

Screenwriting



The Best 10 Opening Scenes in Action Movies

An Analysis of How the Opening Scene Drives the Success of a Story

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Introduction

You have an idea to write an exciting action script. In order to make your screenplay stand out to the reader, you need a strong opening scene to grab their attention and entice them to read the rest of your script. The scene must not only be exciting, but must kick off the story and introduce key elements that drive the narrative and action. In this guide, we'll take a look at the ten best opening scenes in cinematic action films and discuss the key elements that make them so successful.

Keys to an opening scene

Before diving into the specific film opening scenes, it's important to note key elements of any opening scene, no matter what the genre.. Keep in mind these are guidelines, as there are always exceptions. But following some, if not all, of these elements will help you create an engaging opening to your screenplay and keep the reader engaged.

- 1. Introduce the hook** - what is the element that is going to hook an audience to buy into the story. The hook introduces the question the audience has about the main character of your script and how they will succeed.
- 2. Set the tone** - what is the tone of your story? Is it moody and dark? Or is it light and funny? Whatever it is, this must be evident from the first scene.

- 3. Create the world** - while the main character is not always introduced in the opening scene, their world is. Likewise, the audience should now be having questions about the main character's world.
- 4. Show the style** - similar to tone, what is the style you envision for the story? For example, is it film noir or is it a color-rich musical?
- 5. Conflict** - The key conflict of the story should be evident from the start.

The top ten: action

Keep in mind that the top ten of anything is subjective, unless dealing with statistics such as box office results. This is also not to say this is the top ten movies of the genre. We are focusing only on the opening scene/sequence.

The importance of this list is to analyse what makes these scenes so great. You may have favorites that are not in the list, but use this as a guide for taking what makes them so successful and incorporating those elements into your screenplay.

In many action films, you have what is known as the “cold opening.” This is usually an action set piece that teases the story to come. The James Bond series has become widely famous for its cold open scenes, with the audience knowingly anticipating the action as the movie begins.

10. RESERVOIR DOGS

What makes Reservoir Dogs so fascinating as an action movie is that it is very heavy with dialogue. So much so, that much of the tension is a result of the interaction between the characters. This is already evident by the opening scene, a wonderfully directed conversation between the key characters in the

story. We are introduced to them after having finished a meal and having a conversation.

What Tarantino does so well with dialogue, as evident in this scene, is he can portray the underbelly of society as regular people having regular conversation. They discuss things like Madonna's music and the culture of tipping in society. But not once do they discuss what it is they do or are going to do. As the camera moves around the table, the conversation gives us insight into their personalities without being obvious.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine Reservoir Dogs:

- 1. Hook:** While we don't yet know what will transpire in the story, by introducing the audience to these characters in this way, Tarantino lets the audience know that this is going to be a story that lives or dies on these characters' personality and interaction with each other.

2. **Tone:** Clearly, the tone is immediately set through the interaction and dynamic of these men. There will be irony with an underlying sense of impending danger.
3. **World:** Immediately, Tarantino brings the audience into the world of these key characters. We get insight into how they think, their world view and how they interact with each other.
4. **Style:** Notice how the characters are dressed. Notice where it is set--in a neighborhood pancake house, not a place you would expect this conversation to take place. Their dress and setting evoke a sense of nostalgia. Also notice the lack of color. The colors that are there are muted. Yet the characters have names that are colors. So irony is a big part of the style of the film.
5. **Conflict:** It's subtle but there is conflict in their conversation and each of their world views. Listen to the dialogue about their feelings about Madonna or the concept of

tipping. While the conflict is not strong in the story sense. It sets up their differences brilliantly.

9. ENTER THE DRAGON

Unlike *Reservoir Dogs*, the opening scene of this classic martial arts film is all action. While there are better action scenes later in the movie, this opening scene shows the artistry of martial arts star Bruce Lee and the pageantry surrounding the tradition of classic martial arts combat. The film opens with the serenity, beauty and color of the Shaolin temple, then pans over to the contrasting the action about to begin. Even the choreography of the sparring match is beautiful in its own way.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine *Enter The Dragon*:

- 1. Hook:** What sells this movie is the martial arts element. Nothing about the plot is introduced here, with the exception of the

two men dressed differently, but Bruce Lee is introduced, lean and muscular in comparison to his opponent, in a battle that shows his prowess.

- 2. Tone:** Serious and sinister. Lee is all business as he goes through the routine. No one smiles. And the two men who look on cast a sinister tone on the scene.
- 3. World:** By starting with a traditional Shaolin temple and sparring match, the audience is immediately placed in the world of martial arts, the key factor that drives the story forward.
- 4. Style:** The introduction of martial arts shows the audience that precision and choreography will be a main aspect of its style. Its use of color, bright colors for the good guys and muted and darker shades for the villains will continue to play out throughout the movie.
- 5. Conflict:** The conflict of the martial arts battle is obvious. But also, by introducing

the two characters who stand out from the rest indicate the conflict that will be introduced after this scene.

8. JAWS

The film that is considered the granddaddy of the modern day blockbuster, Jaws created an opening scene that is as terrifying today as it was when an audience, having never seen anything like it before, was shocked and sickened. It wasn't just the visuals that created this terror, but also a soundtrack that became iconic.

As the scene opens under water, as if it were the shark's perspective, then goes ashore to follow a group of teenagers, and ending with the attack on Chrissie, we get a varied sense of impending doom. Add in the familiar John Williams score and the tension is raised to new heights.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine Jaws:

1. **Hook:** The hook is immediate and brutal as Chrissie is attacked and taken down by the great white shark in the opening sequence.
2. **Tone:** The intense anxiety of tone is quickly established right from the start with the undersea motions of a shark. This culminates in the attack on Chrissie in what is normally an idyllic setting.
3. **World:** The world of the monster of the water and the serene summer vacation town are captured in the opening sequence.
4. **Style:** Jaws is one of the greatest thrillers ever made. That's clear from the start.
5. **Conflict:** The conflict of man vs beast and the setting of a small town being terrorized is obvious.

7. MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ROGUE NATION

In a series that seems to improve with each subsequent edition, Mission Impossible: Rogue

Nation's opening scene is a standout. Opening with a beautiful shot of a field in Belarus the sequence throws the audience right into the action, complete with a ticking clock combined with its familiar humor and, of course, Tom Cruise's daredevil performance. The fact that each member of the team works together from different locations gives us the sense of scale of the story that has just begun. We don't even know the plot or the stakes, yet we've completely bought into it by the end of the scene.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation:

- 1. Hook:** Most of the audience is already familiar with the characters and format by this, the fifth movie in the series. By creating this action scene with beloved characters, and knowing there's more to come, the audience is already hooked in a matter of minutes.

- 2. Tone:** Likewise, the MI series has a similar tone of excitement, intensity with a dash of humor.
- 3. World:** By showing each character in a different location yet working together, the sequence tells us that this is a world of espionage that covers the globe.
- 4. Style:** Fast paced, high adventure with a bit of humor.
- 5. Conflict:** The conflict between the team members is evident as is the conflict that has been set up with Ethan's successful stunt aboard the plane.

6. KINGSMAN: THE SECRET SERVICE

While maybe not as popular as most films on this list (although not bad at \$414 million worldwide, enough to spawn a sequel), Kingsman: The Secret Service caught audiences by surprise with its engaging, fast-paced action spy story that opened with a memorable scene

that earned the film its good reviews with a wink and a nod to classic spy movies.

The scene balances action and humor, starting the scene during a battle in a nondescript “Middle East”. Credit titles playfully fly out of chunks of a building being bombed by helicopters and ends with death and collateral damage, all while maintaining an air of a movie that is more of a spoof than a serious spy movie.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let’s examine Kingsman: The Secret Service:

1. **Hook:** By starting with a battle and a failed interrogation by men wearing masks, followed by the reveal of the “Kingsmen”, the audience immediately knows they’re watching a spy movie comprised of a secret society.
2. **Tone:** A balance of tongue-in-cheek humor and escalating action is well demonstrated in this scene.

- 3. World:** The scene gives a glimpse into the Kingsman, a secret society that one must earn their way in.
- 4. Style:** Much like the spy movies this spoofs, Kingsman: The Secret Service, shows sophistication and etiquette. There is a suaveness to the key players in the scene
- 5. Conflict:** There's the battle, the interrogation and its failure that leads into the rest of the story.

5. MAD MAX

Immediately, as the credits roll, the music sets the tone for the film. It's foreboding and adventurous, with its harsh drumbeats and heavy brass. A dystopian society is introduced with a simple, "A few years from now..."

Immediately, we see a world that is lawless as even the law isn't so on the level. The vastness of the Australian landscape is as much a part of the film as the characters themselves.

When analyzing opening scenes, this is a long sequence of a chase of crazed outlaws that ultimately introduces Max, stoic and cool. By the end of the sequence, we're not quite sure what we're watching. But we're totally in.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine Mad Max:

1. **Hook:** A world we've never seen and a character that seems to belie the chaos, as Max watches the end result of the chase, we want to find out what it's all about.
2. **Tone:** A bit crazy, a bit violent, the tone is definitely a wild ride.
3. **World:** Dystopian Australia that is just a few years from now. Lawlessness and a poorly armed Law Enforcement that must prevent it.
4. **Style:** Big, loud machines, wide open spaces, and a sense of chaos.
5. **Conflict:** With the introduction of Max, we know that this is not his first chase. And it won't be the last.

4. THE SPY WHO LOVED ME

Maybe not the best Bond movie of them all, but certainly an opening scene to remember. Beginning with the series' trademark humor, Bond leaves the bed of his latest conquest and as she says she needs him, he quips, "So does England." Then, it's off to a wonderful ski sequence which, especially in its day, contained fantastic stunts, ending with the ski jump off the cliff. Breathtaking and memorable.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine The Spy Who Loved Me:

1. **Hook:** As always, James Bond is about women, danger and adventure. Not always in that order. This opening has it all.
2. **Tone:** Charming, humorous and sophisticated. This all comes through in the entire sequence.
3. **World:** One of the advantages to the Bond series is the audience knows the world

before the first frame is shown. This opening scene confirms that world.

4. **Style:** Like all Bond movies, there's a style of sophistication and cool. Just like his martinis.
5. **Conflict:** From the moment it's clear that the woman in the cabin is not just an innocent woman to the chase on the mountain, the entire sequence is conflict.

3. APOCALYPSE NOW

The opening scene of *Apocalypse Now* is both ironic and beautiful. It opens with a stunning lush tropical forest that belies the violence going on in the country. The blades of passing unseen helicopters sound musical, an intro to The Doors' "This is the End". This is followed by the devastation of bombs being dropped until the once pristine forest is completely ablaze.

This mirrors Martin Sheen's Captain Willard, who lays on a bed smoking a cigarette in a

slow dissolve. He has a calm demeanor as he smokes a cigarette. But that is also just a facade to the chaos and battle which hides within. His life is upside down, much in the manner in which we first see him.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine *Apocalypse Now*:

1. **Hook:** By the time we see the devastation of the forest and the state of Willard's room and mind, it's obvious that this is more than a physical war movie.
2. **Tone:** There's a psychedelic and hallucinogenic tone that permeates throughout the film.
3. **World:** The devastation of the Vietnam War is introduced immediately, as is the world of those who are in the war.
4. **Style:** Brutal irony with a lyrical quality, this is evident in both the forest and Willard's room.
5. **Conflict:** War, of course, is the greatest conflict. But also, the sounds of the

chopper blades mirroring the ceiling fan blades, the gun and alcohol in the room all signal great conflict.

2. THE DARK KNIGHT

A bank heist like we've never seen before can only take place in a familiar world and introduces Heath Ledger's Oscar-winning performance as The Joker. But this is not just a bank heist. It's a bank owned by the mob. Of course it is. It's Gotham. In this case, there's no sign of the hero of the story, Batman, but it's an entity already familiar with audiences. This scene ramps up the violence--it's terrifying but has a sense of dark humor. As the Joker pulls away from the scene in, ironically, a school bus, it's game on.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine The Dark Knight:

1. **Hook:** In a world with which we're already familiar and a villain who never fails to

surprise, this installment of the Batman series has already reached a high point.

2. **Tone:** Brutal, unsentimental with a bit of dark humor. In a sense, the Joker.
3. **World:** It's Gotham. We already know this world and this scene doesn't disappoint our preconception.
4. **Style:** There's an industrial bleakness that is evident in the style. It's dark with some bold colors, primarily in conjunction with the Joker.
5. **Conflict:** Even though we don't see Batman in the scene, we know this sets up the conflict that will play out between him and the Joker.

1. RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK

Perhaps one of the most iconic opening scenes in movie history, it's complete with adventure, danger, twists and surprises. As Indiana Jones and his duplicitous cohort, Satipo, attempt

to steal the golden idol, it sets off a series of obstacles that Indy has to escape. It's a fun, adventurous thrill ride that sets up the rest of the movie. As well as setting up one of film's greatest heroes.

Taking a look at our criteria for a great opening scene, let's examine Raiders of the Lost Ark:

1. **Hook:** A larger-than-life adventurer who faces obstacle after obstacle in search of treasure. A classic opening to classic storytelling.
2. **Tone:** Adventurous, humorous, fun and daring.
3. **World:** While we don't yet know Indy's profession, it's clear this is not his first adventure--in ancient worlds with a lot of booby-traps.
4. **Style:** In an homage to the adventure movies of the past, there's a nostalgic style and a grandness to it.
5. **Conflict:** This scene sets up that Indy can't trust those close to him and there's a world out there that doesn't want him to succeed.

Conclusion

When crafting your opening scene or sequence, it's important to grab and engage the reader. Read this guide, then watch the opening scenes and follow our analysis to get a complete understanding as to why they are so successful.

By ensuring you have a great hook that is evident, establishing a clear tone and style and defining the world of our story, you'll put your script in a great position to get noticed. And of course, don't forget the conflict. Conflict, conflict, conflict.



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