

# Opening Scenes: Force The Reader To Turn The Page

By Michael Hauge

Just about every screenwriting book, seminar or conference you encounter will inform you that you must "grab the reader with the first ten pages of your script." But what does that mean, exactly, and how do you do it?

Screenplays, like movies, must provide an EMOTIONAL experience. A movie is a roller coaster ride, not a slide show. If the agent, executive, star or director reading your script is simply thinking, rather than feeling, you're not doing your job.

The people in power in Hollywood are far too busy to read every screenplay to completion. They will assume, correctly, that if the writer can't captivate them at the beginning of the opening of the story, it's highly unlikely things will improve later on. So scripts that don't pass the "10-page test" will be rejected.

Even story analysts, who must read every screenplay to completion in order to write accurate synopses, are unlikely to recommend a script that takes more than ten pages to capture their interest. How many times in your own life have you ended up praising a movie that bored you for the first ten minutes?

## THE THREE GOALS OF THE OPENING SCENE

To insure that your screenplay passes this ten-page hurdle, your opening must achieve three basic objectives:

### 1. DRAW THE READER INTO THE STORY

One of the biggest mistakes screenwriters make is rushing through the opening, rather than allowing enough time for the reader to move from the real world into the fantasy world the writer has created.

Begin with your setting, picking two or three details that will create a vivid image in the reader's mind. An apartment strewn with old pizza boxes and cigarette butts, where posters of Pamela Lee adorn every wall, is a lot more vivid and interesting than the phrase INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT. The details also tell us a lot more about the character who inhabits the apartment.

A standard opening scene might begin with some panoramic shot to establish location-the New York skyline in *Working Girl*, or the snow covered plains in *Fargo*. This broad setting is described in some detail, then a second scene moves in to an exterior shot of the more specific location for the action, the Staten Island Ferry, or a small town tavern, in the same two examples.

Only after the writer has pulled the reader into the setting with these establishing shots would he move to an interior shot where the real action will begin. To open the two films mentioned without showing the larger setting would reduce the audiences' emotional involvement, and some of their understanding of what drives the main characters as well.

Do not feel rigidly tied to this panorama-exterior-interior formula. The same effect might be achieved by opening with a close up of some object, then pulling back to reveal a larger setting, and then introducing your first character. Or consider opening with a black screen, but describe the SOUNDS we hear first, then open on whatever is making the sounds, then describe your character. The key is to hold back on character action or dialogue until your reader has gotten his bearings.

Also be certain that when you do introduce your characters, you do so one at a time, with individual descriptions, giving each a separate piece of action in a separate paragraph if possible. Meeting characters in a script is like meeting strangers at a party; if we're introduced to too many at once, we'll never be able to remember who each one is.

## 2. INTRODUCE YOUR HERO.

Once the reader is inside the setting of your screenplay, your most important concern is to establish identification with your hero. A reader must BECOME this character, not simply observe her. Only after establishing that psychological connection can you use your hero as the vehicle for taking the reader on an exciting, enjoyable journey.

Get us to care about, feel sorry for, and/or worry about your hero before you even consider revealing any flaws or shortcomings to the character. We will identify much more strongly with a character if he is a victim of some undeserved misfortune (as in *Braveheart*, *The Color Purple* or *The Nutty Professor*), if he is in immediate jeopardy (*The Rock*), if he makes us laugh (*Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion*), if he is highly skilled (*Mission Impossible*) or if he is simply a good-hearted, likable person (*That Thing You Do*).

The subconscious expectation of any reader is that the first character to appear in your screenplay will be the protagonist. So unless you consciously choose otherwise for the sake of greater emotion (see "types of openings" below), introduce us to your main character before anyone else appears in the story.

If your hero is among a group of people in the opening scene, provide a detailed description of that character first, before naming or describing any of the other people that surround him. Include more than simply your hero's name and age; your goal is to create as vivid a movie in the reader's mind as possible. Concentrate on clothing, mannerisms, posture—anything that will help convey the essence of this character.

If you intend to develop growth or a character arc for your hero, you should also begin that process immediately. Ask yourself what frightens your hero emotionally, and what she is doing to avoid experiencing that fear. Then use your opening scene to exhibit that inner conflict.

Within the first three minutes of *Sleepless In Seattle*, we have learned that Sam Baldwin has lost his wife and is afraid of "growing a new heart," so he cuts himself off from further emotional risk by telling himself, "It just doesn't happen twice." A key underlying theme of the movie is conveyed in these few opening moments.

Similarly, the relationship between the two brothers is brilliantly exhibited in the opening of *BIG NIGHT* simply by their separate reactions to a customer's request for spaghetti.

### 3. SET THE TONE OF THE FILM

The STYLE of prose you employ for your action, description and dialogue must also establish the mood of your film. Certainly, if you're writing a comedy, something funny better happen fairly quickly, and the tone should be lighter, often with a more leisurely pace.

Thrillers and action scripts should generally be faster paced, use shorter sentences and paragraphs, and open with either violence or suspense. Shane Black's staccato style in *The Last Boy Scout* or *The Long Kiss Goodnight* would never be confused with the softer, wordier style of Jeff Arch in *Sleepless In Seattle* or Kevin Wade in *Working Girl*.

Lawrence Kasdan opens *Body Heat* with the phrase, "Flames in a night sky." This immediately creates a provocative visual image, establishes a tone of foreboding, foreshadows a key plot element, and symbolizes the sensuality, evil and damnation the hero is about to encounter. Not bad for five short words.

### THE FIVE TYPES OF OPENINGS

To accomplish these three necessary objectives, it may help to be aware of the most familiar openings movies employ.

#### 1. THE ACTION HERO

If your hero is a cop, a soldier or a spy, the most direct method of grabbing the reader may be with a big action opening involving that character. *Eraser*, *Judge Dredd* and *Double Team* all open this way (as does almost every other one of Arnold's, Sly's or Jean-Claude's movies).

#### 2. OUTSIDE ACTION

This is often employed when an everyday person is the hero of a thriller. The first scene shows some exciting action sequence which does NOT involve the hero (though it often introduces us to the villain). Then the screenplay cuts to the hero living her everyday life before she is plunged into a situation of jeopardy and violence. *The Pelican Brief*, *Star Wars*, and *The Relic* all use this very common device.

#### 3. THE PROLOGUE

Some screenplays open with an event (often one involving compelling action) which occurs significantly prior to the main story, but which creates anticipation of what's to follow, and gives the characters' actions greater credibility. *The Saint*, *The Devil's Own* and *Courage Under Fire* are all recent examples.

#### 4. THE FLASHBACK

In period pieces in particular, taking the audience back in time can be an added challenge to getting them emotionally involved. When a screenplay "bookends" the story by opening (and closing) with a narrator in present day, the "once-upon-a-time quality" of the story can be very captivating. *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Sleepers* and even the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* all employ this device.

#### 5. THE EVERYDAY HERO INTRODUCTION

This is the most common way of opening a screenplay, but also one of the most varied, so I left it for last. Most of you are probably writing screenplays that don't involve thrills and chills, but rather rely on humor or everyday conflict for their emotion. Or perhaps you are writing a suspense film, but your hero is just an everyday person, and showing violence immediately would be inappropriate for your story. In these cases, you must rely on your character introductions, your dialogue and even your setting as the means of grabbing the reader.

A unique, original, interesting hero will pull the reader into your story, as will situations creating immediate sympathy or worry. Think of how compelling the heroes of *Sling Blade*, *Secrets and Lies* and *Jerry Maguire* are, despite the lack of spectacular pyrotechnics.

Similarly, the immediate humor in *Flirting with Disaster*, the sexuality that opens *Murder at 1600*, the evocative setting of *The English Patient*, the curiosity and anticipation at the beginning of *The Godfather* and the strikingly original opening of *Everyone Says I Love You* all take us out of our own lives and plant us firmly in the worlds their screenwriters have created.

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