

SCRIPTNOTES

A Book About
Screenwriting
and Things That
Are Interesting to
Screenwriters

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AUGUST
&
CRAIG
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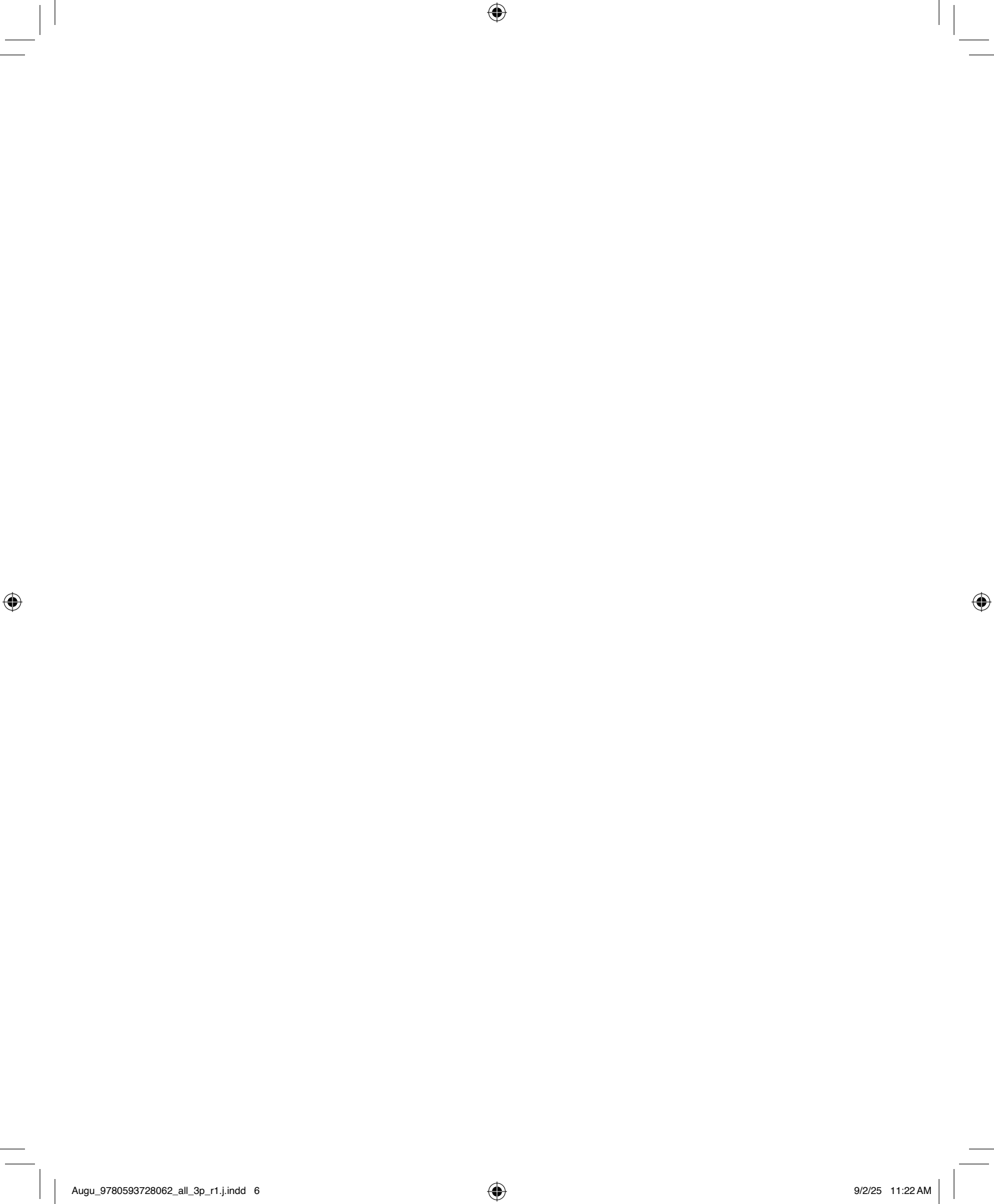
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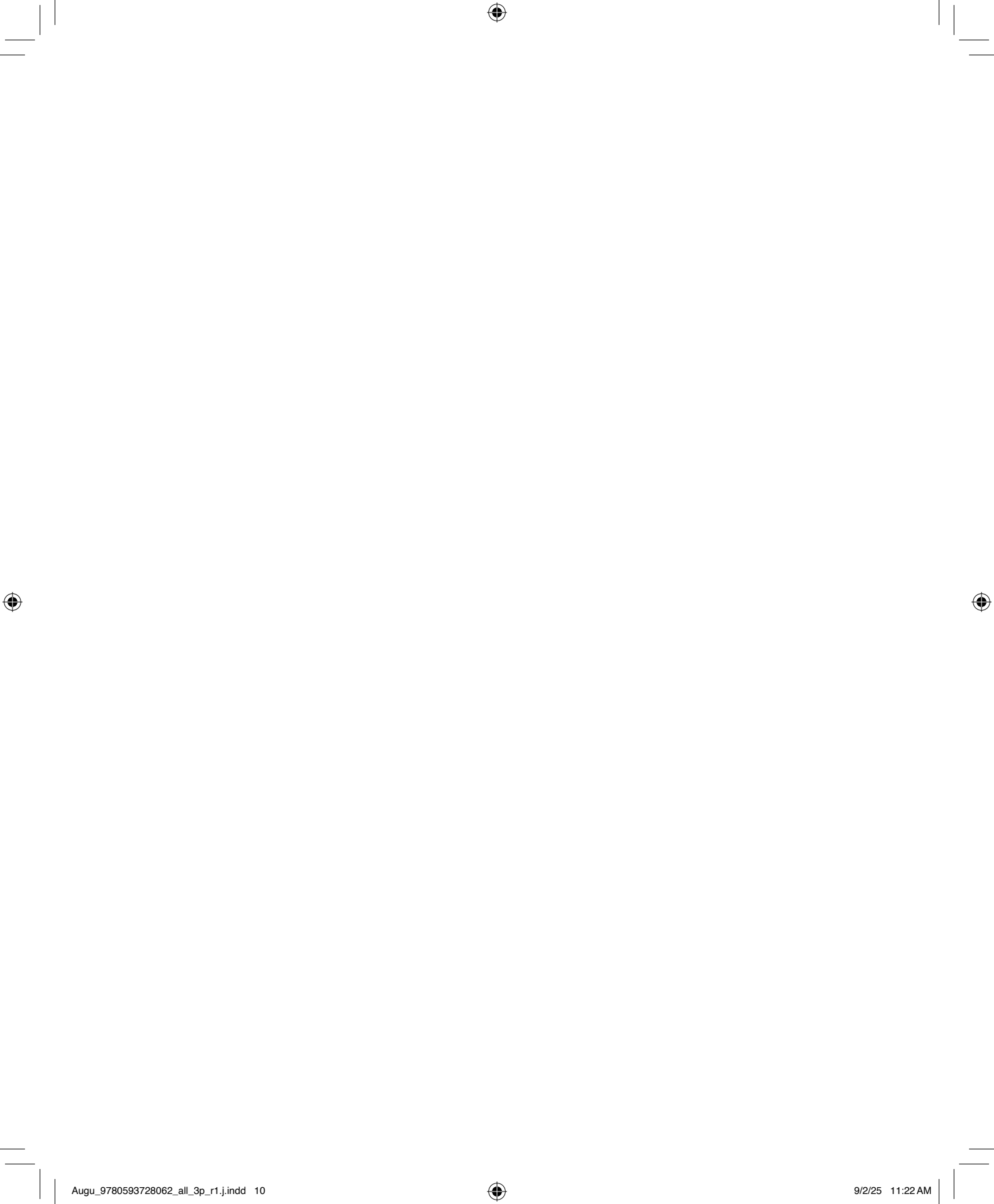


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SCRIPTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

HELLO AND WELCOME!

In 2011, we started recording *Scriptnotes*, a weekly podcast about screenwriting and things that are interesting to screenwriters. Like prototypical heroes answering a call to adventure, we really didn't know what we were getting into.

At the time, both of us had screenwriting blogs in which we answered questions about the craft and the industry. Blog posts are like monologues. You get to say exactly what you want—no interruptions—but there's no real-time feedback. You're speaking into the void. When you're done typing, you hit "publish" and wait to see if your ideas connect with anyone.

With *Scriptnotes*, we were looking to have an honest conversation about screenwriting—both the art and the business. Beyond that, we had no real expectations going in. Craig wondered if anyone would listen. John figured we might hit fifty episodes and call it a wrap.

More than fourteen years and seven hundred episodes later, the conversation continues. Every week, we discuss topics related to screenwriting, often with guests who bring new perspectives and challenge our assumptions. We've added recurring segments like "How Would This Be a Movie?" and the Three Page Challenge. We've sold out live shows across the country. We've advocated for higher assistant pay and called out charlatans trying to make a buck off aspiring writers. And we've watched as a string of listeners and *Scriptnotes* producers have gone on to successful writing careers in the industry.

We're proud of the show we've made and how it's resonated and connected. Craig is still amazed anyone is listening.

From the beginning, we've made transcripts of every episode available free online. In addition to being a resource for writers—particularly deaf and hearing-impaired writers—the transcripts help us remember the history of the show.

Have we done an episode on character names? A quick Google search reveals the answer: Yes, episode 151.

With this giant corpus of text just sitting there, many listeners have asked us if we'd ever publish a *Scriptnotes* book, but the scope of the work felt too daunting. Simply printing the transcripts would result in thirty-plus volumes, each more than five hundred pages.

Creating a proper *Scriptnotes* book required a massive amount of planning and editing to pare those transcripts down to a manageable size and shape. That work fell on Chris Csont, Drew Marquardt, and Megana Rao, who assembled the first drafts of most of the chapters in this book. That process turned our conversations back into monologues, where ideas aren't attributed to John or Craig individually, but rather to a collective "we."

When you see direct quotes from us or other guests, they've been lightly edited for concision and clarity. People speak differently than how they write. They repeat words and trail off. Just as screenplay dialogue is an optimized version of how people actually speak, quoted sections in the book are slightly improved versions of what was originally spoken.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

For the last decade, when aspiring writers wanted to buy him coffee to pick his brain, Craig has had a go-to response: "If you want to learn about screenwriting, just listen to the free weekly podcast we do."

After seven hundred episodes, it's simply not realistic to expect someone to spend ninety full eight-hour days listening to *Scriptnotes*. Yes, people really do go back and listen to the entire show from the beginning, but

it's not efficient. And even if you have listened to every word, you can't easily refer back to something.

By pulling together our greatest hits into a single book, it feels like we've boiled down our advice to the essence. To that aspiring writer, Craig can now say, "Here's a book. Have at it!"

As listeners know, we have conflicted feelings about screenwriting books in general. The irony that we're now writing one isn't lost on us.

On the one hand, you have to start somewhere. We both read Syd Field's *Screenplay* when we first got to Los Angeles. It was our introduction to the screenplay form. Field tells you a lot about the end result—*Casablanca* in particular—without much insight into the process it takes to get there. Is this idea better suited for movies or TV? How do you incorporate producer notes? And more fundamentally, what's it like being a screenwriter?

When John started his blog, his idealized reader was a kid in Iowa who was curious about screenwriting but had no good way to learn about it. That's one target audience for this book: the aspiring writer who wants to learn about the craft. Read this book and you'll get a good understanding of what it's like being a screenwriter. We hope screenwriting classes will use this book to continue the conversation in the classroom as well.

But this is not just a book for future professional screenwriters. Most of our listeners have no screenwriting ambitions. Instead, they're just curious about the work that goes into making the movies and shows they love. This book should provide a peek into the creative process.

Finally, we hope anyone involved in making film and television (or judging the final product) will read it so they can better understand the journey from script to screen. Whatever your connection to the industry, welcome aboard!

HOW SHOULD YOU READ THIS BOOK?

We've attempted to create an overall structure for this book. We start with the screenwriting basics before moving on to meatier craft topics. We finish with chapters looking at screenwriting as a career. Interspersed, you'll

find interviews with some of the amazing writers we've had on the show, along with a deep-dive analysis of one of our favorite movies.

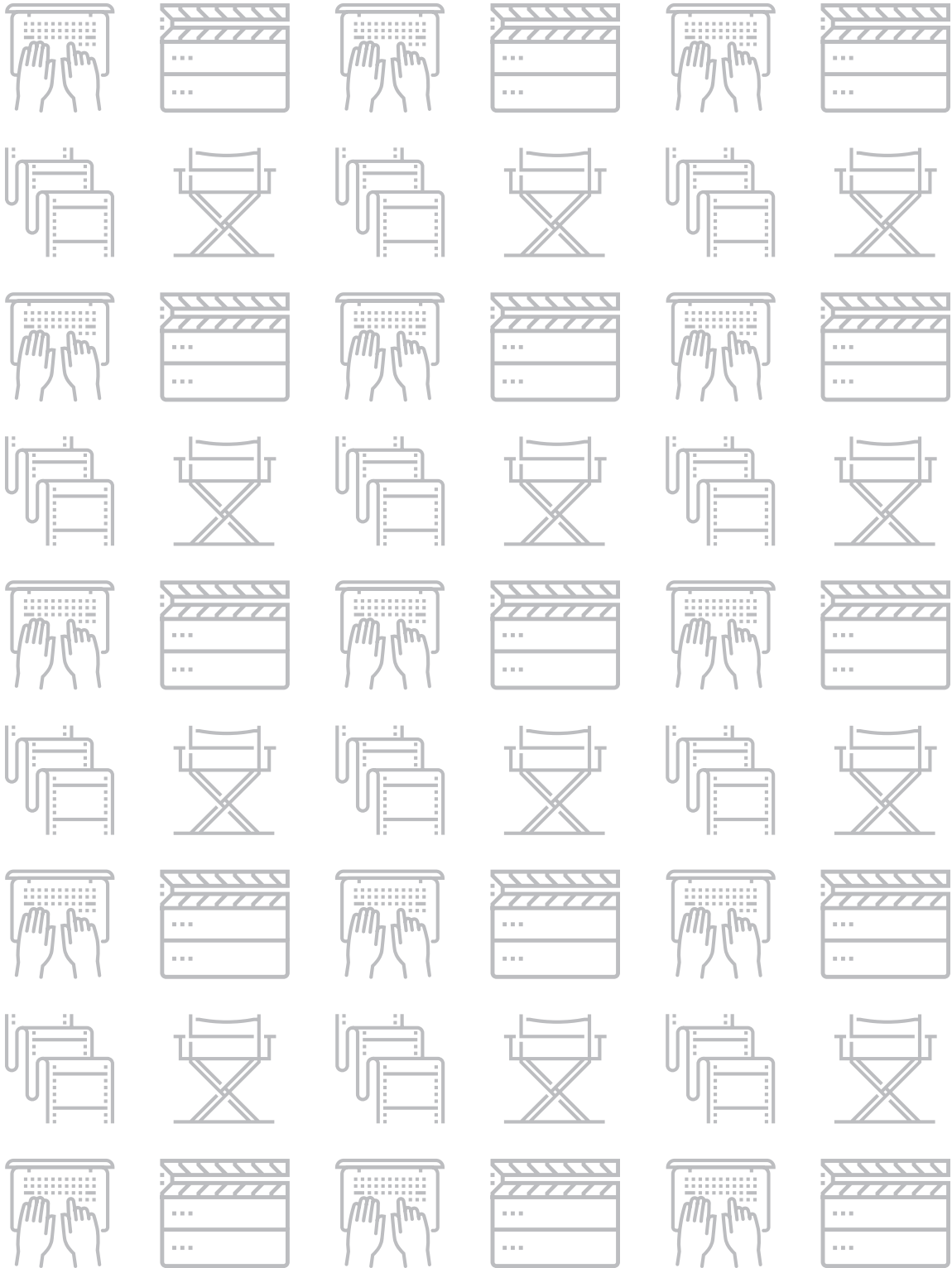
That said, you don't have to read this book in order. Feel free to skip around. Struggling with theme? You can jump right to that chapter.

We grew up with the *D&D Player's Handbook*, a text that no person has ever read from beginning to end. Rather, it's the kind of book that sits next to the toilet. You open it anywhere and just start reading, or rereading. If *Scriptnotes* ends up becoming your bathroom book, there's no higher compliment for us.

Our goal with this book is to provide the wisdom we've gleaned over our collective sixty years doing this job. It's not really a how-to guide. We don't provide templates and formulas. We want to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. We're pointing out the choices writers make. In our chapter on conflict, we're not saying, "This is how you write conflict." What we're saying is: "Here are different kinds of conflict. Here are ways you can approach it. Here are some things you should try to avoid. Here are some traps we've fallen into." To us, that's how you learn.

Unlike a weekly podcast, books are fixed, frozen in time. What you're reading is our take on screenwriting as of mid-2025. We hope most of our advice is timeless, but the industry will keep changing. If you enjoy reading *Scriptnotes*, please listen to the podcast to see where the conversation leads us next.

Thank you for picking up this book, and enjoy!



1

THE RULES OF SCREENWRITING

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT SCREENWRITING, so we are contractually obligated to provide at least one chapter about the inviolable tenets of the craft or else risk our spot on the bookstore shelf next to Syd Field's *Screenplay* and Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!*

So, let's get this over with. Here are Twenty Essential Rules of Screenwriting we've assembled from other books and websites.

1. Your script must be 120 pages or fewer.
2. 12-point Courier only.
3. The inciting incident must happen by page 15.
4. The first act break must be on page 30.
5. The midpoint is really important.
6. The second act break must be on page 90.
7. No scene may be longer than three pages.
8. Use only "DAY" or "NIGHT" in scene headings.
9. Never use "CUT TO:" (it's unnecessary filler).
10. No camera directions unless you're also the director.
11. Don't use "we see" or "we hear" in scene descriptions.

12. Use UPPERCASE only for sound effects and character introductions.
13. No bold, italics, or asterisks.
14. No action in parentheticals.
15. Don't make asides to the reader in your action descriptions. If it can't be seen or heard, cut it.
16. Don't use the words "is" or "walks."
17. Don't use the passive voice.
18. No adverbs ending in "-ly."
19. No "-ing" verbs.
20. No voice-over.

IF YOU FOLLOW these rules to the letter, congratulations! You'll have written a perfect screenplay. Please proceed to the gates of Hollywood to receive your paycheck and commendation.

Obviously, these "rules" are bullshit. We've broken every one of them over the course of our long careers. Pick up any award-winning screenplay and you'll find it violates at least half the items on this list.

Still, there's a reason aspiring screenwriters love rules like these. We crave order. Faced with a blank page, we're desperate for any constraints and guidelines. *Just tell me what I can and can't do.* Newer writers in particular are afraid of making mistakes that might reveal their inexperience, so they choose the absolute safest path. It's the literary equivalent of driving five miles an hour under the speed limit.

Before we dismiss these rules entirely, it's worth considering how they even came to exist in the first place.

There's no screenwriting constitution. Billy Wilder and Paddy Chayefsky never convened a conference of acclaimed screenwriters to determine

whether scene headers should be underlined. Nora Ephron never proposed an amendment regarding dual dialogue.

Just as there's no master document laying out the rules, there's no Screenwriting Supreme Court to decide whether a writer's use of "SAME" as the time marker in scene headers is appropriate.

Instead of laws and judges, all we have in screenwriting are conventions. Most screenplays do most of the same things in most of the same ways. And that's helpful! If every screenplay came up with its own layout for action and dialogue, it would be chaos.

So we've collectively, passively agreed on a set of norms and standards. For example, nearly all scripts in English are delivered in 12-point Courier font, not because it's the best font but because everyone's used to it. It's the same with the standard margins for dialogue and other elements. There's no Platonic ideal screenplay format; there's just what people expect. In the majority of cases, you're best off going with the flow.

The prohibitions on what screenwriters can or can't do on the page ultimately comes down to taste. For example, some readers despise the terms "we hear" and "we see." We think that's dumb. Modern screenplays are an attempt to capture the experience of watching a movie or show, and "we" is a very useful way of putting the reader in the seat of an audience member. In some cases, it's nearly essential, such as when you need to make it clear that the audience has information the characters don't.

Candace rifles through the clothes in her closet,
trying to decide on an outfit. In the mirror, we
see a DARK FIGURE standing at the door, watching
her. Ominous.

And then it's gone.

You could absolutely write this without "we see," but it would be clunkier.

We wish we could find the patient zero of "don't use 'we see' in scene descriptions." We don't know who started this terrible virus, but it's wrong. And it has spread throughout all these mediocre schools. Waves of human

beings keep arriving on Reddit to explain to other people why you can't use "we see." And the two of us have just been trying to rescue people from this nonsense.

Can you overuse "we see"? Absolutely. Same with asterisks, adjectives, and exclamation points. But that's no reason to ban them.

So, how did we get to this overreliance on screenwriting rules, and why do they persist? In addition to helping calm the nerves of nervous screenwriters, screenwriting rules often serve as a filtering mechanism.

Over their careers, producers, agents, executives, and paid analysts read thousands of screenplays. Most of these screenplays are bad because most screenplays are bad. Reading these bad screenplays, they inevitably notice certain things that bother them, so they associate these characteristics with bad screenplays. They extrapolate and say, "Stop doing this thing. Here's a rule, because I read all sorts of scripts that do this too much and those scripts are bad. So this thing is always bad." They're identifying a pattern.

Here's the problem: There's something called the "triangular nonrelationship" in logic where something is correlated with something else but one is not causing the other. They are both caused by the same thing.

In this case, a bad screenplay correlating with rule-breaking doesn't mean that rule-breaking causes bad screenwriting. It means that often-times bad writers will tend to do certain things. They'll write very long scenes. They'll use a lot of bold and underline. They'll put a lot of extraneous detail into parentheticals.

If a screenplay is good, and it articulates a blueprint for a potentially great movie, no one cares how much it adheres to standards.

But good writers also break these rules, as do most professional screenplays, including Oscar-winning hits. When you point this out, pedants will

wave it aside, saying only produced writers or directors can get away with violating these imaginary screenwriting precepts. The truth is much simpler. If a screenplay is good, and it articulates a blueprint for a potentially great movie, no one cares how much it adheres to standards.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SCREENPLAY

It's important to remember that screenplays are a relatively new thing. For early silent films, all you really needed was a shot list.

- ⇒ **WIDE SHOT:** Train pulls into station.
- ⇒ **CLOSE-UP:** Passenger looks up from newspaper.
- ⇒ **MEDIUM:** Woman looks out from train window.

It's only as movies got longer—and added dialogue—that scripts started to bring in elements of stage and radio plays. By the time you get to 1942's *Casablanca*, most of the elements we see in modern screenplays were established, including the placement of dialogue and parentheticals.

13 SIDEWALK CAFE ON ONE SIDE OF THE SQUARE

A middle-aged English couple are standing in front of their table for a better view of the commotion in front of the Prefecture. A dark-visaged European smoking a cigarette leans against a lamp post a short distance away. He is watching the English couple more closely than the scene on the street.

ENGLISHWOMAN
What on earth's going on there?

DARK EUROPEAN
(walking over to
the couple)
Pardon, Madame...have you not
heard?

ENGLISHWOMAN
We hear very little -- and we
understand even less.

(CONTINUED)

Compared to a stage play, screenplays have a lot more scene description. While a stage play is almost entirely dialogue, screenplays add all the context and action as well. The director still has to make choices about how to shoot the scene, but there's a clear plan on the page for how the scene is meant to go.

On the podcast, we've speculated about ways to update or reimagine the screenplay format. After all, it's not 1942 anymore. Adhering to the conventions of notable screenplays from eighty years ago is part of why we're stuck with dumb "rules" today. Modern scripts could include embedded music and images, citations, and alternate lines of dialogue. But very little has changed.

It's tempting to point the finger at Final Draft, the dominant screenwriting software for the past twenty-five years. It's always been buggy, frustrating, and overpriced. We both use alternative apps to write our own scripts; John's company makes one of them. But the reality is that if Final Draft were to suddenly go away, screenplays wouldn't change that quickly. Inertia is a powerful force, and everyone is used to scripts looking a certain way.

While the screenplay itself hasn't evolved much over the decades, screenwriters are now doing a lot more work in apps like Keynote and PowerPoint. For pitches, it's become common to build a deck to show buyers what a movie or series will look like. For certain projects—particularly ones with a lot of world-building—there's a growing expectation that you'll be delivering visuals along with the script. So even if the screenplay format itself never changes, screenwriters will find themselves curating visuals to accompany their words.

FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS, NOT THE RULES

Every screenwriter is going to make different choices about how to present a scene on the page. It ultimately comes down to personal style and the rules they set for themselves. For example, how much action can you shove into parentheses? Compare these two versions of the same moment:

ROBERT

It looks like it's addressed to
Cynthia.

(opens the envelope, reading)
Oh god. No!

versus

ROBERT

It looks like it's addressed to
Cynthia.

With a moment's hesitation, he opens the envelope.
Pulls out a typed letter. He goes pale.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Oh god. No!

Which version is correct? Both and neither. The decision comes down to the writer's personal style and what else is happening in the scene.

The general rule is that you should use an action line for action. Parentheticals are for terms that influence the way the line is read or are there to imply that there's a pause. But every now and then, if there is an action that is super tiny and necessary to understand the dialogue properly, we would place it in the parenthetical. For example, if someone lights a match or shakes someone's hand, that might go in a parenthetical.

Screenwriting involves making these judgment calls countless times per script, per scene, and per line.

A similar issue arises with the passive voice. In general, in screenplays we prefer to see characters as the subject of the sentence ("Marcus lights a match") rather than the object ("a match is lit by Marcus"). Movies are about characters taking action.

But like all suggestions, it's easy to overgeneralize.

A listener wrote in about coverage he had gotten on his script. (Coverage is a written assessment of a script, typically by a junior studio executive or intern.) The reader criticized the writer for using the passive voice, providing the example of: “Mary is cooking dinner.” The reader said, “It should be ‘Mary cooks dinner,’” which is wrong on two levels.

First off, that’s not passive voice. “The dinner was cooked by Mary” is passive voice. Second, there are times when the passive voice is simply better. For example: “The casket is lowered into the ground.” That puts the emphasis on the casket, which may be what you want.

But with “Mary is cooking dinner,” that’s actually the present progressive. It’s a remarkably useful thing in English that not every language has. The present progressive is that “-ing” form. So, “Mary is cooking.” “Todd is running.” What’s great about the present progressive for screenwriting is that you can interrupt it. “Todd is running down the street when . . .” something happens. You can stop that action.

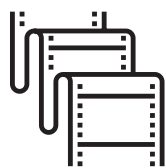
If it’s “Todd runs down the street,” well, does he finish running down the street? It implies that something has been completed when it may be something that you want to stop midway.

Passive voice and the present progressive are two examples of why those twenty rules of screenwriting at the start of the chapter deserve scrutiny, if not mockery.

Again, the intention of the screenplay is to make the reader feel like they are watching the movie. “Mary is cooking dinner when there is a knock at the door” more effectively communicates the sudden disruption of a placid domestic scene, the sudden startle for Mary and the viewer, than “Mary cooks. There’s a knock at the door.”

Screenplays are not novels—but just imagine if novels were limited in these same arbitrary ways, hemming in language’s ability to communicate with precision action and drama. We want to use the language that gets us closest to how it will feel to experience the scene on-screen.

There are no rules of screenwriting, just conventions. You need to understand them, but don’t let them stop you.



FIRST PERSON CHRISTOPHER NOLAN

BACKSTORY

- ★ Episode 622, "The One with Christopher Nolan," December 19, 2023
- ★ Christopher Nolan is the writer and director of *Memento*, the *Dark Knight* trilogy, *Inception*, and *Oppenheimer*.
- ★ Chris's brother and frequent collaborator, Jonathan Nolan, was an early *Scriptnotes* guest.

STARTING OUT

For my whole childhood, I was always filming things and putting images together, trying to cut images together on the old Moviola. I was eight years old, getting together with friends and doing riffs on *Star Wars*. Writing came to me over time as a way of formalizing my instinctive process of putting one image after another to create some kind of sensation of narrative. As these things become longer, as you move into 16mm and you start making things that you need more structure to, then you start writing.

When you embrace the screenplay form, as I have over the years, you always have to remind yourself that the initial impulse, and therefore the thing that people are watching films for, is that string of images telling a visual narrative. It's nice to have that recollection, to have that physicality of holding images in my hand, taping them together. It stays with me as a guiding principle as I'm getting lost in the words.

EDITING

As a writer-director, I do a lot of editing on the page. I love overwriting and then editing the same way I edit the images and the dialogue when we get in the edit suite.

One of the things that I try to do in my writing at a certain point—it's not usually with the first draft—I'll try to start thinking like an editor as I'm writing and how the juxtaposition of images is going to be something more.

The relationship between the two is very interesting, because editing is a key feature of cinema that's not shared in other media. Eisenstein summarized it: Shot A plus Shot B gives you Thought C.

NONLINEAR STRUCTURES

My process has tended to be one of spending months thinking about the film, thinking about the script, what it's going to be, and almost not letting myself write until I feel like really I'm ready to go, like I really need to. Structure to me is part of that.

My first film, *Following*, has a nonlinear structure. I came up with the structure before I wrote the script. That's what I generally do. It's three braided timelines. I decided to write the script chronologically, so that everything makes sense and I know that it all works, and then cut it up. I was typing it out and then physically cutting and pasting it to the structure. That didn't work very well, because you then had to rewrite endlessly to try and create the flow. What I had uncovered is the reason why applying an editorial structure to a project that didn't have it baked into the script never works.

Now, whatever the structure is, I write from page 1 through to page 123. That way, when you're doing a film like *Memento*, it's actually very linear, it's very connected, but it is inverted. I wrote that screenplay from the first image that the audience would see to the last, so it has a conventional three-act structure underpinning the more elaborate temporal construction of it. That's an important reason why the film worked for an audience.

WRITING FOR DIFFERENT READERS

I always try to view the screenplay first and foremost as a movie that I'm watching with an audience. Then before I ever show it to anyone, there's a pass where I'm imagining the studio reading it. What do we actually have on the page? What works?

One of the big differences I've found in terms of nonlinear construction is when I've got into the edit suite, I have found the need to combine the first two sections of any nonlinear, segmented timeline. I did it with *Following*. I did it with *Memento*, definitely. I did it with *Batman Begins*. *Openheimer*.

When you show someone a screenplay with a nonlinear structure, you have to teach the readers the structure right away. But movie audiences don't respond to that. If you're jumping around too much at the beginning of a movie, the audience just lets it wash over them, and they wait for the movie to start. They wait to find their feet. With every project, I've simplified the structure at the front end so that the audience can connect with the characters and the type of narrative it is. Then you start jumping around.

I started off in my early scripts being very, very rigid. I wouldn't even use a character name until somebody had called the character by name. That was very useful for me as a screenwriter but also as a director, because it meant that I was always aware: Have I communicated the information about who this character is or haven't I?

The problem is you have to show the script to a lot of people who aren't reading your screenplay as a movie. They're reading it as a screenplay. They're reading it for information about what character they're playing or what costumes are going to be in the film or whatever that is. Over the years, it varied project to project, but you try to find a middle ground where you're giving people the information they need, but you're not violating what you consider your basic principles as a writer.

WRITING IN THE FIRST PERSON

With *Oppenheimer*, I decided to write the script in the first person. “I went into the room. I sat down at the desk.” I love the effect that had on the writing and the relationship with the reader to the film, but I didn’t want to cheat. And so what I did was I wrote quite a few scenes at the beginning, maybe almost the whole first act, in the third person, conventionally, so that I knew that everything worked technically the way it needed to for a screenplay. Then I put it into first person without changing anything other than the pronouns. That worked beautifully for me. That hooked me right in. I knew I wasn’t cheating. I wasn’t describing thoughts that no one would be able to convey, that kind of thing.

It was a big breakthrough for me. I knew the structure I wanted. I knew that I wanted to tell the story subjectively. But I knew that I didn’t want to use voice-over. The thing about voice-over, it’s seductive when you’re looking for a subjective storyteller, because of that first person.

My brother and I, we were quarantining in a house together during Covid. I was writing downstairs. He was writing upstairs. I came up with this idea, and I thought, I’m not going to say anything to him. I’m just going to rewrite what I’ve done and then show him the first act, just say, “Look, just gut check, what do you think?” without drawing any attention to it. He read it and was like, “Yep, don’t know why no one’s done that before, but that works.”

For years and years, I’ve written scripts where you have to read the stage directions. I’ve never found any way to get anybody to read the stage directions. He said to me, “You finally found a way to get people to read the stage directions,” because when you put them in the first person, people value them as information, so they read all of them.

ADAPTING A NONFICTION BOOK

I can only start writing when I have the structure in place. For *Oppenheimer*, I was adapting *American Prometheus*, by Kai Bird and Martin

Sherwin. It's this incredible resource, but it's seven hundred and something pages. It's a massive tome. My approach was to read it, not take notes, nothing, read it again. I read it a couple of times and then just spent a lot of time thinking about what had struck me about it, about what I was interested in, what I would tell somebody about this story. Based on those notes, I started to feel out what were the things that were going to give me the structure I wanted. I knew I wanted subjectivity. To do that, I felt like I also needed objectivity crosscut with that. I needed two timelines braided together.

About two-thirds of the way through *American Prometheus*, there's a reference to the Senate confirmation hearings that Lewis Strauss, ultimately the antagonist, was subjected to. I immediately grabbed that and went, Oh, there's a really interesting relationship between what he had done to Oppenheimer and then what was done to him. As a writer, you're always looking for those kind of poetic echoes, those kind of rhyming relationships in narrative. I chased that down.

For example, I started to realize, while reading the objections in the *Oppenheimer* transcript—which is about a thousand pages—I found things like Oppenheimer and his lawyers strongly objecting to the fact they had no list of witnesses. Strauss in the congressional testimony is making the same complaint, that they're not giving him a list of witnesses. Things like that, that as a writer, you're like, "This is such a gift."

Then, of course, you have the fun of going into these written transcripts that have no indication of tone, of voice. They're very dry in terms of the format. In a funny sort of way, not to sound massively pretentious, but you have to interpret them. It felt a bit like what my friend Ken Branagh must do when he does a Shakespeare film, where yeah, the words are there, but what are you going to do with them?

SURPRISING YOURSELF

Structure's very important, but you have to leave room to play. I love to overwrite. I tend to not write scenes that I don't need at all. It's more within

the scene, particularly with the dialogue. It's almost like stream of consciousness, monologues, kind of, that you can then winnow away, find what's in there that's the thing you're trying to express. I'll write notes on thematic connections and ideas, but some of those ultimately prove too self-conscious. You don't want to get caught doing it. I don't use the outline. I don't use the notes. I'll write the script. If I get stuck, I'll then go back through pages and pages of notes to see: Did I miss something? Sometimes you pick things up and you put them back in.

Structure is very important, but you have to leave room to play.

I read an interview with Paul Thomas Anderson where he talked about things that you write into a script, and you're like, "Oh, I'll fix that later." Quite often, it's the things that don't work or the mistakes or the things that don't quite fit the pattern that you wind up actually valuing, that give the thing its idiosyncrasy. For my process, as I write, I've done a lot of thinking, I've done a lot of notes about those kinds of elements, and then I want to forget them and try and write from the point of view of character and story and what's really going on in the narrative, what feels necessary.

EVOLVING YOUR SCREENWRITING STYLE

For me, it's been a continual journey to try and strip it down. As the films have gotten longer and I'm trying to stuff more and more into the sausage, you really do try to strip it down. I try to write scripts that really will be a page a minute—which, if you tend to over-describe things, the scripts are going to get very long.

I try to write in a way that reflects screen time, that reflects the kinetic energy. Then you strip down to just the necessary beats.

The funny thing is when you're in it, when you're writing, these things seem so important and unquestionable. I remember being at a party when

I was writing *Dunkirk*. I was talking to a fellow writer, who writes TV. I said, “I’m doing this thing, and I’ve decided I want to write it with no dialogue.” Then he said, “Why?” Of course, I had no answer. It was so clear to me that that would be a good thing to do, that that would be inherently somehow positive to strip away dialogue and just go with action for this cinematic thing.

You become very convinced—and I think you need to become very convinced—that you’re doing it the only way that’s possible, the only way that would ever make a good film. Of course, it’s not true, and there are a million different ways to approach things. You try and get the right approach for the film you’re going to make.

FINDING YOUR WRITING PROCESS

Writing’s very hard and very lonely. Like all writers, I try to find a way to trick myself into it. I’ve learned a few things over the years.

I went to a lecture by [novelist and Booker Prize winner] Julian Barnes. He said a thing that stuck with me: At the end of an evening’s or a day’s work, he’ll try to finish halfway through something, because then when he comes back the next day, he knows where he’s going, and he can get started. That’s something I’ve definitely tried to do. I try to be reasonably disciplined and then write office hours for most of it, and then not do all-nighters or crazy hours until you absolutely have to, until you’re on the case of something.

The thing that every writer needs to learn, the thing that I know absolutely, is that feeling you have that you can write something, when you know, “Okay, I’ve got it now”—you have to write exactly then and get it on the page, because that feeling will disappear like a fart in the wind. You’ll come back to the desk, and you’ll be like, “What was it?” You can write notes, but that’s not going to help. You just have to sit down and write it.

With *Oppenheimer*, I knew what the end of the film was going to be. It’s always important to know where you’re going with the end with any movie. But I woke up in the middle of the night with the whole last three or four

scenes figured out. I got up in my underpants, went down, crossed the garden into my office, sat, and just wrote it. I think I wrote it on a legal pad. But I wrote it as foreseen, and it never changed.

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It's a really important thing for everybody to know, because the feeling is so convincing that you'll always be able to write it. It's like being drunk, then sobering up. You're a different person the next day, and you don't have it anymore, and then you've got to think your way back into it.

People always view writing as an intellectual process, but I think writing's actually a very emotional process. Those elements that are about or reflect on the narrative or create connections, those are the intellectual things. They're the things we like to discuss. But they have to be emotional. If they're emotional in the story, then they work.

A lot of my note-taking process and a lot of my thinking about what I'm going to do when I write, that is intellectual. I do a lot of diagrams. Big fan of Venn diagrams for different narratives or whatever. When I go to write, then I have to be in an emotional state, and I have to write from an emotional perspective.

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