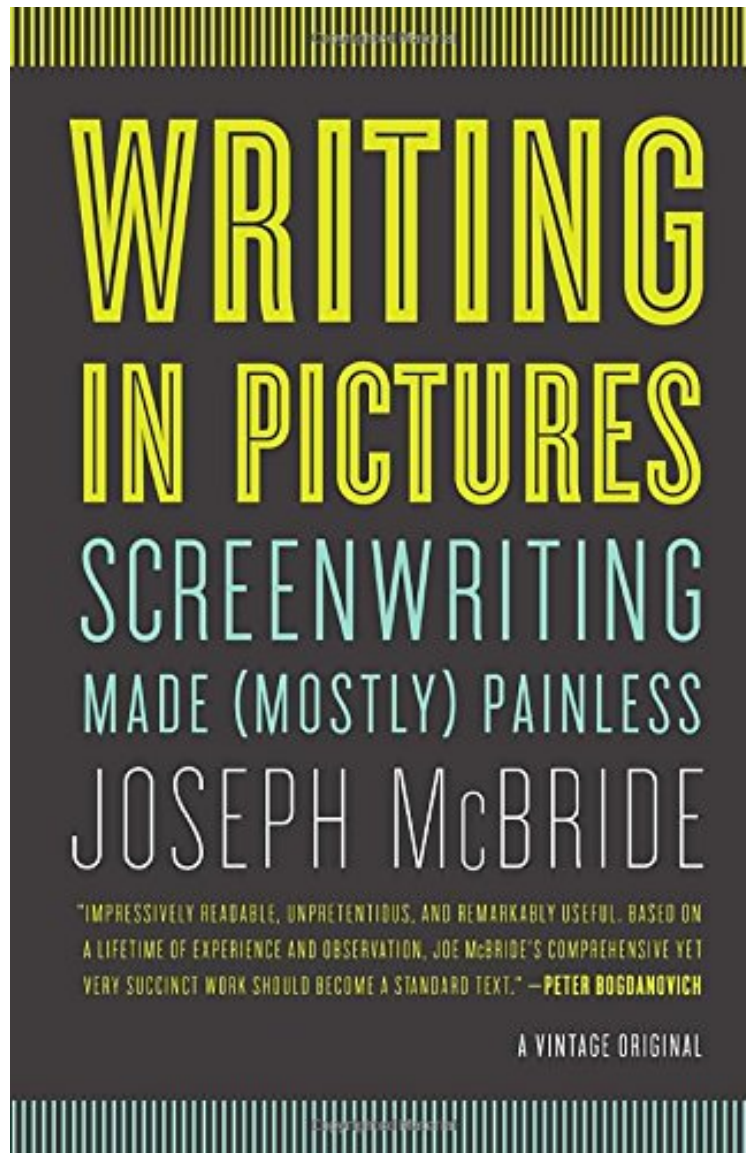


Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless

Joseph McBride

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Joseph McBride : Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless:

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Perfect for the novelistBy Anna AndersonAs a novelist, I found this

book to be more of a bible than just a tool. I can now work with screenwriters in a way that shows I understand what they are talking about. I may never try my hand at adapting my own books, but it sure is nice to collaborate on a more even playing field. The simple lessons in the book take the mystery out of the adaptation process, and my own writing will surely benefit as I think about my future stories in more of a film-friendly way. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A breathe of fresh air

By LBB Company "Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless" by Joseph McBride is a new book written by a produced screenwriter and screenwriting instructor. While I enjoyed reading this book, and agree with the statement that there are very few, if any books that teach you to write a professional screenplay, I don't think this is a book for beginners, unless you've read scripts before. As someone interested in the process of adaptation, I found this book extremely helpful. Any novelist looking to adapt their work would do well to read this book. With great software available these days, formatting is done for you, so knowing how to tell a story is where a writer should be concentrating. That's what this book teaches, how to tell a good story. McBride uses Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire" as his teaching tool. Taking the reader through the extensive (and VERY necessary) process of "breaking the spine" of the story, character bios, treatments and outlining, he prepares the writer for the process before typing FADE IN. I loved the movie references throughout the book, and now have a long list of must see movies. It's obvious McBride loves film, and his extensive history as a critic gives the reader much food for thought. The screenwriting section is followed by information on how to "break in" to the Hollywood dream. I really enjoyed the way this book was written, as if McBride was sitting across from me, doling out nuggets of information. As a produced screenwriter who has read many books on the subject, and the co-founder of Script Chat, I can tell you, this book was a breath of fresh air. (Disclaimer - this book was given to me by the publisher, in exchange for an honest review)

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. One of the best

By Thomas Bauer I've read and studied and practiced various methods, tools, and techniques learned from McKee, Truby, Snyder, Kitchen, Howard, Gulino. And those are the ones worth mentioning. This is one of the best. Provides a working method that gets real results, emphasizes language, clarifies formatting in key ways. Overall one of the most helpful in practical terms. I would imagine this would be useful to beginners and seasoned pros alike. If I was giving a course I'd use this book, or at the very least large sections. Along with all that, it's very well-written and insightful. Clarifies key elements, and genuinely enhances whatever is to be learned from above. One of the most practical handbooks, and a great discussion on the art. Highly recommended.

Writing in Pictures is a refreshingly practical and entertaining guide to screenwriting that provides what is lacking in most such books: a clear, step-by-step demonstration of how to write a screenplay. Seasoned screenwriter and writing teacher Joseph McBride breaks down the process into a series of easy, approachable tasks, focusing on literary adaptation as the best way to learn the basics and avoiding the usual formulaic approach. With its wealth of useful tips, along with colorful insights from master screenwriters past and present, this book is invaluable for anyone who wants to learn the craft of screen storytelling.

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Impressively readable, unpretentious, and remarkably useful. Based on a lifetime of experience and observation, as well as conversations with some of the greats (like Orson Welles, John Ford Howard Hawks), Joe McBride's comprehensive yet very succinct work should become a standard text.

--Peter Bogdanovich, screenwriter, director, film historian

I must confess that I had never read a how-to book straight through for the sheer pleasure of it, and I never expected to until I got my hands on the splendid *Writing in Pictures*. . . . A word of warning: in this book you will not find the Six Keys to Compelling Characters, the Seven Secrets of Successful Plotting, or the Eight Jungian Archetypes No Studio Executive Can Resist. There are no magic formulae here but if you do have a story to tell, this book will give you the solid practical advice you need to tell it in the most effective way.

Writing in Pictures is a short course in how to think cinematically. It will change the way you write. It will change the way you watch. -- Sam Hamm, screenwriter of *Batman*, *Batman Returns*, and *"Homecoming"*

If this isn't the greatest screenwriting book ever, I'll eat my hat! *Writing in Pictures* is the kind of how-to book Ben Hecht would have written on that subject: a Socratic tour of the profession the novice aspires to, filled with screenwriting lore, for illustration and entertainment. If you want to judge someone's work by how personal it is, this may just turn out to be Joe McBride's masterpiece. --Bill Krohn, author of *Hitchcock at Work* and Hollywood correspondent, *Cahiers du Cinéma*

In this unique contribution to the screenplay literature, Joe McBride invites writers to connect themselves to literary tradition, relying less on formulas

and more on intelligent uses of classic storytelling technique. He blends general precepts, concrete examples, hard-won experience, and lively anecdotes into something more than the usual script manual: an invitation to participate in the great human adventure of sharing stories. --David Bordwell, author of *Poetics of Cinema*A real contribution to a much-abused genre. Most screenwriting how to books are either formulaic, craven, or both. . . . McBride's book is something else. Its a straightforward, considered and lucid meditation on the arts and crafts of storytelling for the screen, informed by McBride's unsurpassed knowledge of, and deep love for, the movies. --Howard A. Rodman, screenwriter, teacher, and vice president of Writers Guild of America West "If it is possible for only one book to embody the ethos of screenwriting, this is the one, a guide to screenwriting that is more than a guide -- craft, history, practical advice, philosophical bedrock, wisdom, wit -- and through it all, as in the very best screenplays, the reassurance of one clarion voice." -- Patrick McGilligan, film biographer and editor of the *Backstory* series of interviews with screenwriters McBride offers the kind of friendly but honest advice that will make him the mentor to a new generation of aspiring screenwriters. Born of long experience and exceptional insight, he distills the lessons of screenwriting history into a first-rate primer for the screenwriters of tomorrow. --Julian Hoxter, screenwriter and author of *Write What You Don't Know: An Accessible Manual for Screenwriters* About the Author Joseph McBride is an internationally renowned film historian and biographer and a veteran film and television writer whose decades of experience have brought him a Writers Guild of America Award, four other WGA nominations, two Emmy Award nominations, and a Canadian Film Awards nomination. McBride was one of the screenwriters of the cult classic punk rock musical *Rock n Roll High School* and co-wrote five American Film Institute Life Achievement Award specials for CBS TV. McBride was a film critic, reporter, and columnist for *Daily Variety* in Hollywood for many years. His books include the acclaimed biographies *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*, and *Searching for John Ford*. The French edition of the Ford biography won the Best Foreign Film Book of the Year award from the French film critics' organization in 2008. McBride has also published a celebrated book of interviews with director Howard Hawks, *Hawks on Hawks*, and three books on Orson Welles, including *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?: A Portrait of an Independent Career*. That book is partly a memoir of McBride's experience working as an actor for Welles for six years, playing a film critic in the director's legendary unfinished film *The Other Side of the Wind*, for which McBride cowrote his dialogue with Welles. McBride is an associate professor in the Cinema Department at San Francisco State University, where he has been teaching screenwriting and film history since 2002. In 2011, he became the subject of a feature-length documentary on his life and work, *Behind the Curtain: Joseph McBride on Writing Film History*, written and directed by Hart Perez. McBride lives in Berkeley. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction Who Needs Another Book on Screenwriting? You do. I imagine that you are opening this book because you haven't found the answers to the many questions you have about how to break into the field of screenwriting. The books you have looked at probably disappointed you because they laid out, in excruciating detail, a series of rules you must follow to write a salable script. These rules probably struck you as recipes for turning out predictable screenplays resembling too many movies you've already seen. These books may have seemed to have more in common with cookbooks than they do with the field of creative writing, encouraging standardization rather than individuality. You may also have noticed that most of the people writing these books somehow have never managed to get a script of their own produced, which probably accounts for why much of their advice may seem so vague and impractical. At least that is what I found when I started surveying the field of books on screenwriting. When I began teaching screenwriting on a regular basis more than a decade ago, after a long career as a professional film and television writer, I naturally hoped to find a handy textbook I could use for my classes that could provide a solid framework for learning the craft. To my surprise, I couldn't find a book I thought worth using. Some seem reasonably sound but overly obvious, dull and trite in their approach to filmmaking and creative writing. Some books offer amusing comments on the field but don't offer you much practical help. You can get something out of almost any of these books, but not enough to do the job. What I couldn't find was a book that actually gets into the nitty-gritty of what's required to learn the screenwriting craft in a systematic way and that does so concisely and without telling you how to write formulaic screenplays. I wanted a book that gives you the tools to write in your own voice. I did not want one that would tell you how to devise character arcs that follow standard behavior patterns for movie characters, how to include beats and inciting incidents and on what pages to put them, and how to ensure that your characters and plots are likable enough (meaning innocuous enough) to sell. Charlie Kaufman made wicked fun of such books in his screenplay for *Adaptation*, showing an intemperate screenwriting teacher (modeled on a certain luminary in the field) browbeating his students into following the slavish formulas pushed in his books and highly expensive seminars. Whether your ideas are truly daring and original and whether you are writing from the heart rather than just the pocketbook often seems incidental in such dogmatic approaches to the craft. And if you are as dissatisfied as I am with such factory-style training methods, you probably share my view that what's wrong with most mainstream filmmaking today, at least in the United States, is that it follows formulas so slavishly. When you go to the theater and see a bunch of trailers (after suffering through all the ads you've paid good money to watch), you find to your distress that most of the coming attractions look alike: cars flipping over and exploding, maniacs chasing victims through shadowy houses and alleyways, slobby guys making fools of themselves pursuing impossibly pretty girls, superheroes

flying through darkly painted skies, animated monsters and machines chasing tiny humans through fairytale landscapes or urban settings that look like video games a nonstop parade of dreary clichés and tiresome (though impressively executed) special effects, all thrown together in a dizzying montage of shots lasting no more than two seconds each. American movies that take the time and care to deal with people and their problems such as *No Country for Old Men*, *Juno*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Gran Torino*, *Lost in Translation*, *Sideways*, *The Good Shepherd*, *The Informant!*, *The Wrestler*, *Up in the Air*, *A Serious Man* unfortunately seem few and far between, though audiences starved for such adult fare made most of those films popular. American movies exploring serious issues and ideas are even harder to find (with such notable exceptions as *Milk*; *Invictus*; *Bulworth*; *Syriana*; *Minority Report*; *Munich*; *Good Night, and Good Luck*; and *In the Valley of Elah*), and usually if you want to see a film about social issues, you'd better hurry before it's hustled off the screen to make room for the next CGI extravaganza. *The Hurt Locker*, a powerful human drama dealing with the Iraq War, won the best-picture Oscar for 2009 but had trouble drawing audiences to theaters. A rare example of a critically and commercially successful film dealing in an adult way with a serious social theme was *Brokeback Mountain*, which defied conventional wisdom to demonstrate that a gay love story, and a Western to boot, beautifully written (by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, from the short story by Annie Proulx) and directed (by Ang Lee), could appeal to a broad audience. But studios usually go for safer bets, films that are market-tested to appeal to the lowest common denominator. It's uncommon for a quality film to emerge from that process, although it does happen, as demonstrated by *Avatar*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, *V for Vendetta*, *Titanic*, and Steven Soderbergh's remake of *Ocean's Eleven*. In such cases, the filmmakers found ways of overcoming genre clichés and market pressures. But someone said only half-jokingly that the ideal movie for today's marketplace would be a two-hour explosion. If you can figure out a way to write such a movie, more power to you. But if that's your goal, this is probably not the book for you. And even if it is your goal, you might well find that in trying to make that long explosion interesting, you will need a solid story structure and some well-rounded characters to inhabit the cinematic world of your imagination. This book, then, will give you the tools to tell the stories you want to tell, the ones you've been carrying around in your head, the scenes you'd like to see (as *Mad* magazine used to put it) but don't yet have the craft to transfer from your head to the printed page. The *New Yorker* ran a cartoon a few years ago showing the screenwriting section of a chain bookstore, with a sign above the book rack proclaiming WIN THE LOTTERY. That captures the problem with too many books about screenwriting. They assume your motivation in wanting to write screenplays is simply to get rich. Or to get famous. Or to get laid. Joe Eszterhas, in his entertaining book *The Devil's Guide to Hollywood: The Screenwriter as God!*, keeps reminding you about the time he slept with Sharon Stone, one of the perks he claims to have received for writing *Basic Instinct*. Sure, those are probably the main motivations for many people in the business. But are those really the reasons why you want to write scripts? Take a moment to ask yourself why you first wanted to get into this crazy racket. I assume you wanted to do so because you love watching movies and telling stories. You may or may not have much experience in other forms of writing, but if you want to be a writer for the screen, you probably love words almost as much as you love pictures. The operative word here, as you notice, is love. If you don't love what you are doing when you write screenplays and if you don't want to do it for love more than for any other reason, I'd suggest you seriously think of doing something else, because the film business is as difficult as it can be rewarding. This book is not going to promise you that you'll get rich or win an Oscar. But if you want to take a shot at success and let's define that as writing a script that not only sells but reaches the screen in a form reasonably similar to what you wrote you first have to know the craft. And if you want to learn the craft, this book can show you how. My aim here is to demystify the process. What you will get is straight talk, no mumbo jumbo or gimmicks, just a methodical, step-by-step process that walks you through the different stages of writing a screenplay. Our work together will be modeled on the development process that a screenplay undergoes in the world of professional filmmaking from idea to outline to treatment to step outline to finished screenplay. The book will show you, with discussions and concrete examples, how each of these stages of development functions and will give you ways of correcting and polishing your own work. When you do these writing exercises, the same kind of steps that a professional writer would follow in developing a script, the end product will be a short screenplay in the professional format. I have used this same method with hundreds of beginning screenwriting students at San Francisco State University and elsewhere, and I am happy to report that almost all of them get the hang of the process in less than three months. I can make you the same guarantee I make to them: If you learn these lessons and work diligently on your writing assignments, you will be well on your way to being a professional-quality screenwriter within ninety days or less. The only students who don't reach that goal are usually the few who skip some of the lessons or don't do all the written work. But since you are highly motivated you've bought the book by now, I'm sure you will escape those pitfalls and emerge ready to write your own feature-length screenplays. After that, it's up to you. Your own talent and drive will carry you into your professional career. But every professional writer has to start with the basics.

APPRENTICESHIP How did I learn the craft? And how am I going to apply what I learned to teaching it to you? For me it started with *Citizen Kane*. I first saw Orson Welles' masterpiece about a media tycoon when I was nineteen, one afternoon in 1966 in a film class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The audacity and ambition of the film, and the fact that its maker was only twenty-five, literally changed my life. I went from wanting to be a novelist to wanting

to write and direct films. I started writing a critical study of Welles, completed four years later, the first of three books I've written on him and his work. By 1970, through a series of fortunate coincidences, I would be acting in a Welles film, as a film critic in *The Other Side of the Wind*, and working with the director to help write my own dialogue. That Walter Mittyish adventure was my first experience in professional filmmaking, and what a way to start! Working with Welles for six years on that legendary, still unfinished satire of Hollywood was my equivalent of film school. We had only two film courses at Madison, and neither was about screenwriting. But we had thirty-five film societies on campus (one of which I ran), so I was constantly studying films. The film sections of bookstores were still very skimpy in those days; although it was a good time to break into writing about film, it was a bad time to look for a book on how to write films. I also didn't have the means to go to a film school in New York or California. So I realized that I would have to teach myself the craft of screenwriting. I was fortunate to have access to a 16 mm print of *Citizen Kane* that I watched over and over (more than sixty times in that period) to learn every aspect of cinematography, art design, editing, acting, directing, and writing. And I was even more fortunate to have access to a mimeographed original copy of the script of *Kane* at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (now the Wisconsin Historical Society); the script was still unpublished and would not appear in print until 1971. Every day for a month, I hauled my portable manual typewriter to the Historical Society reading room to type an exact copy of that magnificent screenplay, since I couldn't afford to have it photocopied. I took it home and studied it as my bible for the next few years, absorbing both its formatting and its content. The script of *Kane* by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Welles is a film school in itself, with its rich characters and themes, colorful and witty dialogue, brilliantly visual descriptions, and intricate flashback structure. I was pleased to learn many years later that when David Mamet was teaching himself to write plays, he similarly typed out a copy of a dramatic work he greatly admired, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Mamet could have taken that play out of the library, but typing it for himself made him intimately familiar with every word and line. Internalizing a play or a script in this way, to make its style second nature as you learn from your master(s), is something I'd recommend to any young writer. And so I felt I was ready rashly enough to start writing scripts of my own. But how to begin? Realizing that learning how to write in the screenplay form was challenging enough without having to come up with my own story, I sensibly decided to start with some adaptations of literary works and gradually build up to writing an original. I knew that I should start simply, by writing a short script based on a story that could be filmed without a great deal of complication. I thought of Jack London's classic short story *To Build a Fire*. This story about a man's desperate attempt to survive in subzero Yukon cold is filled with blunt action descriptions and carries a strong emotional punch. London's storytelling is largely visual in its narrative style and free from internal monologues and other complicated literary devices. The story's elemental simplicity makes it powerful material for filming. I studied the story carefully and turned it into an adequate blueprint for a short film. It was rather clumsy and not in the professional format, but I found that I could translate a written story into cinematic language, although I was laboring under some misapprehensions about screenwriting (more on that later). In the end I decided not to shoot the screenplay because of the practical difficulties during a Wisconsin winter of filming a man slowly freezing to death; Wisconsin may not have been as painful as the Yukon, but it was close enough. Thus emboldened by my first experience writing a screenplay, I went on to try my hand at a feature-length script. I wrote a couple of adaptations and then ventured into writing originals. I didn't sell my first screenplay until 1977, the seventh feature-length script I had written (I had also written dozens of short film scripts and filmed several of them myself). That's one of the first lessons I will pass along to you: Don't ever stop writing. The great novelist Graham Greene wrote five novels before he found a publisher; the sheer determination involved in keeping going in such circumstances is the test of whether a writer is truly serious or not. So I served a ten-year apprenticeship teaching myself how to write scripts before I became a professional. By then I had thoroughly learned the craft, and over the next seven years I had three features produced (including cowriting the cult classic musical *Rock n Roll High School*) and six television specials. I received a Writers Guild of America Award, four other WGA nominations, a Canadian Film Awards nomination, and two Emmy nominations before I decided to concentrate full-time on writing books. But occasionally I have been lured back to work in the movie business, usually as a writer and/or producer of documentaries. I will share my varied experiences as a film and television writer to help illustrate the lessons in this book. The methods I used to teach myself how to write screenplays proved sound, and I have replicated them in my screenwriting classes and in this book. I proved that someone can teach himself the craft if he is sufficiently dedicated to doing so and keeps challenging himself to go one step farther. But I have since come to realize that I could have saved myself several years of work if I had had some training and mentorship. I had no one to warn me about the many mistakes I would make when I landed in Hollywood, eager, knowledgeable, but largely naive. Having a teacher guide you through the steps involved can speed up the process and save you from many false starts. And having someone who knows the business to teach you the ropes can save you years of struggling and suffering. If you know how to write a professional-quality screenplay, whether you learn how to do so in school or do it on your own (with the help of a book), you have at least a fighting chance, as I did, to break into the business and show people what you are capable of doing.