

## **“Script Writing” MCD502**

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### **Script adaptations**

*How does someone go about adapting a written story to film format? Thanks.*

–Sam Ruin

Probably half the movies made are adaptations of one sort or another. The original source material might have been a novel, a short story, an article or even a 1970's TV show (such as "Charlie's Angels," coming to a theater near you November 3).

Sorry for the blatant plug. Back to the question.

The first issue you face with any adaptation is rights. The author of the original material generally holds the copyright, which means he or she has say over whether or not a movie can be made based on the material, and for what price. So if you're serious about adapting the work, you'll want to check with the original author's publisher (in the "sub-rights" department) and get contact information so you can start the process of buying or optioning these rights. ("Optioning" is something like "leasing-to-buy," where you pay a fraction of the money up front, with a promise to pay more later if the movie gets made.)

It's important to note that copyright expires, so if you're looking at adapting something originally written in the 1800's, there's a good chance the work is considered to be "in the public domain," which means you won't have to secure any rights at all.

Of course, there's a big difference between having the rights to a story and actually having a movie to make. Adapting a story into movie form is a lot harder than it might seem at first.

The basic problem is that movies work so differently than most fiction or other prose.

In novels or short stories, the prose is the final product. Screenplays, on the other hand, are blueprints. They're a plan for making a movie, but not the movie itself. While the author of a novel has the final say about everything that happens in a story, the screenwriter is by default only one of many hands in making the movie, and everyone who becomes involved with the project will change it in one way or another. Thus the screenplay has to communicate the overall vision for the movie, above and beyond all the details of character, plot and theme. In short, a book is just a book, but a screenplay has to be a story, a plan, a sales tool and a mission statement all in one.

Fiction can ramble. Screenplays have to be ruthlessly efficient.

In fiction, the author can say what a character is thinking. In movies, a screenwriter doesn't have that option, without resorting to some device like a voice-over or flashback.

The reader of a book can put a book down and think about it, or flip back a few pages if something was confusing. Sitting in the theater, the audience doesn't have that opportunity. The movie keeps going, 24 frames per second, no matter what. Therefore, the screenwriter has to be extra attentive to make certain the audience will be able to follow the story at every moment.

Finally, movies are fundamentally a visual medium, so the screenwriter has to be able to tell the story with images. Yes, there's sound and dialogue, but the picture is king. In a book, the author can say what a character tastes or smells or feels. In a movie, all the audience can experience is sight and sound, so the screenwriter needs to communicate everything through only these two senses.

Given these challenges, it becomes clear why adapting a book into a movie isn't a matter of feeding the pages into a projector. It also explains why so many bad movies are made from good books.

So how do you begin an adaptation? The most important thing is to approach the project as a movie, with all the strengths and limitations of the medium, rather than as a novel or short story. Focus on the primary characters, their goals and obstacles. Rather than trying to winnow down the source material to fit into 120 pages, try to invite in only the elements you really need; that is, build up rather than strip down.

And most importantly, remember that adaptation isn't any easier than writing a screenplay from scratch. So don't beat yourself when certain aspect worked in the novel but not in your script. They're different beasts.

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