

## Notes for Aspiring Screenwriters from Terrel Seltzer

- Interview by Osha Hayden, Chair, 2017 Screenwriting Contest

*First, if you are wondering how to format a screenplay, the easiest way is to use screenwriting software that will format it for you. Most screenwriters use Final Draft but if you don't want to spend money on software, Terrel mentioned a free online software option, Celtx. <https://www.celtx.com/pricing.html> On the website, scroll all the way down to the free Basic Scriptwriting tool.*

In order to gather some tips in advance of our **Redwood Writers Screenwriting Workshop** on **May 7th** and our **Screenwriting Contest** launching **May 21st**, I interviewed Terrel Seltzer, an acclaimed screenwriter and instructor, who will teach our workshop and serve as a judge. Here are some highlights from the interview to orient you to the screenwriting process & stimulate your ideas.

**OH:** *We have many published authors in our club; what do they need to know about the difference between writing a book and writing a screenplay?*

**TS:** That's a huge question. First of all, you have to learn what the screenplay form is . . . When you want to start making a transition, you have to start thinking about your story in a completely different way. When Coppola was adapting *The Godfather*, what he did was - first, he just read the book. And then the second time he went through and he used highlighters to mark the parts he knew he needed to really have in the movie. And then the third time he went through, he just took out those parts and then worked his screenplay from that.

So usually when you're making that transition from a book to a screenplay, it requires a lot of revision, taking out lots of things. Sometimes you even have to make up new things to make the screenplay work . . . You have to find the screenplay in the book.

**OH:** *What if they are novelists or memoir writers and they are writing a screenplay from scratch?*

**TS:** The first thing you need to know is - *screenwriting is writing in pictures* . . . you're writing visually; you want to write pictures and you want to write pictures in such a way that anyone who's reading the screenplay sees it and it's concise and it's a quick read.

**OH:** *Can you give us a brief overview of "vertical writing"?*

**TS:** When you read a book or a kindle . . . your eyes are scanning left to right, left to right . . . but the key for writing a screenplay is *people read from the top of the page down*.

It's kind of like writing a poem in a way; you know how in a poem you kind of go up and down too? That's the closest I can come up with in a comparison.

A screenplay . . . might be the only form of writing that really is not an end product. There's no reason to be writing a screenplay unless the hope is that it will be made into a movie. So when you're writing a screenplay, you're really writing something that you hope is going to attract people, money, resources to get made into an actual movie. I always say to my students, more than just loving movies, you have to love the screenplay form.

**OH:** *There are certain basic sequences that every screenplay must have?*

**TS:** I always explain that it's similar to a symphony . . . Whenever you're thinking about doing something long-form, there is a certain ebb and flow of the narrative that is just natural to storytelling.

When I first started out, this was a long time ago, there were no programs, no books, there was nothing. So I just watched movie after movie after movie and I outlined them all just to try to figure out what structure there was. What I realized is almost every story was breaking down into 17 very distinct chapters. It was so interesting to me that there seems to be similar DNA for all of these.

I don't teach the 17 because since then, so many books have come out on sequencing and the easiest way to teach this is - there are eight basic sequences in a story.

**OH:** *Last night I saw an episode from the series, Mildred Pierce. She had just lost her youngest daughter who had died; she's there in bed with her older daughter; she has slept in her clothes all night and you see her waking up; she raises her head; she looks over at the empty bed; then just drops her head back on the pillow and closes her eyes. Without a single word of dialogue, you get the entire emotion of that deep grief and loss.*

**TS:** What you're talking about there is writing visually. There is a hierarchy when you're writing a movie; anything you can write without dialogue is almost always better than having to use dialogue. Now of course there are exceptions; everybody loves really well written dialogue, especially in comedies . . . but generally speaking, if you can write something without any words, it's almost always better than using words.

**OH:** *Because you're getting the emotions in a very powerful way without them having to tell you.*

**TS:** It's called *show don't tell*.

**OH:** *As a judge, what do you look for in a screenplay?*

**TS:** Does it hold my interest? Is there a character there that I really get interested in, so I want to find out what's going to happen to them? Is it a compelling story; is it about some major emotion? Is there a character that you care about? I guess that's the main thing.

Every story should be a life and death story and that doesn't mean that somebody has to die in every story but it means that something is really at stake. Somebody is trying to do something of major importance and if it doesn't happen, it's going to be a terrible thing. In a love story it means you don't get the person that you love.

For more information on the screenwriting workshop and contest:

<http://redwoodwriters.org/screenwriting-essentials-workshop/>

<http://redwoodwriters.org/2017-screenplay-contest/>