want two or three "salt on the wound" scenes before the hero gets back on their feet.

Training day

- If I read five pages of Pulitzer Prize-worthy prose describing a man watering a plant, I'm bored. However, if I read five pages of freshman-level English describing a plant trying to kill a man, I'm excited.

- If there's important information in your scene, you need to tell us. If you leave it up to us, we'll guess. And now you're not telling your story. We are.

- Is your character good or bad? Don't tell us - Some of the best characters are characters we can't figure out.

Jerry Maguire

- the quicker you can make us love your hero, the quicker we'll be invested in your story

- The event you're writing about should be the most important moment of your hero's life

- Plot out your own "memorable moments."

- Real moments are imperfect and bumpy and unpredictable. Exploit these awkward moments.

- As you close in on the third act, you want to raise the stakes to their highest level. To achieve this, you need to cross what I call the "all or nothing point." It's the moment when your character cannot go back: he's either going to get it all or lose it all.

The social network

- Write a few trailer lines for your indie movie - Action films have million dollar special-effects shots to throw in their trailers. Cash-poor indies have dialogue.

Rocky

- When telling a story in screenplay form you should use the active voice. In other words, don't write: "He proceeds to pummel the man with a flurry of punches." Instead, write: "He PUMMELS the man with a flurry of punches…" Don't write: "He is knocking Apollo off balance." Say, "He KNOCKS Apollo off balance.

Pulp fiction

- Imply a collision at the end of a scene and everything leading up to it will entertain.

- Extend irony into your dialogue. Vincent Vega and Sam Jackson are two ruthless hit men who like to discuss foot massages and foreign cuisine on the way to their hits.

- Great scenes don't materialize out of thin air. They usually require other scenes to set them up.

Goonies

- The "Every 15 Pages Rule" - If something interesting or unexpected or surprising or stake-raising doesn't happen every 15 pages at least, your script is probably boring.

- The more people who have something at stake in your story, the better.

- As long as the scene is required for your characters to achieve their ultimate goal, then the scene is necessary.

Pretty woman

- A common mistake I see young writers make is to only showcase one dimension of a character's personality - typically their dominant personality trait.

- Show another side of your character every once in a while.

- Always look for places to flip the cliché on its head.

- Divide your exposition up into more than one scene. There's something about splitting backstory up that makes it feel more realistic.

Juno

- Make sure each relationship in your movie brings out a slightly different side of your character. That should help keep the dialogue fresh.

- The more backstories you know, the better your script will be.

- The most obvious location for a scene is usually the least interesting

Super 8

- To convey that your hero is thinking about someone, create a physical object that represents that person.

- In Cast Away, it's the picture Tom Hanks has of his wife.

- The more mysteries you can introduce into your story, the more reasons your audience has to keep reading.

- Try to convey said feelings without the characters saying them.

- The average script has 60 scenes. For a script to be considered "decent" or "good," at least 35 of these scenes must be good. For a script to be considered "great," 50 of them should be good.

- After you've finished your script, list your 60 scenes and put a check by everyone you consider to be "good." Don't lie either. Be honest with yourself. Don't show your script to anyone until at least 35 of those scenes are top notch.

The shawshank redemption

- There needs to be space between your set-ups and payoffs. That's because a payoff, in part, depends on the audience forgetting the set-up.

- One of the common mistakes new writers make is to be easy on their protagonists.

-

- If we see our hero get beaten down (by a character, a situation, or life) we're likely to heap sympathy on him.

- Never let your heroes dwell on their misfortune for too long. We HATE characters who feel sorry for themselves.

The 40-year old virgin

- Keep your comedy scripts under 110 pages - Most comedies should come in between 100-110 pages.

- Supporting characters should have backstories and goals and flaws and fears just like your hero.

- Use your protagonist's home to tell us about him! –

- Beware the unfilmable - An "unfilmable" is anything in your script that can't be captured on camera. "The air smells like pineapples." "This room used to be owned by Ernest Hemingway."

- Comedy is the only genre that welcomes unfilmables. Just remember, whenever you break a rule, do it in modesty

When harry met sally

- No matter how many rules you break, if you can do one or two things perfectly, other problems seem to disappear.

- A ticking time bomb. I prefer them because they create urgency, and urgency ups the stakes, which ups the conflict, which ups the drama. And drama is the backbone of entertainment!

- A good way to measure the quality of your dialogue is to pretend you're a third party standing near your characters while they talk. Is what they're saying interesting enough?

Office space

- Take a character who hates something more than anything, then put him in a situation where he must pretend to love it

- An angry boss is a boring boss - instead, look for a trait that's more dynamic, that makes the audience think more.

The princess bride

- Every task for your hero must be difficult. If it isn't, your reader's getting bored.

- Make sure all of your motivations are clear or we'll quickly lose interest in your story.

- Make sure all the plumbing is in place, but when you sit back and evaluate each scene, ask yourself a simple question: "Is this scene entertaining?" If it's not, change it.

The ring

- Anybody can have a cat pop out of a cabinet or a face appear in a window. These are cheap scares. For something more intense, however, build up your scares. Have them emerge through your storytelling.

- If you're going to team your protagonist with someone, consider an old flame with whom they have baggage.

- Audiences tend to prefer female protagonists in horror movies because they're more vulnerable.

- Whenever something starts getting too tech-y, soothe our confusion with the perfect analogy.

- We need to feel that time ticking away – each day bringing us closer to doom. Do this by giving your audience updates. The Ring uses screen titles at the beginning of each day

- A good procedural has four to six mysteries that must be overcome before the final mystery can be solved.

Titanic

- You want to have us fall for your hero in his very first scene if possible.

- Movies are storytelling, so if there's a portion of your movie where you're not telling a story, something's wrong.

- If you want to add some spark to your dialogue, put your characters in a position where it's difficult for them to talk.

- Treat your story like a roller coaster

The matrix

- Don't let your script take a nap after the opening scene –

- It shifts the movie onto a different path, which is what a good midpoint will do

- Most action scenes I read are pretty boring. Lots of guns shooting, cars speeding, helicopters chasing. It's all rather pointless and empty, no matter how fancy the writer's description is. In order for us to care, use your action scenes to challenge your hero's fatal flaw.

- Hold off on that first kiss (or first sex scene) as long as possible. Couples held apart are always more interesting than couples happily together.

The silence of the lambs

- If you're going to write a serial killer procedural, you better have a unique take on it.

- Good writers allude to their villains long before they arrive. In the very second scene of The Silence of the Lambs, Clarice's boss warns her about how dangerous Hannibal is.

- Beginner writers make their villains one-note. They're either 100% mean or 100% heartless. You gotta mix it up! Humor's a perfect way to achieve this.

- Audiences LOVE an ironic villain.

- If there's something to be discovered in your story, make sure your hero discovers it!

- Characters should be reluctant to share their backstory –

- Hannibal demands "quid pro quo." He'll tell her something about Buffalo Bill, but she has to tell him something about herself in return.

- The length of your scene should correspond directly with the stakes of your scene. The more there is at stake, the longer your scene can last. That's because an audience's interest level escalates as the stakes rise, giving you more time to play.

- The most powerful form of dramatic irony is the kind where we know our hero is in danger, but they do not.

- Every once in a while, throw an obstacle in front of your villain. Audiences aren't used to villains having obstacles, so when they happen, it's shocking.

The sixth sense

- Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. The more you toil away at a script, the more discoveries you're going to make!

- If a scene takes place in a generic church, you don't have to waste four lines describing the artistry of the stained glass. Just do what M. Night does: he writes, "INT. CHURCH," then jumps into the scene.

- Use sound to create atmosphere in your horror script. The creak of a floorboard, the pounding of rain against the pavement, the static in a phone call, the whistling breeze through an open window.

- A great surprise ending almost guarantees your script will be sold. It must be shocking, yet a logical conclusion to everything you've set up.

- If you're writing a twist ending, pretend like you're not. That way, your script will have to work on its own. The twist then becomes the cherry on the sundae.

- The first five pages are the most analyzed.

- "The more subtle and elegant you are in hiding your plot points, the better you are as a writer." - When writing a story, the objective is to make it seem like it's not a story, but that things are just…happening.

Star trek

- Find a classic property/idea/genre and figure out a way to update it. All J.J. Abrams did was give Star Trek attitude, something it never had before.

- You have to focus on the relationships, guys! They're one of the most important parts of your screenplay

- When you introduce a bad guy in an action movie, make sure to show us he's bad right away

- Action films are kinetic and action-packed, so that's where you have to deliver your exposition.

- Heroes need to be heroic, and they need to be heroic without thinking of themselves.

- A villain without a motivation is like a car without a steering wheel: Directionless.

- Keep your character count as low as humanly possible.

- Instead of introducing yet another person, why not bring back someone from before?

- Show them talking, walking, loving, arguing, all in their own unique way.

- The more intense the internal conflict, the more memorable the character –

Taxi driver

- Every scene has to move the story forward. Goals have to be clear. Motivations have to be clear. The story always has to feel like it has a purpose

- With any transformation, there has to be an arc - a series of developments that lead to a final change.

- Research the shit out of your character's job and add interesting small things. Example: "Each night when I return the cab to the garage I have to clean the cum off the back seat."

Terminator 2

- Audiences LOVE, and I mean LOVE, clever characters. So write a scene where your character out-thinks the bad guys.

- Your villain will be risking everything to take down your hero, so if he doesn't have a damn good reason to do so, then your movie won't hold up.

- The real money comes with a PG-13 rating or lower. Did you know that, as of this writing, 48 out of the top 50 grossing movies of all time (not adjusted for inflation) are rated PG-13, PG, or G?

7. Build a network

- If you can't move to LA, move to Cyber-LA. That means going to sites like Scriptshadow and Go Into The Story and Amazon Studios and Triggerstreet and the Black List. Park your browser on these sites and meet as many screenwriters as you can.

- Be nice. Build as big of a network as you can. If someone sounds funny or interesting, get in touch with them! Tell them you want to trade script reads.

- Focus on helping other screenwriters. When the time comes, one of them is going to help you, and that's probably going to be your big break.

- Where you want to look is the mid-level and smaller outfits. These are companies or agencies that are big enough to still have good contacts, but small enough so that they'll occasionally read unsolicited material (The Gotham Group, APA, Underground).

- 95% of the reason your script will get requested is due to your logline. A good logline should include the main character, the objective, and the major source of conflict.

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