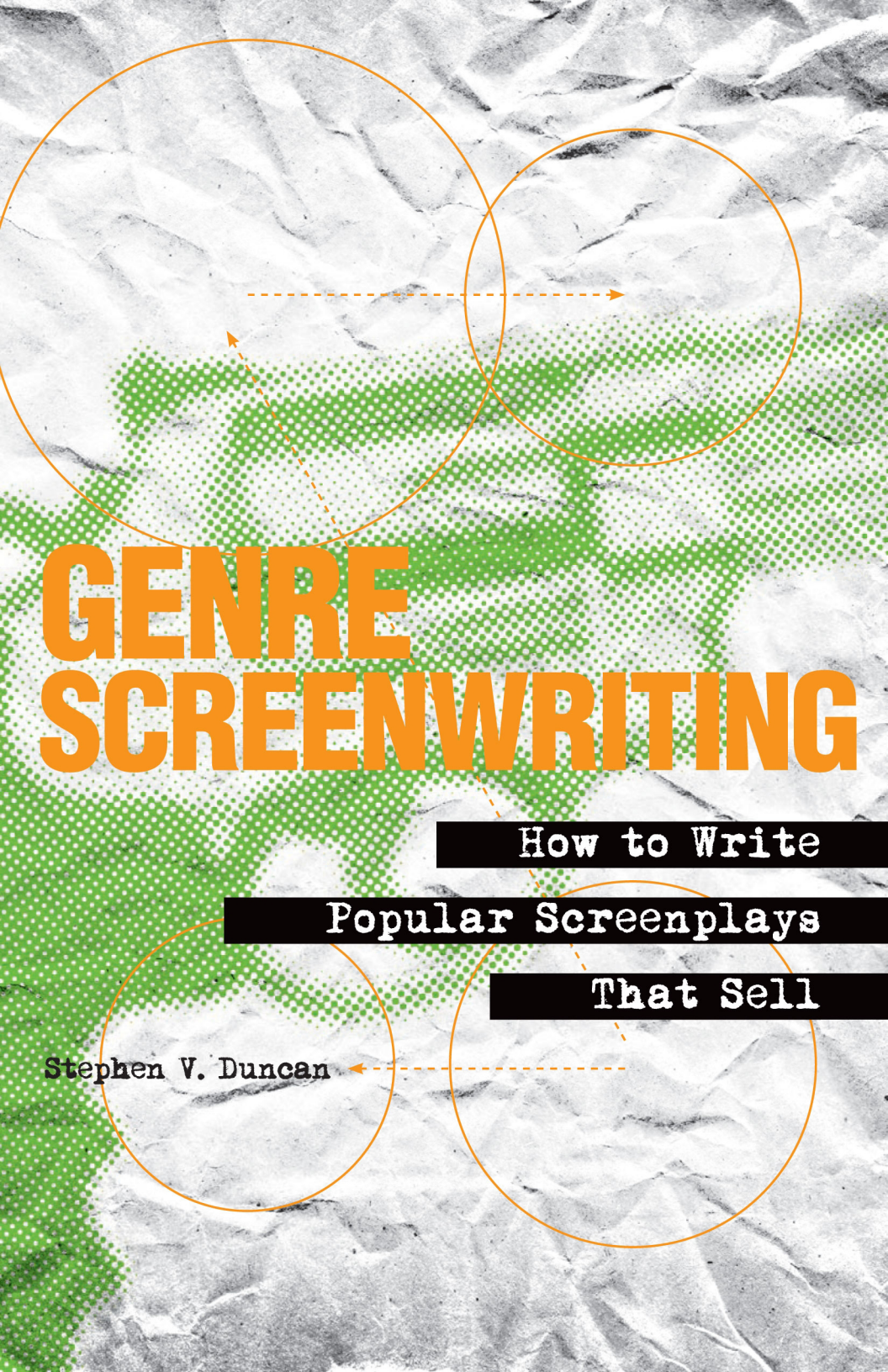
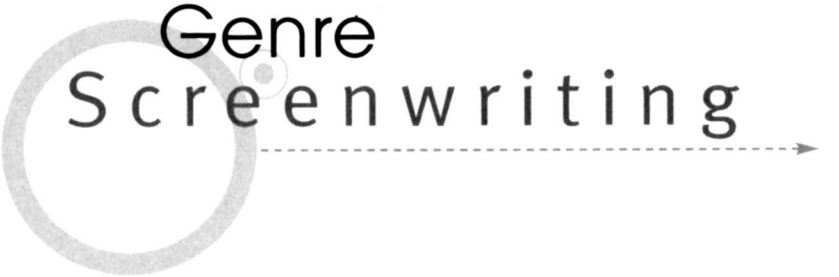

GENRE SCREENWRITING
How to Write Popular Screenplays That Sell
Stephen V. Duncan


Genre
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How to Write Popular Screenplays That Sell

Stephen V. Duncan

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I dedicate this book to my best friend, Jean, who also happens to be my wife. Without her encouragement, I couldn't do what I do.

About the Author

Steve Duncan is an associate professor and chair of screenwriting at the Loyola Marymount University's School of Film and Television in Los Angeles, California. He is the author of *A Guide to Screenwriting Success: Writing for Film and Television* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006). His credits include co-creator and executive consultant of the award-winning, critically acclaimed CBS-TV one-hour Vietnam War series *Tour of Duty*; writer-producer of the touted ABC-TV one-hour action series *A Man Called Hawk*; and co-writer of the highly praised Turner Network Television original movie *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson*. He has developed and written projects for Warner Bros., Lion's Gate Television, New World Television, vonZerneck-Sertner Films, Spelling Television, Columbia Television, NBC Productions, Republic Pictures, and Tri-Star Pictures.

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Introduction

Why Write Popular Film Genres?

There's no need for a drumroll, so let's get right to it: the primary purpose of this book is to provide you with the practical knowledge necessary to successfully deliver the basic elements expected in a popular film genre screenplay—in a word, a commercial screenplay. I realize that in some circles—especially in film schools—the word *commercial* is occasionally considered blasphemous. While art certainly has its place in the world of cinema, all films have commercial value—some more than others—or studios wouldn't produce them, theater chains wouldn't exhibit them and distributors wouldn't sell them to the public in various formats such as the DVD, which is by far the most lucrative vehicle. Then there's the emerging platform of the Internet vis-à-vis downloadable files, which is going to explode once the entertainment industry figures out a stable business model for its use.

So, you write a popular film genre screenplay because they sell and make money for everyone involved.

Expectations & the Unexpected

The people who buy or option screenplays—producers, directors, actors, studio executives—have certain expectations when it comes to what's commercial and what's not. The people who represent screenplays—agents, managers and attorneys—have the job of screening material to match these expectations. As the writer, you must not only deliver on those expectations, but you must also deliver the unexpected: the mysterious essentials of creativity and uniqueness . . . or plain old talent. One factor, among many others, evident with the most successful screenwriters, producers and directors, is the ability to exalt the "rules" of a

particular genre to a very high level while managing to bend and even break a few of them along the way. I'm a firm believer in the simple axiom "You can't break the rules until you know them."

So, that's my aim in this genre cookbook of sorts: to furnish you with the recipes for the action-adventure, thriller, science-fiction-fantasy, horror-fantasy and comedy/romantic comedy film genres. You are the chef and must bring to the kitchen the most important factor of all—your talent.

The Drama & Popular Film Genres

The realistic drama you've written can often catch the attention of agents and managers and, perhaps, help you to land professional representation. However, ultimately these reps will want you to write something that they can sell to the entertainment industry, especially to the big studios. Now, don't get me wrong—I'm not saying you shouldn't write dramas. The fact is, the drama is the chassis for all popular film genres.

So, if you're a serious screenwriter who wishes to sustain a career, it's important to be as versatile as your talent permits. Here's a simple testament: the list of produced films between 2000 and 2007 reveals that nearly all fell under the categories of popular genres; few were pure dramas. Realistically, in the long run, dramas do not produce a significant percentage of profits for the industry. Therefore, statistically, it's just plain harder to sell a drama screenplay than one written for mass appeal. Granted, well-written dramas are more likely to collect important accolades—the Academy Award, Drama Desk Awards, Film Festival Prizes, etc.—and that's an essential reason why the larger studios make them. In addition, many dramas find their way to the big screen because an important star or director wants to make the film.

But the bottom line, as they like to say in the biz, is: that unless studios and production companies can keep their doors open, there would be no films produced at all.

Jumpstart Your Writing Career

For now, put aside your drama and begin writing screenplays that will give you a stronger opportunity to start or even resuscitate your writing career. A well-written screenplay in a popular genre is more likely to

become a lightning rod for you as a writer. You'll earn clout by demonstrating the ability to generate income (for yourself, your reps and the studios), and in turn you'll gain more value as a writer to help sell your drama script.

When you're the hot writer, it's very common to hear, "What else do you have to show me?"

This Book's Approach

Let me be clear: I do not attempt to probe the deepest psyche of screenwriters and directors of famous or seminal films. Nor do I attempt to analyze the theoretic machinations of films. This is not an academic exercise. I leave that to the Film Studies Doctors of Philosophy. My intention is to give you, the screenwriter, a practical guide to writing each popular film genre—the expected—so that you can add the unexpected: your talent.

This handbook is for screenwriters at all levels, whether a neophyte or someone with screen credits. Because contemporary film genres tend not to be as pure as they were twenty to thirty years ago, I've attempted to isolate the significant elements of each genre category so you can gain the clearest understanding of how to write a commercial screenplay that will snag you an agent or get him or her making phone calls on your behalf.

My approach includes the use of familiar fairy tales such as The Three Little Pigs, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel. I apply the elements of each film genre to these well-known stories in order to illustrate the "how to" of each genre.

A Bonus Section: Popular Genres & Television

Because many of the same elements of film genres apply to television, and because television is the single largest employer of screenwriters, I also take a brief walk down memory lane to illustrate how each popular genre has fared on television since the advent of popular series programming in the 1950s.

Let's get started.

1

The Basic Concepts of Dramatic Screenwriting

THERE ARE MANY COMPREHENSIVE BOOKS on the fundamentals of writing a screenplay.[1] However, I want to begin by establishing the broad concepts that are germane and key to my later explanations of how to write popular film genres. My intention is not to be all-inclusive here, but rather to give you a short course in the chief storytelling concepts.

This is important because in order to write strong genre screenplays, you must be able to write a good old fashion *drama*. Look at the drama as the chassis on which to build all the popular film genres: action-adventure, thriller, science-fiction-fantasy, comedy/romantic comedy and horror-fantasy all begin with a strong dramatic framework.

Create an Enticing Film Premise

Nearly every film studio executive will tell you he or she is interested in purchasing screenplays based on a *high-concept premise*. But exactly what does this phrase mean? Basically, in a high-concept premise, *the situation in the premise is more important than the characters in the story*. I will provide specific examples of this in each genre that I discuss because nearly every screenplay written in a popular genre is based on a high-concept premise.

Since moving into the twenty-first century, film studio executives have realized that the "high-concept" approach to screenplay development is getting a bit stale. So they have come up with a new approach to widen their search for unique film premises. The search is now on for what's being called the *low-high-concept premise*. This is a simple variation that takes character into account more than the situation of the

story but still relies on a unique situation in which the characters are involved. Essentially, the low-high-concept premise is a *focused* drama. Since actors love drama because it gives them a chance to strut their stuff on screen, this approach has become a way for the studios to help dramas earn more money at the box office. That's a big reason why high-profile-popular actors tend to be involved on the production side of these films, and not just on the screen. Just look at the top drama films made since 2000, and you'll find that the most successful of them involve high-profile actors who also work behind the scenes as directors and/or producers. Two excellent illustrations of this are George Clooney's *Good Night & Good Luck* (2005)—which he co-wrote, acted in and directed—and Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), in which he acted and which he directed. Both of these movies won Academy Awards and made money for the studios. They're both based on low-high-concept premises.

Use Theme in Your Story

What's the story *really* about? What's the big, shiny *idea* underneath the story? Answer this and you'll have the *theme* of the story. If you analyze all the great films, both past and present, you'll find that they all have strong and important themes that are *life-affirming*. What does that mean? Life-affirming themes reassure the audience that their own existence matters. Films, more often than not, offer the audience a chance to go through the perils of life—both physical and emotional—as spectators, allowing them to learn from the experience without the jeopardy. I know that sounds a bit pretentious, but deep down you know it's true when you experience a well-made film.

One technique is to start with a one-word theme that broadly describes what your story is about. An excellent source for a thematic word is *Roget's Thesaurus*. Go to the Table of Contents and look under *Class Eight: Affections*. Of special interest is the section on morality—that's where you'll find the themes most used in storytelling. The struggle between right and wrong—morality—is eternal and universal, because people and films are about people. So this is a natural and very organic approach.

There are other sources of themes, and the most popular are:

- The Seven Deadly Sins
- The Seven Heavenly Virtues

- The Ten Commanders
- Popular Bible Stories

Once you've decided which one-word theme applies to what you want to write, come up with a cliché that would be appropriate for what you're trying to say. Here are few examples:

- *As Good as It Gets:* Trust . . . "No man is an island."
- *Jerry Maguire:* Honesty . . . "Honesty is the best policy."
- *Titanic:* Dishonesty . . . "If you'll lie, you'll steal."
- *Shrek:* Tolerance . . . "Don't judge a book by its cover."

This is the only time when using a cliché is really helpful in creative writing. Otherwise, avoid them.

Next, develop the *physical theme* for your story. This involves giving the audience a clear sense of what the story's main character is up against—a *problem/predicament*. So, if your main character is a police detective, then her physical goal in the story needs to have an underlying theme. In this case, it could be to stop a serial killer who preys only on young women, which is an underlying theme that embraces feminism or the idea that woman are objectified in American culture (and, to be fair, elsewhere on the planet, too).

Next there should be a *metaphysical theme* for your story. This involves the audience in an emotional sensation that underlines a more universal idea in the story, exemplified by the main character's efforts to solve the problem/predicament in which she finds herself. So, following the female police detective, the more universal theme could embrace the idea that women must act on their own behalf in order to level the playing field and not sit around waiting and hoping that men will see the light. Of course, this theme could go in other directions as well.

This theory may strike you as highbrow, but you can easily bring it down to earth by converting both the physical and meta-physical themes into concrete *central questions* that are to be answered (or not) by the story's end.

For example:

Female Police Detective's *physical* central question: *Can she catch the serial killer before he or she kills another young woman?*

Female Police Detective's *metaphysical* central question: *Must women take more control of their lives in order to protect themselves?*