

 FabJob[®] GUIDE TO

BECOME A SCREENWRITER



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1. Introduction

Think back to last weekend. There is a good chance you saw a film. If not at the theater, then you rented a video or DVD, or caught a movie on TV. Movies are one of America's most enduring favorite pastimes, appealing to all ages and all tastes. And it doesn't stop at our shores. American films are beloved by people all over the world.

There is a constant need for good movie scripts to feed this demand, and somebody has to write them. It all starts with the words. Whereas it could be argued that other careers in film such as directing, acting and editing are interpretive skills, screenwriting is the one original creative art.

If you entertain a dream about writing screenplays, very likely you are already a movie buff. Well, as a screenwriter *you* will get to concoct those daring stunts, decide how the lovers will meet, create alien worlds and come up with those lines that leave 'em rolling in the aisles.

You could even get the opportunity to adapt a favorite book for the screen. Maybe you've read a story in the news that you think will make great drama, or know someone whose unique life experience lends itself to being told on the screen. Remember that the award-winning *Erin Brockovich* and *A Beautiful Mind* are two such movies.



Writing can be a lonely profession, but many successful movies are written by teams. So screenwriting is a great way to collaborate with others in a dynamic and inventive atmosphere. **Karen Lutz** and **Kirsten Smith**, for example, wrote the recent hit *Legally Blonde* together because both had a fondness for teen movies.

Your work can bring enjoyment to millions, and acclaim to you. If you reach the highest echelons, you will hang out in Hollywood, hobnob with movie stars, attend film festivals, go to premiers and maybe even win awards. All that and you get to work at home, be your own boss and make your own hours!

Writing screenplays is one of the highest paying jobs a writer can do. In the 1990s, **Joe Esterhaus** made headlines when he earned \$3 million for writing *Basic Instinct*.



It was an unprecedented sum at the time, but it soon was topped by **Shane Black** who got **\$4 million** for *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. Since then, screenwriters have gone on to earn fees that previous generations could only have dreamed of.

It doesn't stop there. A successful scribe can write his or her own ticket in show business. Many go on to direct, produce, even act in their screenplays. The story of how **Sylvester Stallone** wrote the *Rocky* movies for himself to star in is now legendary. **Spike Lee**, **Woody Allen**, **Quentin Tarantino**, **Oliver Stone** and **Cameron Crowe** are other examples of writers who maintain creative control over their own work.

Other top scribes become script doctors, doing last-minute polishes of other's work: that is a desirable and well-paid talent. Renowned writers such as **William Goldman** (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Princess Bride*) and **Robert Towne** (*China Town*) are legendary for their script doctoring skills and get paid a fortune for them.

But these are people who have reached the very top of their profession. Not all who embark on a screenwriting career will attain this peak. Still, for every one of them, there are dozens of others who make a great living in "the biz." Many writers opt to work outside of the big studios and make low-budget independent movies in order to maintain creative control of their work. Some people write movies that go directly to video (in the past these were termed "B" movies). Cable television channels such as **HBO** and **Showtime**, even **VH1**, all commission original films. Even video games require scripts.

Some writers are writing and producing movies that appear only on the Internet. New technologies, some we can't yet imagine, are presenting fresh opportunities for writers all the time. Maybe you'll write the first audience interactive movie. Then there are the opportunities available outside of the entertainment world. People who can write educational and industrial training films, for example, are always in demand. If you have a base of knowledge on a particular subject, this could be a good place to start.

No particular education is compulsory for becoming a screenwriter, although there are excellent film schools and college courses available if you have the means to attend them. Writing and storytelling abilities are a given, and since you have bought this guide you likely know your own talents. You do need to become familiar with the very specific formatting that screenwriting requires: it is more technical than writing, say, novels.

Outside of that, the best preparation you can do is watch movies. See them all: classics, blockbusters, independents, foreign, shorts, documentaries. You will learn something from everything you see, and absorb the pacing and flow of the cinematic form. But there is more to achieving success as a screenwriter than being a fan and having good story ideas. That's where this guide comes in.

Chapter 2, Getting Ready, is packed with valuable information that will help you decide on crucial fundamentals before you start to write your scripts. This section will help you choose what to write and will answer many of your questions, such as: Which of the various **genres** best suits your plot and your style? (For example, is it a thriller or a comedy?) Do you want to write “**on spec**” (complete a script, then sell it) or pitch an **idea** to a studio executive and try to get an **assignment**? Do you want to work alone or team up with another writer?

In this chapter, you will find tips for developing your plot, picking a setting, and creating characters. This chapter also provides advice on formatting and preparing your script, including the do's and don't's of scriptwriting, plus information about a variety of writing programs and script consultants. Finally, you'll get invaluable information on safeguarding your work from plagiarism.

Chapter 3, Selling Your Work, begins with a look inside the industry. You'll discover the best resources for learning about the industry and keeping up with the latest news, and find a glossary of industry terms so you can speak like an insider. Next you'll learn how to find an agent to represent you to major studios, how to submit your screenplay to independent production companies and how to “pitch” a script idea. You'll find out how scripts are evaluated, and how contracts are negotiated once your script is sold. This chapter also covers other ways to break into screenwriting including fellowships, screenwriting contests, film festivals, and marketing your script online.

Chapter 4, Being Successful, covers keys to having a lucrative and fulfilling career as a screenwriter. Among other helpful advice, this chapter explains how to “schmooze” – how to make a great impression at social events and meetings, and build rapport with people who can advance your career. Finally, the guide concludes with a list of the best **Resources** in **Chapter 5**.

Being a screenwriter is an artistic, exciting and lucrative profession. All you need to get started on this marvelous career is right here: resources, case studies and tips from produced professionals. So read on, and picture **your name** in lights!