

# Screenwriting 101

By Janie Cheaney

**PRODUCTION**

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**SCENE**

**TAKE**

**DIRECTOR**

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**CAMERA**

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**DATE**



Common Sense Press  
*Simple to teach. Easy to learn.*

# LESSON ONE: MEET THE SCREENPLAY



What’s your favorite movie? Just about everybody has one, or two or three.

When you’re thinking about your favorites, can you pinpoint just what it is you like about them? Is it the characters, or the special effects, or the whole look of the thing or the way it makes you feel? Have you ever written yourself into the movie as an additional character because you like it so much?

Movies as a storytelling form are only about 125 years old, but they’ve come to have a powerful hold on our imagination.

Did you ever read a great book and wonder what it would look like as a movie? You’re not the only one: producers are always looking for story ideas to develop, and the process always begins with a screenplay. It’s kind of weird, when you think about it: a medium that’s mostly visual begins with words on paper. But whoever is writing those words—and often it’s more than one person—has to think visually. That’s what we’ll be doing as we learn to write a screenplay.

First, let’s consider how screenwriting is different from other kinds of writing. In the chart below, you see a list of storytelling forms. Discuss with your group how these are alike and different and fill in the empty boxes.

<b>Short Story</b>	Fiction	250–5,000 words		Few Characters	No subplots
<b>Novel</b>	Fiction		Imagined (read)		One or more subplots
<b>Stage Play</b>		1–3 hours	Seen and heard	Any number of characters	

<b>Graphic novel</b>	Fiction or nonfiction		Seen and read		0 to many subplots
<b>Comic strip</b>	Fiction (usually)	4–12 panels	Seen and read		No subplot
<b>Documentary</b>	Nonfiction	½ to 2 hours		Any number of characters	No subplot
<b>Magazine article</b>	Nonfiction	700–15,000 words	Read	Few (or no) characters	
<b>Cartoon</b>	Fiction		Seen and heard		No subplot



If you’ve ever acted in a play at school, you know what a script looks like. Most of it is taken up with dialogue, or what the actors say. The rest is stage direction, which tells the director and actors what is supposed to be going on between or during the dialogue. Such as

ROCKY punches BIFF

BIFF. (grunting) Oof!

If you look at a play by Shakespeare, you’ll notice that it’s almost all dialogue—very little stage direction except *Exit*. or *They fight*. Over time, playwrights have added more and more direction to their scripts, and the script format has changed. These days, if you write a play and submit it to a theater to produce, you must be careful to type it in a very specific form.

Only about half of a screenplay is taken up with dialogue—the rest is action, some camera direction, and a lot of white space. Only one font is allowed: 12-point Courier New. The left margin of the page is set at 1.5 inches, and the right, top, and bottom margins at one inch. The character name is always typed in all caps, and when the character is speaking, his or her name is always indented 2.5 inches from the left margin. The actual dialogue is indented 1.5 inches from the left margin. Here’s

how the two seconds of action between Biff and Rocky would look in a standard screenplay:

ROCKY punches BIFF.

BIFF.

(grunting)

Oof!

Typing a screenplay means you make friends with the tab button, because you'll be pressing it a lot!

There's a reason for so much white space and so little actual dialogue. Each page of a screenplay will work out to roughly one minute of running time, so the length of a script gives the director and crew an idea how long the finished film will be.

It's not just formatting that sets screenplays apart from novels and stories, and even stage plays. Screenwriting represents an *entirely different way of telling the story*. Characters and plot may be the same, but the writer has to show what's happening rather than explain how the characters feel or what they're thinking or what their childhood was like. And because film allows much more freedom of movement than a stage play, the storytelling can use techniques like closeups, cross-cutting, split screens, montage, and more that we'll be learning about later.

Let's make a comparison. Have you ever read *The Tale of Despereaux*, by Kate DiCamillo? It was published in 2002, won the Newbery Medal in 2003, and premiered as a movie in 2008. It's the story of a little mouse with great big ears who doesn't know how to be afraid. Despereaux's lack of fear is seen as a problem by his family:

Despereaux's siblings tried to educate him in the ways of being a mouse. His brother Furlough took him on a tour of the castle to demonstrate the art of scurrying.

"Move side to side," instructed Furlough, scrabbling across the waxed castle floor. "Look over your shoulder all the time, first to the right, then to the left. Don't stop for anything."

But Despereaux wasn't listening to Furlough. He was staring at the light pouring in through the stained-glass windows of the castle. He stood on his hind legs and held his handkerchief over his heart and stared up, up, up into the brilliant light.

"Furlough," he said, "what is this thing? What are all these colors? Are we in heaven?"

“Cripes!” shouted Furlough from a far corner. “Don’t stand there in the middle of the floor talking about heaven. Move! You’re a mouse, not a man. You’ve got to scurry.”

“What?” said Despereaux, still staring at the light.

But Furlough was gone.

He had, like a good mouse, disappeared into a hole in the molding.

Kate DiCamillo, *The Tale of Despereaux*, Chapter Two  
Candlewick; Reprint edition (December 8, 2015)



*Try it!*

How would you show this in a play or movie scene? Take about five minutes to sketch it out on the storyboard at the end of this lesson. Your sketch will show basic camera angles (such as long view or closeup), actions and reactions. Write dialogue in the boxes above the panels and indicate the actions inside parentheses (like this). You don’t have to use all the boxes, and as you’ll see from the worksheet, your drawing doesn’t have to be fancy! Just try to give some idea where the characters are, what they’re doing and what they’re saying.

You’ll find a film clip of the scene you just plotted here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJUFDpkUK4>

Watch the clip a couple of times and note how it’s different from the way you imagined it.



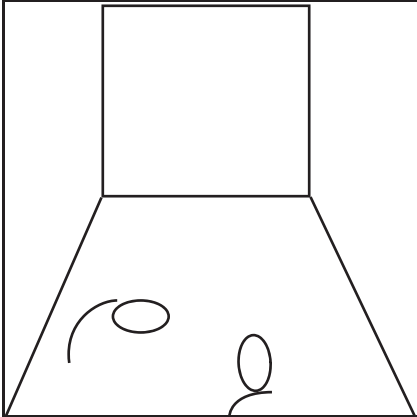
Different? It’s not the same scene at all! Sometimes the author of the book and the screenwriter for the movie are the same person, but usually not. And since it almost always takes longer to read a book than to watch a movie, it stands to reason there’s a lot of material in the book that will need to be cut out, or shortened, or shown in a completely different way. That’s what you see here: in order to establish

Despereaux's fearlessness and love of adventure, the screenwriters invent a "mouse school" where he doesn't learn his lessons.

They made plenty of other changes—perhaps too many. Most critics liked the animation but didn't care for the story, which (they said) turned an original, quirky fairytale into a sermon about following your dreams. Kate DiCamillo didn't have much to do with the finished product. (The author of a book made into a movie usually doesn't have much control over how the movie takes shape—she just hopes more people will read the book after seeing the movie.)

Some stories make your heart sing. Some not so much. For our next lesson, we talk about what makes a story in the first place.

**WORKSHEET #1—STORYBOARD**

<p>(Interior. Long hallway) FURLOUGH: Now pay attention, Despereaux! It's important!</p>		
 A storyboard panel showing a character's head and shoulders. The character is wearing a white shirt and has a small tuft of hair. The background is a simple line drawing of a hallway with a rectangular opening above the character's head.		