Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting by Syd Field

Start Here . . .

A generation of screenwriters has used Syd Field’s bestselling books to ignite successful careers in film. Now the celebrated producer, lecturer, teacher, and bestselling author has updated his classic guide for a new generation of filmmakers, offering a fresh insider’s perspective on the film industry today. From concept to character, from opening scene to finished script, here are easily understood guidelines to help aspiring screenwriters—from novices to practiced writers—hone their craft. Filled with updated material—including all-new personal anecdotes and insights, guidelines on marketing and collaboration, plus analyses of recent films, from American Beauty to Lord of the Rings—Screenplay presents a step-by-step, comprehensive technique for writing the screenplay that will succeed in Hollywood. Discover:

• Why the first ten pages of your script are crucially important
• How to visually “grab” the reader from page one, word one
• Why structure and character are the essential foundation of your screenplay
• How to adapt a novel, a play, or an article into a screenplay
• Tips on protecting your work—three legal ways to claim ownership of your screenplay
• The essentials of writing great dialogue, creating character, building a story line, overcoming writer’s block, getting an agent, and much more.
With this newly updated edition of his bestselling classic, Syd Field proves yet again why he is revered as the master of the screenplay—and why his celebrated guide has become the industry’s gold standard for successful screenwriting.

My Personal Review:
For the absolute beginner with no clue how to write a screenplay, this book (for better or for worse) is probably essential reading. It effectively describes the basic structure of a basic screenplay. The problem is that what Syd Field does not realize is that many truly great screenplays effectively break his rules. Granted, that is only done by accomplished screenwriter who spent years following the rules when they wrote screenplays. But the fact of the matter is that if all screenwriters followed Fields advice to the letter, Hollywood cinema would be even worse off than it currently is!
A few examples: Field insists that a good screenplays first plot point must occur around page thirty. The first plot point in Star Wars (a film Field makes reference to) occurs around page fifty. Additionally, I would love to see Field sort out the plot points of Pulp Fiction and fit it into his beloved paradigm!
Field insists that a good screenplay must have three acts. Shakespeare wrote the bulk of his works in five acts. Enough said.
Field claims that a name is a name as he names a character Sara Townsend in an example exercise. Would Huckleberry Finn have had the same magic if Huck had been named Jim Johnson? Dickens names added another dimension to his stories, Oliver Twist for example. Other names to consider: Scarlett OHara, Yossarian, or even Dr. Wilbur Larch, as a more modern example. To Fields credit, he focuses on building a character in the same chapter that he downplays the importance of names. Undoubtedly, what’s inside a character is more important than the label slapped on him or her. But equally undoubtable is the ability of the perfect name to enhance an effective character.
I could nit-pick this book apart chapter by chapter, but the most troubling issue surrounding Screenplay is this: Syd Field is an awful screenwriter. He wrote a decent how-to book on the subject, but he cant write a screenplay himself. If you have a copy, take note of how the about the author section doesnt mention any screenplays Field has had produced. Theres a reason for that. Then read the excerpt from Fields unproduced screenplay The Run in chapter 13 and youll begin to understand. The story premise is laughable and the dialogue is an embarassment to screenwriters everywhere.
The bottom line: Screenplay is an fine choice for beginning screenwriters. It was my first screenwriting book and it gave me a good foundation. Just dont expect to follow Fields instructions to the letter if you want to write a truly unique and memorable screenplay. A better idea: read lots of screenplays, plays, and novels by people who are actually good at writing them.

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