

Screenwriting



Film & TV adaptation

How to take
a book from the
page to the screen

by Michael Barmish



Introduction

In today's film industry, more and more movies are being produced based on adaptations, especially books. This offers many advantages to producers in that it's easy to visualize the story at an early stage of development. And from a marketing perspective, books have an immediate built-in recognition from readers and the publishing industry.

The ability to adapt a book offers a key advantage to screenwriters, as it demonstrates another level of skill in writing scripts. However, there are important differences between developing a script from a book and developing one from an original idea.

In this guide, we will explore the techniques behind writing the adaptation and the angles to consider when turning a book into a screenplay.

The Oscar

When “7th Heaven” was awarded best screenplay at the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929, it set a precedent of excellence in the adaptation of source material, in this case a play. At the time, there was no separation between original screenplays and adaptations. But it was clear that with so many strong adaptations year after year, that the category for best screenplay needed to be divided into best original and best adaptation as they were different works, requiring different writing processes. It’s not to say one is easier than the other. But rather, both needed to be recognised.

Preparing for the adaptation

How do you know if adapting a novel is right for you? Start with genre. What scripts do you like to write? Drama? Spy thrillers? Read some books and see how they resonate with you.

Likewise, watching films adapted from novels is also a great way to start.

Find a book that has already been adapted into a movie, preferably one you haven't seen yet. Read the book first. Then, find the screenplay before you watch the movie. Read the screenplay and see how the book was changed. Then watch the movie. Getting into the habit of reading screenplay adaptations after you've read the books is a great way to prepare for the task at hand. And to see if this is the direction you want to go.