Title	Screenwriting is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision, by Jack Epps, Jr.
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Publication date	2017
Original Citation	Akkan, G. (2017) Screenwriting is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision, by Jack Epps, Jr. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media 13, pp. 168-172. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.13.11
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue13/13_3Review_Akkan.pdf - https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.13.11
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Download date	2024-05-04 13:58:43
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/6036

Screenwriting Is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision. Jack Epps, Jr. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (360 pages).

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Besides being a famous screenwriter for Hollywood films such as *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) and *Dick Tracy* (Warren Beatty, 1990), Jack Epps, Jr. is also an Associate Professor and the Chair of University of Southern California's Writing for Screen and Television Division. Hence, his book *Screenwriting is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision* comes in handy as a guide for students or amateurs trying to take their first step in the world of screenwriting, by teaching them the most important points of revision.

The book is craftily divided into four main parts, namely "Foundations and Fundamentals", "Layering and Details", "Screenwriters on Rewriting" and "Examples". The first two parts are concerned with revising notes, character building, structure and plot, as well as introducing the author's "pass system", whereas the last two parts are more practical as they include one-on-one interviews with other famous screenwriters and real-life examples of notes for reviewing a screenplay.

These four sections are further divided into chapters, which explain thoroughly how to go about the main aspects of screenwriting by introducing the idea of "pass system". The author describes the pass method as "an organized, systemic, strategic way to approach rewriting that evolved out of years of my professional experience writing and rewriting hundreds of drafts" (xxi). Throughout the book, revision and rewriting notes are organised as the pass method in such a way that it does not seek to fix everything in one giant step, but rather in smaller, more precise sets that are easier to tackle one at a time. This is basically a schematic "tips & tricks" diagram for different subject areas of the screenplay, such as Foundation Pass (44–5), Character Pass (54–5), Story and Theme Pass (78–9), Structure Pass (102–3), Consistency Pass (214-15) and so on. For example, the Foundation Pass seeks to improve the basic storyline and the purpose of the main character. Epps approaches this by creating a chart, with one column entitled "Common Notes", which can be understood as common problems or questions about the central issues, such as "I'm not sure what the script is about" or "The main character is unmotivated", and giving corresponding solutions to each problem, such as "What Is Your Screenplay About? Theme, Internal Character Story, Main Character's Want" and "Internal Character Story, Main Character's Want, Stakes and Key Relationship", respectively. (44)

In his pass system, Epps creates a guide for readers where they can posit their own ideas about the screenplay in a schematic format by identifying problems for each element of a screenplay and seeing matching solutions for those exact problems. As another example, for the Consistency Pass, which seeks to improve the script's inconsistencies in order to create a

cohesive and aligned film from start to end, he creates the exact same diagram guide with two columns, "The Note" and "Potential Solutions", in which the first identifies the problem, while the second offers an answer. For instance, in the left side of the column, the problem "All the characters sound the same" corresponds to the solution: "Motivation, Attitude, Character, Relationship and Supporting Characters" in the right column (78). This format is recurring in the pass system for different devices throughout the book. In this regard, the publication offers solutions for problems about every structural aspect from character to theme, as mentioned before, and seeks to lay out clear hints for the readers so that they can revise their own screenplays accordingly.

Epps also gives clear objectives for every aspect of the screenplay. For the Relationship Pass, which aims to create and strengthen the arcs between different characters and ensure the right amount of tension, he makes a bullet point shortlist for the readers that is easy to follow, including tips related to key relationships that the protagonist has, for example. Yet, according to the author, such relationships, whether negative or positive, add conflict and tension and, for this reason, it is important to stress the main character's engagements with other characters in the narrative, be they a love interest or an enemy.

The book's chapter structure for each theme approached is almost exactly the same, beginning with a quote from a renowned screenwriter related to that specific chapter, such as one from Damien Chazelle in the chapter "Sending Out Your Screenplay": "There was no plan B. My theory was that eventually people give up, and the easiest way to make it here is just to outlast them" (235). Issue-specific short paragraphs follow—about whether to cut the dialogue when in doubt, building relationships between characters, or the importance of time and setting in the plot. Finally, the section "Final Thoughts" provides the reader with a condensed view of the matter.

As a former student of creative writing, I find that the clear-cut and repetitive structure of the chapters gives the reader a sense of how to go about rewriting his or her screenplay in order to strengthen the weak points, polish it and make it ready to pitch for production. In this regard, through the pass system, Epps states that rewriting allows creating depth and adding layers to the screenplay through various elements, such as characterisation, plot, scenes, relationships and dialogue. The author also suggests that such activity aids to eliminate peripheral parts of the story that do not serve the narrative arc, helping to bring out the best in a script. In a perfect script, every shot and every word have a meaning that contributes to make the film an overall success. For amateur writers, it can sometimes be difficult to jettison some parts of a script that one caringly wrote. However, in a real production environment, the script will receive feedback and notes from other people, and for this reason it is important to learn to rewrite.

As the first two chapters of the book explained the pass system, parts three and four explore more practical issues, since they consist of interviews with acclaimed screenwriters and notes by former students, respectively. The interviews with screenwriters, such as Frank Pierson, who won an Award for Writing – Original Screenplay for *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975), are full of insights about the industry and the process of screenwriting itself—as in the following comment by Pierson: "That is the work of an artist in bringing order to chaos, and it is a psychological process in which you are putting demons to rest. If you've gotten into it deeply enough, you have brought up all kinds of things that are very frightening in a purely psychological sense" (259).

Interviews also help to illustrate what was emphasised in the first two parts of the book, such as when Epps asks Susannah Grant, Academy Award Nominee for Best Screenplay for *Erin Brockovich* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), about characterisation and she replies:

> The most important thing to think about is dimension. It's very important to be clear about characters, but you can also be clear and also have them to be complex, have somebody be incredibly vulnerable and incredibly arrogant. Maybe it's just a matter of understanding people. One of my favorite characters of the last decade was the character Ryan Gosling played in *Half Nelson* (Ryan Fleck, 2006) who was the crack-addicted school teacher. He was such a great character. He was really good and he had a really big problem. That's the kind of dimension that people don't think about having because there's a pressure to be really clear and really specific. Sometimes it can end up being a bit thin. There's room—there's a lot of room on screen for characters to have complexity" (276–7).

This quote exemplifies and solidifies the main issues about giving characters soul and life, as aspiring writers might be wary of making their characters too much of something—too rowdy, too likeable, or too resentful—thinking that it would have a negative impact on the overall story arc. However, as Epps reassured earlier in the book, Grant also verifies that the more multidimensional a character is, the closer they will be to reality, which will ground the film as a more believable picture.

As for the last section of the book, it includes the professional notes Epps took while working on various scripts, from directors to actors, which is a solid, real-life example to prepare the aspiring writers for what is to come if they should find a producer for their script. The student notes also demonstrate how readers who do not have access to a note-sharing environment, such as a class at a college, can improve their own writing within their personal means.

Compared to other textbooks on screenwriting, Epps offers a revised version of how to write Hollywood blockbusters, by reflecting and talking about more recent kinds of storytelling and filmmaking, unlike some of the iconic books on the subject, such as *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri, written in the 1940s, which focused on the classical Hollywood era. Another bestselling book on the topic, *Save The Cat!* by Blake Snyder, although written more recently, still advises its readers to rent a movie at Blockbusters—an activity that died long ago as the Blockbusters stores started shutting down in 2009. Besides, neither of the two publications has a systematic methodology like the one proposed by Epps, as his pass system offers the "do's and don'ts" of revising in a schematic way that can help the reader to visualise a storytelling problem and its solution. On the other hand, more contemporary books with approaches similar to *Screenwriting Is Rewriting* are formatted in a prose style that might work less effectively, as it is more difficult to deduct a specific point from a long body of text compared to shortlists, diagrams and schemas. For example, David Trottier's *The Screenwriter's Bible* or William Goldman's *Adventures in the Screen Trade* are both more anecdotal and formatted in a way that reads more like a prose book than a guide. Therefore, besides the textual content, the visual style of *Screenwriting Is Rewriting* is also practical.

Another feature that commends this book as a must-read on the subject of screenwriting, like Robert McKee's famous *Story*, is that it does not limit itself to Hollywood blockbusters, as most of the other textbooks do. It also includes an examination of independent American films, such as *50/50* (Jonathan Levine, 2011), *Little Miss Sunshine*

(Michael Arndt, 2006)*, 500 Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009) and *Nightcrawler* (Dan Gilroy, 2014), among others. Epps writes of independent films:

> In independent films like *50/50*, the main character's personal and emotional journey is more prominent and important than the plot's twists and turns. The focus of independent films is usually on the main character's emotional issues and dysfunctional relationships. In either case, there must be balance between plot events that entertain and plot events that pressure the main character's story. (49)

The fact that Epps acknowledges the independent side of cinema, and other types of narratives and languages beyond Hollywood conventions, is relieving and somewhat of a fresh breath amongst other books on the same subject, such as *Screenwriting for Dummies*. However, disappointingly the title fails to include storytelling produced by online platforms of Video-on-Demand, such as Netflix, Hulu or Amazon. Since the book was published in 2016, it would have been interesting to mention subscription-based production companies on the rise, especially because they are becoming increasingly relevant in the audiovisual sector without needing the whole Hollywood production system. In this regard, it would be refreshing to see some screenwriting tips for these specific outlets, not least because most of the original titles produced for and by such platforms, including the TV series *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–) and *The Get Down* (2016–), for Netflix; or *Mozart in the Jungle* (2014–) and *Transparent* (2014–), for Amazon, are titles that have feminist and racially inclusive attitudes. *Orange Is the New Black*, for instance, follows the story of women from different backgrounds and their personal journeys, highlighting their human aspect before they became convicted criminals, whereas *Transparent* features a trans woman, who is struggling with her job and family for acceptance. *Mozart in the Jungle* and *The Get Down* are also putting racial minorities into the spotlight and portraying them as active agents of their own wills who can acquire power. These four titles do not fit the conventional Hollywood story. In a context where people turn their backs against the Academy Awards for not being racially inclusive enough, to talk about how to write for these mediums would be groundbreaking.

Overall, the book is a great starting point that would teach aspiring screenwriters or students of creative writing how to go about starting, developing and rewriting their screenplays. The pass system Epps introduces is very analytical and can help the readers make sense of devices such as character, plot, dialogue and structure. The interviews with screenwriting professionals and real-life examples of notes, both from the set and the classroom, give this book a very hands-on approach and make it a go-to book for anyone who would like to successfully write, rewrite and finally accomplish their own screenplay.

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Suggested Citation

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