

Writing Screenplays

by

Jessie Coleman
and Paul Peditto

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Notice to Readers



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Dedication & Acknowledgments



Since no one in this business accomplishes anything without the help of others, I would be remiss to not give credit where credit is due.

Love and kisses to my wonderful family and friends, especially McCoy and Lennon who have encouraged my literary endeavors over the years. Many thanks and much appreciation to managing editor Eileen Velthuis, who believed in this project from the very beginning. And finally, I want to thank my editor Tanya Lee Howe for the fabulous work she did in shaping our book into something I can be proud of.

— Jessie Jamie Coleman

This book is dedicated to my father, who taught style, and Claire Gerardi, who was *Jane Doe*, and who won't be forgotten.

— Paul Peditto

Introduction



Everyone has a story to tell. Never before have personal narratives gushed so profusely in North America as they do this present day. It seems everyone wants to tell his or her life story. Is it because we believe our lives are all unique, or is it that we think people can learn from our drama? Is it a combination of both? Regardless of the reasons writers have for wanting to tell their life stories, as long as people exist, there will never be a shortage of people wanting to put forth their life woes or adventures.

Do you think your life would make a good movie? Most people do, and the reason is simple: There is a story to tell in all of us.

The truth of the matter is, everyone *does* have a story worth telling, if he or she knows how to do it. That's what this book is about — helping writers find that crossroad, locate that milestone, and hone in on that moment in time that has lessons for everyone. However, just because something has happened to you doesn't necessarily mean it will make a good movie, but there *are* moments in everyone's life that, with the right spin, could make for a dramatic work of art.

It's also true that there are many books on the market regarding the subjects of screenplays and memoir writing; however, *Writing Screenplays* dares to be different. This pioneering how-to guide walks the reader through a step-by-step process of telling the true-life tale in screenplay format, which is uniquely different from the standard book format. The screenplay version of your life story will cut to the meat of your story and highlight the message you want to share. You could say this book is two books in one:

- It's a book about honing in on your life's most dramatic moments and fleshing out the story into something people would want to know.
- It's a book about how to craft a story made for the screen (whether TV or the big screen).

It is our wish that you enjoy the adventures of *Writing Screenplays* and, at the very least, experience the wonderful and fun process of discovery by connecting with the moments in your life that made you the person you are today. Here's a golden opportunity to share with the world the story that is unique to you and demands to be told.

The following are some of our favorite movies based on true stories:

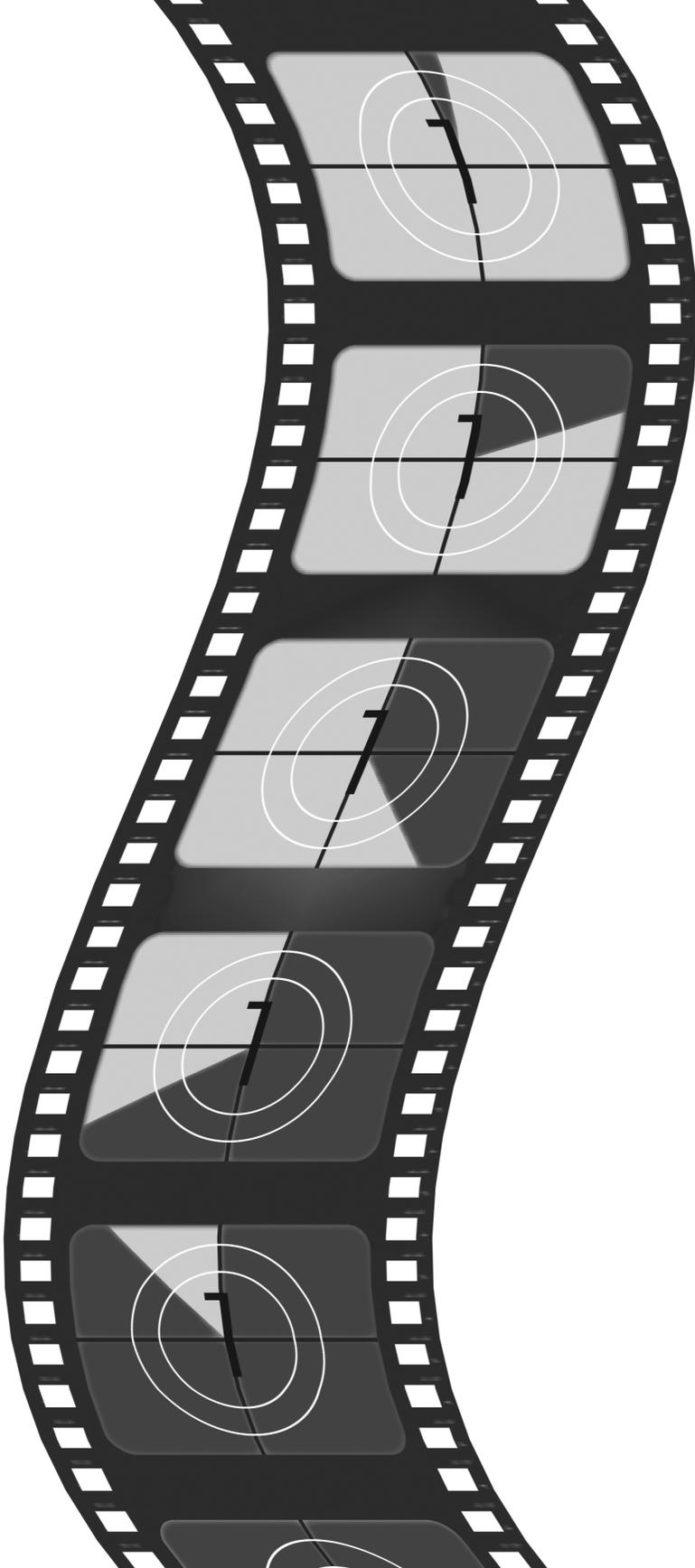
Jessie's picks:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| • <i>Antwone Fisher</i> | • <i>Men of Honor</i> |
| • <i>The Assassination of Richard Nixon</i> | • <i>Mississippi Burning</i> |
| • <i>Black Hawk Down</i> | • <i>Not Without My Daughter</i> |
| • <i>Deliberate Intent</i> | • <i>The People vs. Larry Flynt</i> |
| • <i>Introducing Dorothy Dandridge</i> | • <i>Seabiscuit</i> |

Paul's picks:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| • <i>Bobby</i> | • <i>Marie Antoinette</i> |
| • <i>Capote</i> | • <i>Primary Colors</i> |
| • <i>Donnie Brasco</i> | • <i>Sylvia</i> |
| • <i>Factory Girl</i> | • <i>United 93</i> |
| • <i>GoodFellas</i> | • <i>W.</i> |

The Appendix contains coauthor Paul Peditto's screenplay *Pictures of Baby Jane Doe*. It is a graphic story, based on a real person he knew. Real life is graphic so it was important to include this screenplay as an example.



Chapter One



Finding Your Story

Your mission, if you should choose to accept it, is to select the most interesting period of your life that will appeal to a large audience. Your movie can be a drama, comedy, romance, etc., but if you want the movie to sell, you need to be aware of what the marketplace is buying. If you want your script to appeal to a movie audience, it must resonate with them; it must ring true with a theme that is universal, with characters the audience can recognize as believable and real.

True-life stories continue to cast a spell over people who want to learn from the experience of others, and for that reason, true-life stories with universal appeal will always be in high demand. For example, an adaptation that was powerful and had universal appeal was *The Fighter*, about the real-life battles of “Irish” Micky Ward and his rise to a boxing championship despite his dysfunctional family.

There are always moments or dramatic events in our lives that are so fascinating or memorable that they scream to be shared with the world, and we think, “This could be a movie!” Though that may very well be true, how do you go about finding that moment in time worth writing about and sharing with the world?

You may feel that the challenge is to choose the story that would appeal to the largest number of people. You want to be aware of what will sell, but if you're writing this for the audience alone, it won't be much good. You need to channel what I believe Judith Malina once said, "First I think about what it is I want to say. Then I go about saying it." The point is that the story you're writing must resonate with you; it's a story that you *need* to write, not one that will draw the largest number of people.

Remember, a story is not necessarily interesting because it really happened. It's an interesting story simply because it is, whether it really happened or not. Think of your life story as a work of fiction. If your life story were pitched as a novel, would people line up to purchase a copy, or would you have to say, "based on a true story" to capture their attention? You want your life story to be so interesting that even if it were not a true story, it would be compelling all on its own.

While you are in the planning stages of your story, it might be a good idea to view a few true-life stories on film to get an idea of how the subject matter is handled. After you have viewed some movies, you will probably have a better sense of how different stories are executed based on theme. If you have already decided upon the story you wish to tell, congratulations! If not, I offer you a piece of advice: Look for the hot spots of your life, the moments of the greatest change, greatest lessons, and sometimes the greatest loss. Do this and you will find the story that only you can tell. Here's a golden opportunity to share with the world the story that is unique to you and demands to be told.

1. Story Ideas to Get You Started

Where is the story in your life? What part of your life should be shared with the world? Instead of looking for just that *one* story to tell, compile a list of several stories from which to choose. The key is to tap into your own personal stories, and find something universal that will resonate with total strangers.

The following sections will help you get started compiling your list of story ideas. Of course, this list is in no way conclusive. You will probably find many other wonderful points of interest.

1.1 School days

It doesn't matter whether it was grade school, high school, college, grad school, medical school, or law school; if you dig up enough dirt, you will find something hidden in the shadows worth discussing. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What happened to you during your school days?
- Were you bullied until you learned to defend yourself?
- Did you pursue a major for the sake of pleasing your parents?
- Were you partying so much that you ended up cheating just to get passing grades?

Movies such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Mean Girls*, and *Heathers* aren't based on true stories, but they are all about the trials and tribulations of high school. If you want to write about your school days, watch movies (nonfiction and fiction) to get an idea of what the audience wants in a school-based movie.

1.2 Children

You may want to write stories for kids about adventures you and your friends had, or you may want to write about your children and the struggles you have had with them.

- Were you blessed with a baby when the doctor told you that you only had a 10 percent chance of conceiving?
- Did you want a girl, but ended up with a boy and realized it was a boy you really wanted all along?
- Did you try for a baby for years, then stop trying only to become pregnant the next month?
- Did you and your childhood friends have a great adventure? (Even though *Stand by Me* isn't a true story, it is a good reference for a group of kids bonding while searching for adventure.)

You may want to write about a darker time in your teenage years. A good movie to watch is *Thirteen*. Nikki Reed co-wrote and co-starred in the movie. Reed was a teenager at the time of writing.

1.3 Animals

Stories about animals can be funny or inspiring. If you are an animal lover, maybe this is a topic at which you can excel.

- Do you love your pet so much that you are single because you always put your pet first?
- Did you lose your pet and swore you would never adopt another one?
- Do you have funny or inspiring stories about your pets?
- Did you ever work in a pet shop or veterinarian clinic and have funny stories to share about the customers and their animals?

1.4 Family traditions, religious experiences, and vacations

Every family has their own holiday rituals. Some of them are hilarious. For example, does your family have a ritual of take-no-prisoners chess matches and Monopoly games during the holidays? Or maybe your family has a unique way of decorating the tree?

There are also religious traditions. Who doesn't have an insanely religious aunt or uncle who would make a great movie character?

- Did you fall in love with someone of a different race or background and have to flee the country just so you two could be together?
- How do you feel now about your family's passed-down traditions and beliefs? How will those traditions affect your children?
- Did you have a religious awakening after a traumatic life event?
- Are there family feuds that continue from year to year at family gatherings?
- Are you so religious that people find you to be a fanatic?
- Did you refuse to date someone you really liked because you and this person did not share the same religion?
- Did you attend an awkward funeral for an eccentric relative?
- Is your birthday one of your favorite or least favorite holidays?

- Which holiday is more significant to you? Valentine’s Day or New Year’s Eve? Has that changed over the years?

Pieces of April is a fabulous movie about a daughter attempting to prepare a Thanksgiving dinner for her estranged family. Another example is *A Christmas Story*, which is a movie classic, from the memories of Jean Shepherd (based on the book of short stories *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*).

People love memorable vacation movies. Take the time to watch box-office hits such as *Home Alone* and any of the National Lampoon’s *Vacation* movies. These movies may be fictional, but audiences loved them!

- Do you have any funny vacation stories that you can share with the world?
- Was there ever a particular vacation that brought you so much pain that you wished you could have skipped it?
- Did you have a vacation that did not go as planned where one bad thing happened after another?

1.5 Siblings

Sibling stories can be funny or serious and may include stories about sibling rivalries, or adapting to living with step or adopted siblings. In serious drama, conflict between siblings can be fatal (e.g., Michael and Fredo Corleone in *The Godfather*).

- When you were growing up, did you cherish your baby sister or brother?
- Did you have a love for your older brother that other people found unusual (e.g., consider Angelina Jolie and the media frenzy that occurred around her relationship with her brother, James Haven)?
- Did you model your behavior after your older sister because you thought the world of her? What’s the relationship like now? Is it the same or different?
- Did you wish you were an only child because your sibling received all of your parents’ attention?
- Did your sister or brother pick on you and blame you for everything? Or did your parents automatically blame you for something your brother or sister did?

- Are you still close with your siblings, or are you still on non-speaking terms?

There is a discussion about sibling rivalries in movies at www.aceshowbiz.com/news/view/00017186.html.

1.6 Love and heartbreak

There are numerous stories about love and heartbreak. The key is to understand what moves you in life and whether or not your story will be moving for the audience. What could be more universal than writing about one of your great loves?

- Did you meet someone online? If so, did you lose all sense of reason when you found yourself engaged after only knowing each other for one month?
- Have you ever been so in love that you actually considered murdering someone?
- Would you have shaved ten years off your life to be with a certain person?
- Did you have a whirlwind romance that lasted for six months and then abruptly stopped?
- Were you so much in love and/or lust that you and your romantic interest barricaded yourselves inside a hotel room for one week?
- Were you so in love and/or lust that you couldn't think straight?
- Had you given up on love and then soon after met the love of your life?
- Did you disappear from your friends and family for a period of time because of your obsession with your new love interest?
- Do you still speak to the person you want to write about?

1.7 Employment

Employment stories can be entertaining (e.g., *Waiting ...*, *Office Space*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, or *The Nanny Diaries*). Almost everybody has a job, and most people have had to endure a horrible boss or coworker, so the audience can relate to a good employment story.

- Did you hate your job so much that you quit even though you needed the money?
- Did you suffer a mental breakdown after the loss of a job?
- Was there a time in your life where your job was your only source of companionship?
- Did you ever have a job in which your coworker or boss sabotaged your career advancement?

1.8 Parents

Stories about parents can be serious, sad, or happy. From parents who were neglectful to parents who were overprotective, the possibilities under this topic are endless. A good reference is the dark comedy *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, which covers family relationships.

- Were you so close with your parents, you could tell them things other kids wouldn't dare share with their parents?
- Did the relationship with your parents make you want to be a parent?
- Did you hate your parents for the longest time until you became a parent yourself? If so, what's that relationship like now?

1.9 Dirty secrets

Who doesn't have dirty secrets? Do you dare write about your own dirty secrets?

- Did you harbor a secret that you would do anything to keep under wraps?
- Were you ruined by a secret that got out?
- Are you keeping a secret now?

1.10 Health and wellness

Health and wellness stories can cover a variety of topics such as mental illness or a physical disability and coping with the effects of the illness. *Running with Scissors* is a harrowing story of a son's difficult relationship with his mother and her questionable mental health.

- Did you have a health scare that made you see life in a totally new light?
- Were you diagnosed with an illness that changed your life?
- Were/are you a health nut because of something that happened to a friend or family member?
- What's your health situation now?

1.11 Undying aspirations

There are many stories that can be told about undying aspirations. For example, *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom* is based on the true story of a Texas mom who tries to hire a hit man to kill a cheerleader and/or the cheerleader's mother.

- Did you always want to be an actress but were afraid you would fail?
- Did you want to play sports professionally but were afraid your parents would not approve?
- Would you have done anything to be a dancer?
- How has not following your dreams affected your life?
- What dream would you like to pursue now?

1.12 Accomplishments and overcoming obstacles

Accomplishments and overcoming obstacles can range from getting over an addiction to getting hired at your dream job.

Lots of families have drug-addicted sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers. What do you do when tough love isn't enough? How about writing about it? This is how you get a movie made, by plumbing your own emotional depths to find a truth greater than yourself that will resonate with an audience. When people recognize their own relatives in your movie, your writing will truly move to another level. It's why the movie *The Fighter* was so powerful. Christian Bale's character is an addict, but his character's mother is in denial. The movie's journey is as much the story of Bale's character and his mother's acceptance of this addiction as it is the victory of Mark Wahlberg's character in the ring.

Another movie about addiction is coauthor Paul Peditto's *Pictures of Baby Jane Doe* (you will find the entire script in the Appendix). The story studies addiction from the point of view of the enabler.

You can tell your story from whatever angle you know best whether you were the addict, or someone you knew was the addict, and show how the addiction affected loved ones.

- Did you go from making \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year (or vice versa)?
- Were you at the top of your graduating class?
- Did you figure out an answer to a problem that stumped everyone else around you for months?
- Did you overcome an addiction when everyone else had given up on you?
- Are you living the life of your dreams? If not, ask yourself why?

If you want to see an inspiring true story, watch *127 Hours*. The story is based on the mountain climber, Aron Lee Ralston, who overcame incredible odds to survive.

1.13 Marriage and divorce

The topics of marriage and divorce can be serious or funny, you just have to remember to connect with your audience.

- Did you marry the wrong person?
- Was getting married the best or worst decision you ever made?
- Did marriage teach you something that you would like to share with others?
- What do you think about marriage now?
- Do you regret your divorce?
- Was getting a divorce the best or worst thing that could have ever happened to you? Did/will you marry again?

1.14 Life's crossroads

There are many crossroads in life. The key is to find the crossroad that had the most impact on your life and that will impact the most on your audience.

- Were you emotionally altered by a specific event?
- Was there a time when you thought you would not make it, but you did?
- Have you ever given up on life?
- Did someone say or do something to you that set you on a new life course? Where are you now because of that decision?
- Have you ever strived and struggled to accomplish something, then after not succeeding, realized it was not what you wanted all along?

2. Choosing the Right Moment for Your Story

Now that we have glossed over possible angles for your life story and the wheels are turning in your head, what's next? Choose one of the following:

- The moment in time where there was the most drama and pain. You may say, "but there were so many!" I know, I know. Just pick one.
- The moment in time that you find the most fascinating, whether good or bad fascination.
- The moment in time where you learned your biggest lesson.
- The moment in time that put you on a new course of life.
- The moment in time when you strived and struggled and then won.

Memoirs are about certain, unique, sometimes life-transforming periods as opposed to a whole life. You want to choose a story where somebody does something and something happens as a result, and how it affects the person negatively or positively in the end. The following are some examples:

- A woman graduates from medical school, then realizes that she really wanted to be a lawyer.
- A man searches for Mrs. Right for ten years only to learn that he really prefers to be with Mr. Right!

Now it's your turn to choose your moment in time to focus your story. You do this by forming a one- to two-sentence description (i.e., logline: very short description of concept, main character, and main conflict) similar to the above examples. Before you compile your description, I want to share with you the two different approaches you can take in weaving your true-life tale into an intimate dramatization.

2.1 Logline

When you have finished either Worksheet 1 or 2 (choose one), you will create your *logline* (i.e., a 25-word or less description of your movie). It sums up the whole movie in a sentence or two. Sounds difficult, but it's not. Every great logline has these three elements: who, goal, and obstacle. For example:

- When a Roman general is betrayed and his family murdered by an emperor's corrupt son, he comes to Rome as a gladiator to seek revenge. *Gladiator*
- A journey of self-discovery by a brilliant mathematician once he is diagnosed with schizophrenia. He eventually triumphs over tragedy and receives the Nobel Prize. *A Beautiful Mind*
- The aging patriarch of an organized crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son. *The Godfather*

Now it's time to craft your logline:

It's a story about a _____ who does _____ and _____ happens.

Play around with this description for a little while until you find something you feel really good about. This is the tough part. Once you get this description written down, the rest should be easy; then again, maybe not!

There are two sample loglines in Chapter 7.

WORKSHEET 1

Your Story: Approach 1

The first approach is to make your story a goal-oriented tale, in which the main character pursues some type of goal. An example would be a story about a person in search of a romantic partner. The middle of the story would focus on obstacles and problems throughout his or her journey, and the story would end when the main character accomplishes his or her goal (or not).

If you decide to take this approach, try to answer the following questions for the story you have in mind:

1. When does the event take place?

2. Who is/are the main character(s)?

3. Does/do the main character(s) have a goal to pursue?

4. Is the goal accomplished in the end?

5. Can you list the obstacles that the main character overcame on his or her journey?

6. Does/do your character(s) learn a lesson in the end, or does a change occur along the way? How?

7. Who is/are the secondary character(s)?

8. How are the secondary characters related to the main character(s)?

9. Do any of these secondary characters have goals of their own? If yes, what are they?

WORKSHEET 2

Your Story: Approach 2

The second approach is to make your story about “everything that happened on the way to the market.” This is my favorite type of tale because it is usually a character-driven piece. An example of this type of story would be a person who takes a road trip with a friend, and the story is about everything that happened to them along the way.

If you’re interested in this approach, try to answer the following questions for the story you have in mind:

1. When does this event take place?

2. How long does this event take (e.g., over a weekend, month, year, or summer)?

3. Who is/are the main character(s)?

4. What happens in the end?

5. Can you list everything that happened on the way to the end (e.g., on my way to Florida, my car was stolen, I twisted my ankle, and I caught a cold)?

6. Does/do the character(s) learn a lesson in the end, or does a change occur along the way?

7. Who are the secondary characters, and how do they relate to the main character(s)?
