

## IT'S A GREAT TIME TO BE WRITING SCRIPTS—IF YOU KNOW HOW TO DO IT RIGHT

By Jeff Kitchen

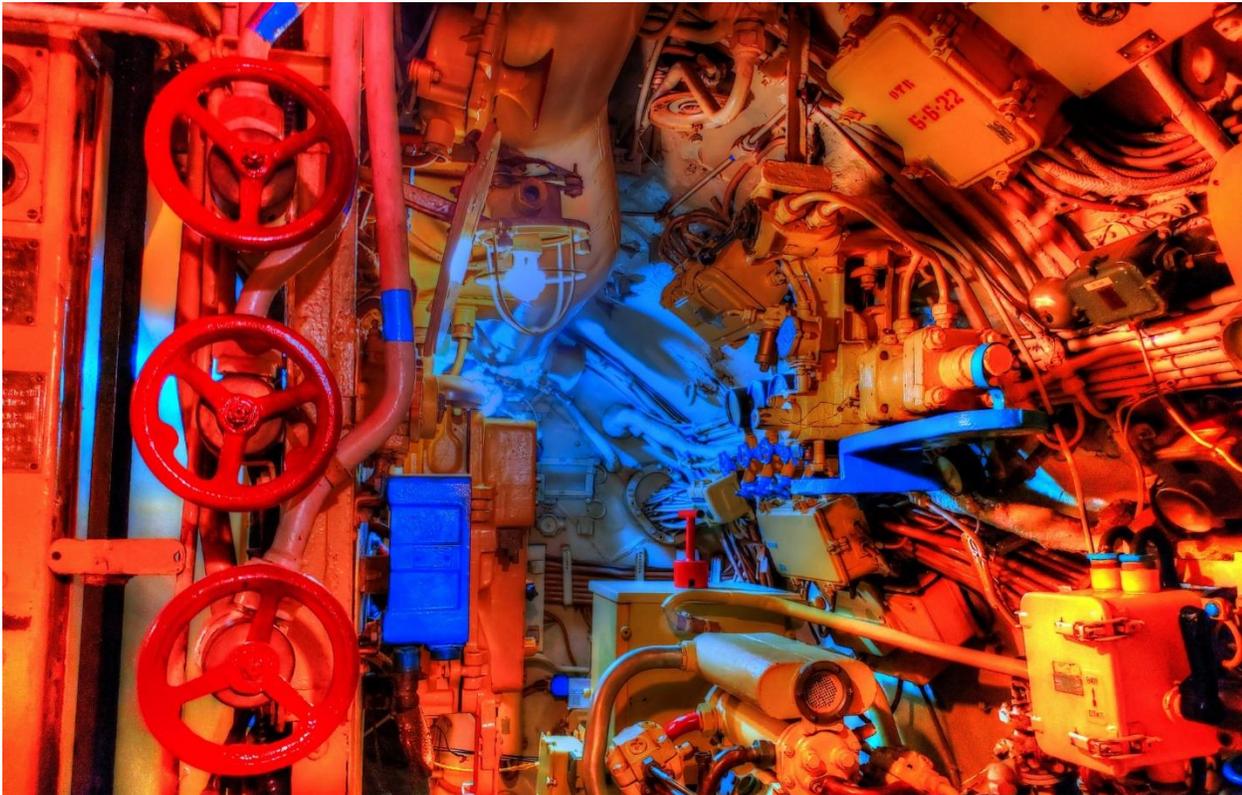
It's a truly great time to be a scriptwriter today because there's such an explosion of opportunity. All the new production entities and streaming services need so much product, and producers constantly tell me they're starving for people who can write. So it is indeed a "golden age of opportunity and adventure" to quote *Blade Runner*, but only if you know how to make scripts work. The problem is that 99% of all scripts submitted are rejected, and that is an alarming fact.

The problem is that dramatic writing is a *completely* different process than most people think it is—nothing like writing a novel or telling a story around the water cooler. Of course it's storytelling, but the story has to be dramatized so it can be performed by actors and continuously grip an audience. It's a tricky art form and most people have no idea just how demanding the craft is. They rush home from seeing a great movie, all excited to write a script and become a millionaire. What could be easier or more fun? But writing a great script, it turns out, is extraordinarily hard to do, and takes a unique and rare set of skills.

### Dramatic Writing is Notoriously Elusive

Dramatic writing is generally considered the most elusive of all the literary disciplines. It's notoriously tricky and slippery, unpredictable, and hard to do well consistently. Something can look great on paper and then fail on screen. A script can fall

apart, and no one can figure out how to get it working. The same basic story done two different ways can see one become a huge success and the other go down in flames, and it can be hard to tell what the first one has that the second lacks.



### **You're Building a Complex Mechanism**

There is so much craft involved that it's akin to designing and building a nuclear attack sub on your own from scratch. Without proper training, the chances of finishing a submarine that's watertight, can navigate the world's oceans, detect enemies without being seen, stay submerged for months, launch devastating attacks, evade enemies and repel attacks, survive multiple catastrophic scenarios, keep hundreds of sailors alive and comfortable for years in extreme conditions, and much more, reliably for decades, is astronomically slim. This may seem like an extreme example, but the hard fact is that virtually no one can consistently make scripts work. Of course, the top-level people are great at it, but then it falls off a cliff, demonstrated by the fact that 99% of scripts are rejected.

### **Producers are Starving for Good Writers**

The problem is quite real. A top writer-producer just told me their bottleneck is finding writers who can really write, not just show up with a good writing sample. It's a chronic problem that's plagued producers for decades and is not getting any better. If what you're writing doesn't work, then it's gibberish to the people who need a script to shoot. You either know how to write drama or you don't, and it's an extraordinarily specific skill.

Whether you're writing for the movies, TV, or Broadway, you're writing for a performance medium. You are adapting or translating a story into drama—telling the story through actors on stage (a film or TV sound stage, or in theater) for an audience. This is the craft of the dramatist—dramatizing stories for theatrical performance.

## It's All About the Audience

You've either got the audience engaged or you don't. If they're not on the edge of their seats, then it doesn't work dramatically. Drama is not about story. Mere story or information or narrative does not make something work on stage. It must be engaging, meaning the audience is compelled to see what happens next. The degree to which they're in doubt is a measure of the dramatic intensity of the story.

A movie playing to an empty theater has no power. It's just shadows on the wall. The power of a film resides in the response of the audience. Whether it's a gripping drama or a goofy comedy, it has to work dramatically. *Liar, Liar* with Jim Carrey is a slapstick comedy, but it's compelling.

## Continuous Coherent Dramatic Action

Part of the trick is to keep them engaged consistently, with no dead spots. You need continuous, coherent, compelling dramatic action. Dramatic Action is not car chases and shootouts, but a state of action that you put the audience in, a subjective state of excitement, as they actively work to figure out how the story will turn out. If they're not on the edge of their seats, then you're not dramatizing your story fully and completely.



This picture has about 1,000 people in it. With the 99% rejection rate, only ten of them would know how to really make scripts work. This is an extreme situation—that so many lack the fundamental skills even though they're all working hard at it. If this was 1,000 licensed plumbers, they'd all be able to install a hot water heater safely and reliably in your home. They're trained to that standard. Producers are looking through 1,000 scripts by professional writers who went to film school and have agents, and only finding a handful who can write effective drama. That is the craft of the dramatist, and it takes considerable training and experience to master.

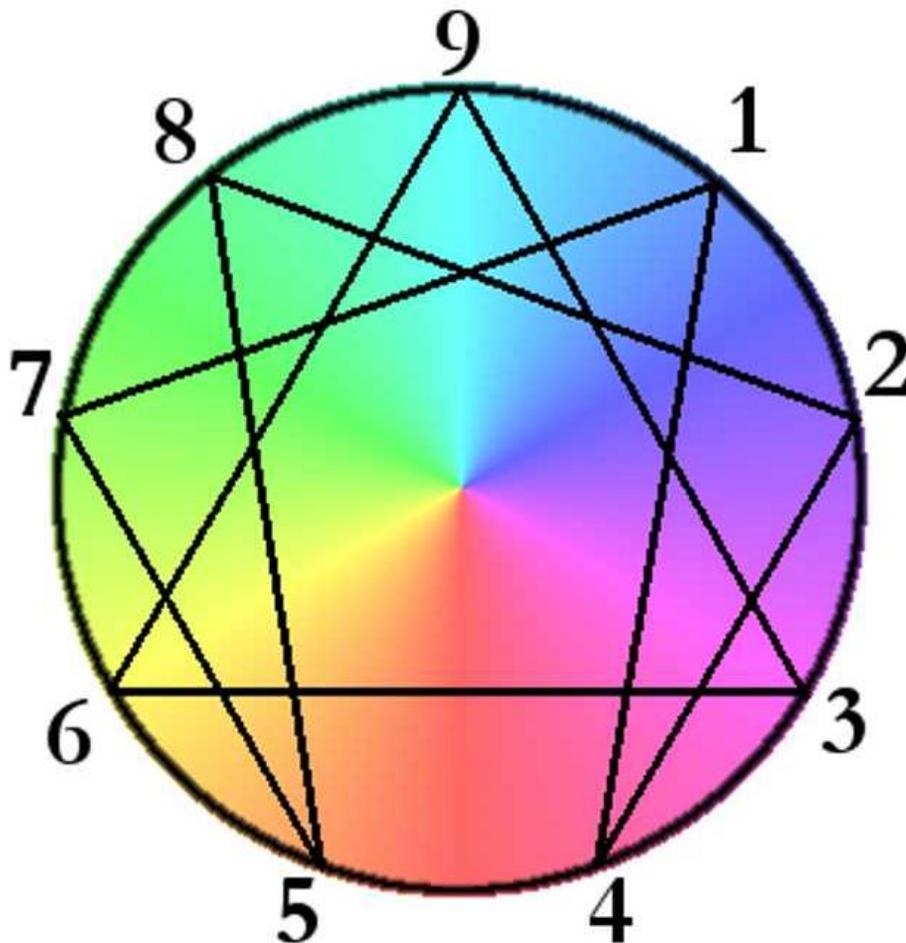
## Master the Craft of the Dramatist

There are so many things that must be done right to build an effective drama, in any genre. All the parts of the story need to be integrated into the one main action. You see this in an orchestra where all the musicians are doing different things, but they're all working together to create one piece of music. This is called structural unity.

You tend to want your protagonist to be trapped in a Dilemma of magnitude, which means that he or she is caught between two equally unacceptable choices. Many people use term dilemma, but most don't know what it is or how to properly use it in a script, thinking that it's a problem, like the office manager has to find the missing thumb drive before the critical meeting. That's a problem, not a dilemma. In the movie *Training Day*, Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke), is caught between his ambition to join Alonzo's (Denzel Washington) elite undercover narcotics squad and his moral compass, which doesn't want to engage in the criminal activities that Alonzo drags him into.

### Dilemma, Crisis, Decision & Action, Resolution, Theme

This dilemma builds to a make-or-break juncture, the Crisis, about three-quarters through the story, which forces the protagonist into a Decision and Action about the dilemma, which leads to the Resolution—the protagonist actively and conclusively resolving the dilemma, which is the ending. The way in which the protagonist resolves the dilemma expresses the Theme of the story. Being able to clearly articulate the theme that's emerging organically in your story is crucial because it helps give shape, tone, and direction to your story. Many people don't grasp exactly what Theme is or how to build a script around it, so they lose its fundamental strength.



## The Enneagram for Building Characters

Character development is very demanding, as each major player needs specific traits, tendencies, and flaws. The Enneagram is a powerful resource for this. A personality-profiling system consisting of nine distinct behavioral types, it's based on ancient wisdom about human nature and cutting-edge psychology and provides a deep and complex reservoir from which to build characters.

## The 36 Dramatic Situations for Brainstorming

Many scripts suffer from a weak underlying story. This is a huge factor in how many scripts are rejected. People put so much work into a weak premise, lacking the skill to evaluate ideas and reject poor material. Bad grapes will not make good wine, and well-structured crap is still crap. One tool that can really help amplify the power of a good idea is the 36 Dramatic Situations. A list of story elements, like Ambition, Disaster, Pursuit, and Revolt, it offers possibilities for breaking a story out of cliché, raising the stakes, violating poor choices, and shaking things up in a good way. People with less writing skills tend to make safe choices and don't like getting in over their head but end up with mediocre scripts that no one wants to make.

Solid research helps too because digging deep into an idea can open up dynamic possibilities for your story. Brainstorming explores extreme options that can catapult you into a bigger and much more dynamic arena. The more craft you have, the more you can afford to make adventurous choices.

## Using Logic to Pull Your Whole Story Together

All of this provides dynamic components for your story, but until you pull them all together into one coherent plot, you've only got a bunch of parts spread all over the place. A tool called the Proposition uses the power of logic to pull all the parts together, fusing everything into one main action. Then you can begin plot construction.

# ACT III

## SEQUENCE, PROPOSITION, PLOT FOR ACT III

**OBJECT:** Kat destroys Keely and the criminal underworld and emerges with a new life with Paddy and Long.

**FINAL EFFECT:** Kat emerges as a new and happy woman, with Paddy doing really well and Long as her husband, and the entire criminal underworld destroyed, with major indictments coming down on the crooked police, judges, and politicians.

**IMMEDIATE CAUSE:** Kat comes out of it sane and sane, with an entirely new lease on life. Paddy and Long see them fighting for her, and Paddy says he's got a copy of the Reporter's story on the location that she studied for her before the war captured.

**CAUSE:** Kat fights with everything she's got to escape her insanity, desperate to come back to the light, to be whole, to be there for Paddy, and Paddy's those cheating her on, saying she can do it, helping her to look.

**CAUSE:** Long comes in and says they just killed Mace and his crew downstairs, and Dasher rushes in saying the doctor wants to bring them down Tragen's attack chopper and he's dead. Kat takes heart from this complete victory.

**CAUSE:** Paddy injects Kat with a dose of anti-psychotic from Keely's torture kit, and then another at her insistence. He even gives himself a shot of it. Kat comes at Paddy to not let her go, to pull her toward the light, back to sanity. She fights with all her heart, desperate to save herself and Paddy from insanity.

**CAUSE:** Kat rages at Paddy, sees at him, that he has to bring her back to sanity, to let her go and let her be the same forever. She has to fight her way back to the light. She yells that he has to reject her with the anti-psychotic.

**CAUSE:** Paddy slips into insanity as he resists the old Dutch torturer, choking her own and even, a hollow glare on Paddy's face. This breaks Kat's heart.

**CAUSE:** Kat is completely open and the old Dutch torturer steps up and is about to kill her when a shot rings out. The old torturer drops dead. Paddy steps out of the shadows with a smoking gun.

**CAUSE:** Kat grabs a red hot poker from the furnace to fight off the snake, and she's about to shove it in the snake's mouth when it swallows and she realizes it's just a hallucination, instead, she jabs it in Keely's face, using it to flip Keely and get her head in a big lock between her thighs, and quickly escapes her neck, killing her right when it looked like Keely had won.

**CAUSE:** Keely pulls out a vicious rattlesnake which crawls the trap out of Kat. Keely has the upper hand and it looks like she's about to finish off Kat as the old Dutch torturer kills his leg. Dasher and Long kill dozens downstairs, and kill Mace.

**CAUSE:** Kat attacks Keely with a raging psychotic attack and it looks like she's right win. Dasher and Long crash through the wall of Mace's headquarters in a heavy truck and attack Mace and crew downstairs.

**CAUSE:** Kat continues her spouting vitriol on Keely's red hot furnace to stop the bleeding.

**CAUSE:** Keely loses the man, and the gloves in it as Kat's spouting vitriol sprays Keely in the face.

**CAUSE:** Keely goes down Kat across a torture device and forces the pressure going, dislocating Kat's shoulder, and then, with intense cruelty, she the arm out of the socket and tears it off. It looks like Kat is done, and with a major victory spouting, she has only minutes.

**CAUSE:** Kat's adrenaline-fueled psychotic attack sends Keely for a loop, turning the battle in Kat's favor, but Keely grabs a red hot iron from her furnace and smacks Kat, making her lose her grip.

**CAUSE:** Instead of Kat trying to fight off the drug-induced psychosis, she dives headlong into it, going crazy insane, standing with unexpected strength and turning the attack on Keely.

**CAUSE:** Keely injects her with stronger drugs to compound the LSD, and as Kat breaks the cocaine that kills her, Kat tells her to fight it, to resist because that makes it work better.

**CAUSE:** Kat spirals down into insanity as the despair and fury, Keely's torturous cruelty and depravity, the imminent loss of Paddy, and the massive LSD dose overwhelm her.

**CAUSE:** Keely drops out the Reporter, who has been heavily tortured, and gets her in front of Kat. Keely crawls in the gun, setting a piece of her still beating heart.

**CAUSE:** Keely says she's going to achieve one of her biggest goals here by executing Kat and Paddy, the two most honorable people to shatter her entire life, who made her life horrible every waking second. She says Kat only cared about her own insanity and projected all that onto Keely, and it was so pathetic.

**CAUSE:** Keely steps out of the shadows and Kat is absolutely stunned that she's still alive. Keely chokes her with LSD truck dirt and says that she told her death to get away from Kat and after long stop. Keely says she had to get away to pursue her true life's passion, causing pain, and here

## ACT III



## **Plot Construction is a Key Skill**

Plot construction can seem foreign to amateur writers who just start writing scenes without a deep knowledge of how the whole story works. That's generally a recipe for disaster because if the big picture doesn't work then the details don't matter. A well-written scene in a script that doesn't work is worthless.

## **Get the Overall Story Right First**

It's important to work from the general to the specific, getting the big picture working before addressing the details. Control of details is crucial because the work of the amateur is characterized by the Unnecessary, with dialog and description overwritten, entire scenes that are unnecessary, sequences that are overwritten or are unneeded, and even acts that are bloated and occasionally unnecessary. Sometimes even an entire script is unnecessary. That might sound funny unless you're a studio script reader who's read thousands of scripts that consist of nothing but unnecessary material. Proper technique will free you from the profusion of unnecessary detail.

## **Work Backwards from Your Ending**

One way to get at the essential incidents in your story is to work backward from your ending, chaining back from each effect to its cause. Doing this for the big picture gives you the major building blocks, the spine, of your story. Once you have that, you then do the same for each act, fleshing out a little more detail as it becomes necessary. Then you do it for each sequence, layering in just a little more detail. Next you do it for the first scene and then you write that scene. It will have only that which is necessary and nothing else. And by identifying and amplifying conflict in the overall story, each act, each sequence, and each scene, you make sure your audience is on the edge of their seats throughout the script. This three-step tool is called Sequence, Proposition, Plot and is remarkably powerful for plot construction and story development.

## **Engineer Your Script Properly Before You Write it**

The essence of good craft as a dramatist is that you can take most of the energy that goes into rewrites and use it to properly engineer a script before writing it. This systematic approach gives you excellent control of your developing story even as it gives you total creative freedom to continually invent and adjust as you gradually layer more and more detail into the growing story.

## **Master Dramatic Writing and Forge a Career**

So the scriptwriting is radically harder than most people suspect, and it's an extremely unforgiving medium. Your script either works or it doesn't. If your hobby is building airplanes, then you need extreme expertise in their design and construction, because getting it *almost* right isn't worth anything at all. The craft is learnable, but it's much harder and more complex than most people suspect, and if you want to make a consistent living at it you need to put in a couple years to master the skills involved. A weekend seminar won't do the trick, and merely having a clever story won't get you across the finish line if you're not an expert dramatist. But when you master the craft, there are thousands of producers out there hunting for you and the sky's the limit.

Jeff Kitchen trains scriptwriters in his three-month or two-year program at <http://script.kitchen>. A top-rated teacher, Jeff has trained thousands of writers from Broadway to Hollywood, with former students nominated for multiple Oscars and Emmy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay Oscars. Jeff's two-year program is a rigorous online apprenticeship that trains you by constantly building multiple scripts in a challenging workshop format.