

“Script Writing” MCD502

ADAPTATIONS

To adapt means to transpose from one medium to another. It is the ability to make fit or suitable by changing, or adjusting. Modifying something to create a change in structure, function, and form, which produces a better adjustment.

Adapting a novel, book, play, or article into a screenplay is the same as writing an original screenplay. It only starts from the source material: the novel, book, play, article or song.

The screenplay must provide visualization of the action that can be captured on film.

When the screenwriters adapts from another medium it must be a visual experience. That is the primary job of the screenwriters who must remain true only to the integrity of the source material.

Adapting another form of writing to the screen means finding cinematic equivalents in the original piece. The screenwriters only has 120 pages to tell the story and has to choose story events carefully so they highlight and illustrate the screenplay with good visual and dramatic components.

It may seem strange to translate one art form into another, but it is an age old custom. One of the most popular means of adaptation, is updating the classics. The hook, outline and plot of *Clueless* was taken from Jane Austen's *'Emma'*: A popular girl at Beverly High decides to do a total makeover on a 'clueless' new girl, only to discover that it is she herself who needs a 'spiritual' makeover.

Here's the concept of *Moulin Rouge*: A tragic romance about a poor writer who falls in love with a high class hooker who is being kept by a rich Duke.

The concept and characters were adapted from Alexandre Dumas' 1848 novel *Camille*, which was also adapted into the opera *La Traviata*. Dumas wrote the story from his own life.

Moulin Rouge, the tragic romance about a poor writer who falls in love with a high class hooker who is being kept by a rich duke is derived from Alexandre Dumas' 1848 novel *'Camille'* which was also made into an opera *'La Traviata'*. Dumas wrote an original story based on his own life.

Shakespeare adapted *Romeo and Juliet* from the Roman poet Ovid's *'Pyramus and Thisbe'*, which later became the hit Broadway musical *'West Side Story'*, was retold as an Asian gang versus the American mob in *'Romeo must Die'*, and Baz Luhrman updated the story with his contemporary revisioning.

Francis Coppola's Oscar-winning *Apocalypse Now* is loosely based on a novel by 19th century author Joseph Conrad 'Heart of Darkness', set in colonial Africa, where Mr. Kurtz, a white man, has gone upriver and set himself up as a mad god to African tribes people. Marlow, the hero is sent to bring him back. Kurtz, dying, tries to communicate to Marlow the horror of what he's seen and done, so that he can explain it to Kurtz's fiancée. In *Apocalypse Now*, Colonel Kurtz, a promising career soldier, has gone upriver and set himself up as a mad god to Cambodian tribes people. Captain Willard, an army assassin, is sent to kill him. Kurtz, dying, tries to communicate to Willard the horror of what he's seen and done, so that Willard can explain to Kurtz' son why Kurtz did what he did. The updating is in setting the movie in the insanity of the Vietnam war. The scenes and characters are replaced, but the through line and the driving question are the same.

The art of adaptation > Screenwriter Richard LaGravenese, an Oscar nominee for his work on *The Fisher King*, had to adapt the 400-page *Water for Elephants* into a workable screenplay "When a book is well-loved, it's important to keep what readers expect, but at the same time you have to understand that, when reading a story, you're seeing and hearing characters in your head, and everyone has their own versions in their own minds. When you see the story played on screen with real people it becomes literal - one version - and there are certain ideas that work in a book that wouldn't work on screen. The key task was making the three principal characters more active, and re-inventing Marlina's and August's backstories. We wanted every character's reasons to be understood, so that morally, who's right and who's wrong, is a little more complex. No one is 100 percent innocent." [Read more](#)

What is the fine art of adaptation?

The trick of adaptation is to find what still works and find a way to update what no longer does.

A book is a book. An article an article. An adaptation is always an original screenplay.

Adapting novels

A novel usually takes place inside the character's head. A play deals with the language of dramatic action. A screenplay deals with externals, with details - the ticking of a clock, a child playing in an empty street, a car turning the corner. Up to 25% of all feature films have been literary adaptations.

After seeing the film version of a well-known novel, most of us have commented that the book was better, or different in some part. Adapting a book into a screenplay means to change one (book) into another (screenplay), not to superimpose one onto the other.

A novel usually deals with the internal life of someone, the character's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and memories occurring within the mindscape of dramatic action. In a novel you can

write the same scene in a sentence, a paragraph, a page, or chapter, describing the internal dialogue, the thoughts, feelings, and impressions of the character. A novel usually takes place inside the character's head.

Narrative film and the novel

The novelist conveys his narrative thought through the use of verbal language. The screenwriter conveys narrative thought through visual and verbal means.

The novelist will write: A woman entered the room. The screenwriter must show a specific woman enter a specific room.

Because film is a visual medium and tells us much more than the novel possibly could about the physical nature of people, places and things, the filmmaker is more limited than the novelist in the images he presents, but has much more control over how his audience receives such images.

Example: Michael Blake's novel *Dances With Wolves*. [Read more](#)

Adapting poetry and song lyrics

Poetry and song lyrics are defined as writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm.

The meaning comes from the literal meaning of the words and what those words suggest by imagery and symbolism. That kind of imagery in the stage directions of a screenplay is useless in the film.

Imagery may help the director to understand the writer's intention, but most directors pay little attention to the literary quality of the stage directions.

Imagery in dialogue will seem unreal and literary against the realistic background of the film.

The impact of language in poetry occurs through the rhythmic arrangement of the words. There is not much point, except to salve the writer's ego, to put the dialogue in too distinctive a rhythm or to write the stage directions in a poetic rhythm.

Rhythmical narration has occasionally been used in film, but its use is very formal. It seems contrived and artificial to modern audiences.

Watch the film *The Man From Snowy River*, which was based on a poem. Also watch and listen to Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, and read the T.S Elliot poems; as well as *Chicago*. Write a page or two on how the material was adapted.

Adapting magazine or newspaper articles

In screenwriting you go from the general to the specific, you find the story first, then collect facts. In journalism, you go from specific to general; you collect the facts first, then find the story.

Approach it from the screenwriter's point of view.

Adapting prose

Prose is the ordinary language of speaking and writing and it appears in a variety of forms. The essay is a collection of ideas expressed in words.

The emphasis is on the facts, some of which can be shown on the screen, and abstract ideas, which generally is difficult to visualise.

Films are about objects - human and otherwise - and about their actions. It is not the best medium for abstract ideas.

Adapting short stories and non-fiction

These stories usually deal with some kind of activity on a limited scale. The activity and the characters, either fictional or real, can be shown on the screen, but the characters' interior states of mind which can be expressed easily in stories, cannot be expressed directly on the screen.

Because of the short length of stories and articles, they may work adequately as short films, but may have to be developed and added to work as longer films.

Adapting stageplays

Closer to films. The dramatic structure of the play has a beginning, middle, and end.

The action in the theatre is stylised. We accept the unreality of the action as representation of reality. We know that events will occur on stage in much shorter amount of time than in real life.

Because of this stylisation of action, we will also accept a stylisation of language, either in the poetic forms of the Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, and Moliere or in the expressive prose of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway, Joel and Ethan Coen, Sam Raimi, Derek Jarman, Tim Burton, Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, Neil Jordan and David Lynch are great visionaries who stylise the dramatic action of their respective stories.

We also accept stylisation and action in television, which is why many stage plays work better on television than they do as films.

Because films show us photographs of not only real people, but also real things and places, we expect a greater degree of realism in the dialogue and action in a film.

A play is told in words, and thoughts, feelings, and events are described in dialogue on a stage locked within the boundaries of the proscenium arch.

A play deals with the language of dramatic action.

Adapting comic strips

The form of writing that is closest to screenwriting. Comic strips and films combine action and dialogue. The comic strip writer must try to find the balance between the two.

Pictures in comic strips do not move, so we can spend as much time as we want reading the words and pictures. Films move, and they have to be clear enough both visually and aurally that we can understand them as they go past.

The technique of writing for comic strips has been used by filmmakers to storyboard the screenplay. This allows a filmmaker such as Steven Spielberg to storyboard the screenplay of films such as Jurassic Park and The Lost World, which require highly specialized computerized special effects and camerawork, and hand the storyboard to the respective department months before filming begins. This allows them to perfect their craft, and give audiences effects they have never seen before!