

## I CAN SEE IT NOW! The Seven Tests Of A Good Screenplay Idea

By Neill D. Hicks

Somewhere in the churning soup of your creative self, a bubble begins to form. It grows larger and larger: an irritation, an obstinate itch, an insistent demand - an idea! At first, it's a craggy, bumpy, uneven sort of thing that only a creator could love. But, with a little work, you forge it into an authentic concept suitable as the operating premise for a...? A what? A note pinned to the supermarket bulletin board? A magazine article? A novel? A textbook? A stage play? How about a movie?

Sure, everyone's writing screenplays these days, and some of those screenplays are selling for big money. Why not yours? Before you plan your Academy Award acceptance speech, though, let's consider what makes a good movie idea that's worth spending the next six months to a year fashioning into a screenplay.

It may seem obvious, but keep in mind that the movies we enjoy the most tell a story. A magazine article about how to select fresh fruit is probably not going to become the basis for an exciting film. Neither is an essay on health care. Even a short story about a young girl who waits by the telephone to be invited to her first dance is not the kind of material movies do well. We may be satisfied in a short story to glimpse a slice of life, but in a movie we want the whole pie - and we'll be unsatisfied if we don't get it. A good movie has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It tells the narrative of change for a character in a dramatic sequence.

Dramatic is the important word. Movies are dramatic, and drama is about conflict. All good movies are about a character acting against another character or his environment. The main character moves through the story only because he overcomes obstacles. The character may have to use physical force, as in an action-adventure movie, or emotional and verbal force as in a movie like *Rain Man* or *Kramer vs. Kramer*, but in either case the character always will have to take direct action in order to overcome the opposition.

The opposition in a movie story comes not only from an antagonist, but from the main character himself. Before he can win, the main character must conquer some fear or shortcoming. In other words, the character must come to grips with his own values.

So, movies are stories about change in the values of a character that is achieved through conflict.

Movies are action. We all know that car chases and gun battles are favorite devices for Hollywood movies. But so are courtrooms and bedrooms - because they require *action*. In the movie theater, the audience's experience is limited to what it actually can see on the screen. That means that the characters must be doing something. That young girl waiting by the telephone may have a world of terrors and hopes going on in her head, but there is little for us to see on a movie screen. Nothing is more boring than watching a movie character *think*.

To be sure, characters do think. One of the requirements of action is that the character is forced to make difficult choices. Remember that the story is about the character's change in values, so that character is going to be making some tough moral choices before he can progress in the story. The audience, however, can't see the decision making process, only the result of the process. A portrayal of the agonies of making a decision is of little interest, while the actions that come from that decision probably will keep viewers entertained and excited.

Movies, in fact, are a poor medium for exploring the inner life of characters. The novel and the short story use the mind's eye to allow the reader to imagine the characters. Even in novels with

scant physical description, we understand what's going on without necessarily seeing detailed pictures of the people. Movies, though, thrust us into the action and we become part of the story as it happens around us. Even an historical drama or a futuristic science fiction piece seems to be taking place *now*, as we watch.

Movies don't, in fact, deal well with fantasy. Of course, they can transport us to a fantasy world like *Star Wars*, but once we are there, that world becomes *real*. We can count the buttons on an actor's shirt. In a sense, the world on the screen seems more real than life itself. A good film story idea recognizes and makes use of this sense of immediate reality.

Stage plays are also dreams. For the most part, however, stage plays take place in one location and deal best with those themes that do not require physical action to carry the plot. While both stage and film dramas deal with conflict, stage characters usually talk their way through the dilemma on their way to self-discovery, but film characters must take action against other characters.

Generally, movies don't ask us to imagine what a character is thinking or feeling, but show us their results of those thoughts and feelings in actions that we can see clearly. The best movie ideas do this by structuring events in ever increasing importance. We don't want to watch the character make the same decision or go through the same actions over and over again. The result of the character's actions must lead to a more difficult decision to make, which in turn leads to greater action, and so on until the character solves the problem.

The worst movie ideas? The worst movies don't tell us a story at all.

**The intensely personal record.** A young man has trouble with his parents. He has trouble at his job. He has trouble with his girlfriend. He talks to his best friend. He worries about his girl. He argues with his parents. He talks to his psychotherapist about his boss. One morning on the way to work, he's run down and almost killed by a speeding car. When he wakes up and hears the birds singing outside the hospital window, he decides to be a better person and stop complaining about life. He reconciles with his parents, makes up with his girlfriend, and gathers the courage to ask his boss for a promotion. Now, this may be fairly accurate picture of a person's life and troubles, but it is hardly an interesting movie. It has no progression of increasingly important events, and merely reports life as it is, wallowing in the minutiae of relationships

**The history lesson.** After years of research, the writer sets down all the facts of her great grandmother's trek westward in the nineteenth century. With loving labor, the writer records every detail of the voyage, faithfully listing the exact places, times, colors, and sounds. Unfortunately, the writer is letting facts get in the way of truth. Better to write a novel where this kind of detailed description adds to the texture of the event than a film where we are much more concerned with the unfolding of the events themselves.

**The sermon.** All writers have a point of view. We write because we have something to say about life. But we make a mistake when we try to hammer our political, social, or moral point of view into the heads of a movie audience. Better to create a world and an entertaining story in which your point of view can be *felt* by the audience than preach to them about what you believe they should think.

Let's get back to that irritating bubble that is swelling up to become an idea. When it finally rises into your consciousness, ask yourself a few questions before you reach for the keyboard:

- Is there a clear main character?
- Does this main character have a problem to solve?
- Is there clear, definite opposition? An antagonist?

- Does the resolution of the problem require the character to take action against the antagonist?
- Does the resolution of the problem bring the character's values into question?
- Does the story have "air" in it? Does it take place in several locations?
- Is the primary thrust of the story emotional rather than intellectual?

If you can answer "yes" to all of these questions, you may have an idea for the next Academy Award winning screenplay!

Neill D. Hicks is a Senior Instructor in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program where he has been honored with the Outstanding Instructor Award; and has been a guest instructor at Northwestern University, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Denver, California State University, the Canadian Television and Film Institute, and advisor to the Norwegian Studiesenteret for Film, among others. His book *Screenwriting 101* will be released in September, 1999. He is available to conduct screenwriting seminars in *Writing Thriller and Action-Adventure Films and Essentials of Screenwriting*.

(Originally from [www.screentalk.biz/art011.htm](http://www.screentalk.biz/art011.htm))