



Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting

Robert McKee

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The author's international screenwriting workshops have long won acclaim from celebrities, film industry professionals and enthusiastic students alike. In this guide, he presents his knowledge of the essentials of screenwriting and storytelling.

Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting Details

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Jerilyn Marler says

As a freelance editor of any type of writing, I am always searching for insight, wisdom, guidance, illumination about the many forms of writing that cross my desk. I'd heard about McKee's "Story" but shied away because screenwriting is so far removed from my usual work. Or so I thought. I bought the digital version on a whim thinking that it might prove useful someday as a reference book. I was immediately hooked and read it straight through. Then I went back and highlighted many passages for future pondering.

It's densely written. You won't find this one tagged "light reading." Your commitment will be highly rewarded.

McKee sets your expectations with these section heads in the Introduction. "Story is about principles, not rules." "Story is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas." "Story is about archetypes, not stereotypes." "Story is about thoroughness, not shortcuts." "Story is about the realities, not the mysteries of writing." "Story is about mastering the art, not second-guessing the marketplace." "Story is about respect, not disdain, for the audience." "Story is about originality, not duplication." All true. These tenants apply to screenwriting, novels, non-fiction, poetry, short stories. McKee explains it all with the passion of a true believer who is also an expert..

I reveled in his diverse examples of movies that got it right and added some to my "gotta see" list. I was fascinated by the line-by-line analysis of a pivotal scene from Chinatown. I watch movies differently and enjoy my heightened awareness of why something is working. Or not. I'm a better writer and a more discerning reader because of this book.

I bought it thinking that it could be a useful reference for screenwriting specifically. I now know it is a valuable reference for writing anything.

Mahdi Lotfabadi says

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Mike says

McKee may be a great screenwriter, but I certainly hope his classes are less pompous and verbose than this book is. It's poorly edited, with too much preaching, and long lists of movie titles cited as examples of a particular point. Since the style is to use ALL QUOTES for titles, when he goes on for a third of a page it just gets annoying.

In his acknowledgements, he thanks someone for their omnivorous will to omit needless words - his wife. Obviously she was too close to it all to tell him to just shut up, then start slashing with her red pen.

That said, there are some rare blooms in there, but it's just too much work to wade through the swamp to find

them. I managed to make it to page 100, then gave up. I'll put this on my list of books to be tried again later - maybe when I'm in a more patient mood.

Right now have too many books, and too little time to waste it on ones that can't hold me.

Ksenia Anske says

This is not a book. This is like a school in a book. A master's degree. The amount of notes I took got out of hand, so I decided to just outright buy it, to have it handy. The best parts are the scene analysis chapters, which are pretty much the same for novel writing and screenwriting. Seeing a scene broken down into manageable bits has made it clear for me how to rewrite my scenes to make them better. Because if I can't write excellent scenes, I can't write an excellent book, period. So glad I have revisited this book. It was like reading a guide to self-critique that doesn't sound like a guide but rather like a friend. And in the end it moved me to tears—the truth of it was overwhelming.

Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

A superb book that illuminates the *purpose* of writing stories and the most effective approach to penning tales that transcend the ordinary.

K.M. Weiland says

I can't believe it's taken me so long to read this book. I expected more of the same: structure, story elements, character tips. And those are certainly there. But *Story* actually deserves its tremendously broad title, because that's exactly what this book is: a discussion of **story.** It's theory and practicality all wrapped up into one module. McKee presents ideas I've never seen elsewhere, backed up by solid example after solid example and all in an extremely engaging and absorbing way. This is deep stuff, but McKee makes it thrilling.

Graeme Rodaughan says

This is the most useful book in my writing library. I literally read and reread this book until I had absorbed its messages into the marrow of my bones.

An endlessly valuable resource that informs the basic structures both large and small of the stories that I write.

Worth reading even if you have no ambition to write for the insights that it will give you into the nature of story and narrative.

Written to support the development of screenplays, but also completely adaptable to the Novel.

Trevor says

In a past life I did a professional writing degree for my undergraduate BA – half of which was in script writing. I wish we had been taught the stuff that is contained in this book. This is such a good book it is hard to praise it too highly. The advice is clear and all of it good. From avoiding adverbs and adjectives in your treatment to the psychology of interesting characters this book has many very important things to say to anyone thinking about writing a screenplay (or anything else, if you ask me).

The best of this is a quote from Hitchcock about his finishing writing the script for a film and then putting in the dialogue. Hitchcock was fairly obsessed with this idea, saying somewhere that a good film is one where the sound could be turned off and you would still know what the film was about. Film is about images. Perhaps this is going a little too far (although, too far is hardly far enough sometimes). This book is at its best when it explains how scenes need to have beats and that these beats need to be the natural beats of emotion between characters in conflict and in change. He explains this with reference to a number of films (including one of my all time favourite films, China Town). He also uses Kramer Vs Kramer (one of the least impressive films I've ever seen) discussing the French toast scene (sort of slapstick masquerading as drama) and even the 'Use the force, Luke' scene from Star Wars. Beats is a really interesting way to think about drama and I will use this stuff when teaching.

There is also wonderful stuff about writing films from the inside out – that is, get the story right before you get the scenes or dialogue right. His point being that those 'great scenes' you have written will stop you being able to write a great film. Why? Because great films are so much more than great scenes. A great film is a whole and all of it works to build that whole. This guy knows his Hegel (even talks about the negation of the negation at one point, and qualitative and quantitative change). Change is the key here, change that leads to completeness. I know that is sounding vague, but his point is that you should know the end of your film before you start writing and then write the film to get to the end. Everything in the film should lead, of necessity, to that end – but the paradox is that the end should also come as a surprise.

He suggests you do this by focusing on two fantastic questions. The first is, what is the worst of all possible things that could happen to my central character – and yet at the same time how could this end up being the best thing that could have happened to them? And the second is, what is the best thing my character could hope for and then, when achieved, how could that end up being the worst of all possible things?

The other fantastic advice he offers is to not have any 'bad guys' in your films. Like every character in Shakespeare (except possibly Iago) every character must be real – must make decisions based on what is real to them and in their own best interests. As he says, you have to like all of your characters. By liking them you allow them to have wants and needs and if you drive the action of the film by expressions of these characters' wants and needs – how could you possibly go wrong?

He also has a wonderful metaphor of a film as solar system - based on a central star and other characters being like planets around the star and minor characters revolving around the planets like moons.

But the best advice is – if you can say it without dialogue, then do. This is actually great advice for any kind of writing. It is the ‘show, don’t tell’ advice with some substance added to it. Because sometimes you can’t show – sometimes you do need to use dialogue – but you never need to ‘just tell’, there is always a better way.

This is a text well worth reading, not just if you think you have a film in you, but also if you want to enjoy film more or you just want to write better in general. The advice that 90% of what you write is written to be thrown away is the best advice on writing you are ever likely to read.

Paul says

If you're a writer of drama or fiction, you need to master these rules before you consider breaking them.

I knew from an early age that I wanted to write stories, but it wasn't till I was about 17 that I learned that there are actual methods, principles, and techniques involved in storytelling, when I received as a gift a copy of *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri. Wow! What a revelation! I read it greedily.

Flash-forward to 1990. I was 31 and now had my own TV series, *The Odyssey*, in development with the CBC in Canada. My writing partner Warren Easton and I were under pressure to come up with a pilot script and 12 more stories to flesh out a possible first season of the show. We'd bought a copy of *The Golden Fleece* by Robert Graves and *The Complete Fairy Tales of Brothers Grimm*, Volume 1 to search for story ideas for our mythologically based fantasy series, but were not really finding stories that would fill our action-packed half hours. One of the CBC executives offered to let me have a photocopy of a set of notes from McKee's workshop, taken by a fellow participant. I'd heard of McKee and so I gratefully accepted them.

Back home I started reading, and was immediately electrified. (The notes themselves were excellent, typed by this person on a laptop and capturing most of what McKee said.) Here was everything I wanted and needed to know: genre, character, structure, controlling idea, protagonist, acts, turning points, and much, much else. McKee came across as definite and authoritative. Here was no "well, some people say this, but on the other hand other people say this other thing...." As far as McKee is concerned, the principles of sound story design have long since been established; they are simply not widely known, and he sees his task as remedying that deficit as much as he can.

Years later I saw a copy of McKee's book in a store and snapped it up. It is well read and well highlighted. When I read *Poetics* I realized that McKee's work is essentially applied Aristotle. Aristotle regarded plot--story--as the most important element in contributing to the effects of the most powerful form of poetry at that time: tragic drama. He analyzed what makes for an effective story, and McKee has applied that analysis to the most powerful form of storytelling in our own time: motion pictures.

But while the book is aimed at screenwriters, the principles apply to all forms of storytelling, including prose fiction. I continue to study this book and keep striving to apply its principles. As observed by the late philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, it is knowledge of principles that transforms a knack into an art. This book provides such knowledge. As far as I'm concerned, if you're serious about telling stories, in whatever medium, you'll get much better results, much faster, if you get this book and apply its principles. This knowledge is what will separate you from the army of dilettantes.

Gypsy says

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A.J. says

I think this is the first time where I read a book solely based off a scene in a movie. The scene can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VseQe...

Lines like, "You cannot have a protagonist without desire! It doesn't make sense! ANY. F****NG. SENSE!" and "WHY THE F*** WOULD YOU WASTE MY TWO PRECIOUS HOURS WITH YOUR MOVIE? I DON'T HAVE ANY USE FOR IT! ANY. BLOODY. USE FOR IT!" more or less had me drooling. For those of you who don't know anything about Robert McKee, he's the writing teacher you wished you had all those years when you were sitting around listening to some other flaccid asshole mumble nonsense about Freudian tropes and postmodern deconstructionism when all you wanted to know was why the hell you were reading a thirty-page story about a guy counting raindrops on a window.

Successful playwrights, screenwriters, and novelists across the globe have made him a fascinating staple of the fiction community. His premise is pretty simple: storytelling has gone to hell for a number of reasons, but one of them is that we no longer teach the fundamentals of story construction. We learn about books from the outside in, never the inside out. There's a reason works like Hamlet, Casablanca, and Star Wars all have an endearing quality. They all have something in common. And that something is *story*.

But at risk of sounding like a cultist, I'll forego summarizing his whole approach and simply mention a few things. If you're looking for *the answer* to the question of What makes good writing, keep looking, because it isn't here. McKee doesn't claim he can polish a turd into Dune, but he can provide you with a very practical way to examine your own work, and a way to think about your story that puts things in perspective. If you happen to be in the editing stages of a project and just can't seem to figure out what's missing, you might find some useful tools here to see your way through.

Whether or not you buy into McKee's 'system,' you can't argue his passion. This is a book filled to the brim with insight, heart, and common sense. McKee talks Story from the heights of Shakespeare to the grit of Reservoir Dogs, discussing what works for every form of storytelling, why it works that way, and how a prospective writing talent can tap into forms, not formulas, that have worked for centuries. And he loves it all, what's more.

I can't claim any sort of midnight conversion. I haven't given my heart to McKee. But I sure as hell would shake his hand and say, Thank you, sir, for being one of few people who talks about the single, unarguable, undeniable, Lord-on-high most important part of writing: telling a story. A good one.

A very useful book. If you give a hoot about storytelling, I'd suggest you give it a glance.

Lena says

Robert McKee is the famous Hollywood screenwriting teacher gently poked fun at in the movie "Adaptation." Though that film could leave one with the impression that McKee teaches formula storytelling, this book is about how good stories transcend formula to become great art.

McKee has a masterful understanding of the fundamentals of story itself, and he writes with clarity about the basic story tools every writer must develop in order to move beyond cliche and into something original. Using examples from famous films, McKee educates us as to why some stories grip us to our toes while others leave us yawning within the first few minutes. Though written with the screenwriter in mind, this book contains excellent specific and practical guidance on how to craft compelling stories that would be of value to anyone who works in the narrative arts.

Steven says

This is the text that went along with his three-day seminar that I attended. Although it is primarily focused on the screenplay, it is equally suitable for a novel, and there were quite a few novelists in attendance at the seminar. Although the focus is on traditional story structure—something McKee believes has become a lost art—his emphasis is so heavily on character, and writing from the inside out, that if well executed, a reader/viewer would not be consciously aware of the story's structure. The book is chock full of great techniques for ensuring that a well-told tale is created that evolves entirely out of character. The book is storehouse of stimulating ideas and techniques. His seminar was amazing. He's hardnosed about quality, and very inspirational. I left there wanting to write my ass off *and* armed with techniques to solve writing problems that had been driving me crazy.

Josh says

YES! It took me six months, but I finally, finished this bitch.

The reason it took me six months was that Story is incredibly dense, and in the best possible way. If you want to understand what makes for a good story, and how and why they work, this is the book to read. But you'll need to read it slow because this is the kind of dense where you'll want to stop and think about what you just read after every few pages to make sure it really sinks in.

Though oriented primarily towards screenwriting, the material is universal enough to address other storytelling mediums as well.

In fact, I actually think it covers stagewriting more effectively than a lot of other books I've read about writing for the stage. Or maybe that's just because Mr. McKee says all the same things I said back to my professors when they critiqued my plays in stupid ways.

But whateva. Read it.

Pavel says

The truth is that this whole concept of three acts and obligatory antagonist will make you unemployed screenwriter in 99,9% of cases. I know, I've witnessed it myself. In some ways the book is usefull, I think it gives pretty accurate analysis of turning points and different types of screenplays and genres, some other things maybe... But in general film bussiness has moved on from straight-forward "hero against something" concept, festival cinema and mass production for theatres and television alike. Anyone who wants to do this thing, have to turn something around, break some rule, that will be her vision. That's the whole point today even at the commercial field - films today are names (actors, director, book it was based on), not some mysterious event of storytelling.

The other truth though is that when you will be talking with your producer he will talk with you in terms of this book and will judge your work according to this book, NOT WANTING your screenplay to follow it at the same time. That's a trick, but once you get used to it, pretty easy one.
