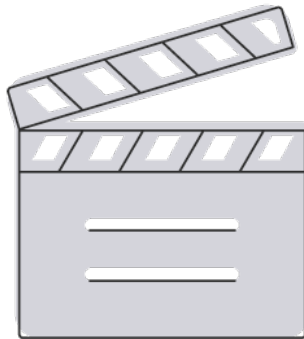


TAKE YOUR
STORY FROM
FICTION
TO FILM



by e.m. welsh

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1

ASSESS

YOUR

NOVEL



CHAPTER OUTLINE OF YOUR NOVEL

Use the space below to briefly outline your novel, listing the chapter and a brief summation of what happens in each chapter.

CHAPTER #

SUMMARY



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CHAPTER #

SUMMARY



EVALUATE WHY YOU WANT TO ADAPT

Now that you've outlined your novel and refreshed yourself on the overall plot, it's time to answer some questions about why you want to adapt your story into a film.

WHY DO YOU LIKE YOUR NOVEL?

WHY DO YOU WANT TO **ADAPT** IT INTO A MOVIE?



EVALUATE WHY YOU WANT TO ADAPT

WHAT ARE YOUR **FEARS** ABOUT YOUR STORY BEING ADAPTED?

WHAT WOULD A **“GOOD ADAPTATION”** LOOK LIKE TO YOU?

2

FIND YOUR
**FIVE KEY
SCENES**



WHAT ARE KEY SCENES?

The key scenes of any story are the ones that tell the story in its simplest form. They embody the core of your story, ignoring elements like exposition and backstory and other features that make those scenes possible, telling only the most essential aspects of the narrative.

Many times these scenes contain a pivotal or memorable moment that defines the story, though that is usually because many key scenes are high-emotion scenes, and as a result the scene being memorable is not necessary for your scene to be a key scene.

The most notable feature to keep in mind is that a key scene is the core of your story, and that essentially, without one of these scenes, your story would fall apart.



FINDING YOUR FIVE KEY SCENES

One of the easiest ways to determine your five key scenes is to divide your book up into a structure or outline, even if you feel it is more of a structureless, literary piece.

You can do this by breaking up the story into three acts, then taking one scene from each act so that you have one scene from act one, one scene from act two, and one scene from act three.

Then, take two more scenes from any of the remaining acts, though ideally don't take more than one extra scene from acts one or three or more than two scenes from act two.

However, you can also determine your five scenes using the questions on the following pages.



DETERMINE YOUR KEY SCENES

Use the space below to jot down all the different main scenes in your story, dividing the story up into three acts, if possible. Then, once you're done, circle or highlight your five key scenes and write them on the next page.

ACT	IMPORTANT SCENES
ACT ONE	
ACT TWO	
ACT THREE	



MY NOVEL'S FIVE KEY SCENES

Once you have decided what your five key scenes are, use the following space to write these down.

SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

SCENE THREE

SCENE FOUR

SCENE FIVE



WRITING A GOOD SCENE

Remember that what makes a good novel scene does not always make a good film scene. Often your key scenes can be almost exactly the same, but they will need to be a bit shorter at the least.

HOW ACCURATELY WILL YOU ADAPT THESE SCENES?

HOW WILL YOU CUT THESE SCENES DOWN TO BE SHORTER?

3

DECIDE

WHAT

TO CUT



WHAT TO CUT IN AN ADAPTATION

After you've found your five key scenes, you'll likely have a lot left to consider. Instead of trying to adapt everything you have left though, it is easier to focus on what you should cut out, especially if you have an enormous novel.

Before you freak out about cutting things out of your story, though, remember that your adaptation and your original novel are two separate works, so that your novel version will always exist. You're just trying to find the best way to adapt that work into a completely new story.

Additionally, cutting some elements of your story often just means combining them with other elements, so that you never really lose characters or subplots, you just find new ways to express them.



CHARACTERS


Cutting out your characters may feel difficult at first, but remember, your film audience has a lot less time to learn and remember people than a book audience would, so if your story is brimming with too many people you'll need to cut and combine them so that your story works better in the medium.

While it is always up to you who to cut and who to keep, here are some people to start with:

FAMILY

It may seem at first like family is necessary – and if you are telling a story about a family, then it is. However, if you're not telling a story about a family, it's better to focus on one or two family member's and your character's relationship with them instead of trying to flesh everyone out in your adaptation, as there is just not enough time to give everyone that relationship.

Too many family members can make them feel like stock characters instead of fleshed out people, making the story feel crowded and oversaturated. So, while it may hurt to cut that



father-daughter scene out or combine it with the brother scene, cutting the dad's lines out altogether, if it balances the number of characters in your story, it may be the right choice.


FRIENDS

Just like with family, too many friends – unless it's a movie about a large group of friends – can make everyone become very forgettable in a film, since, as mentioned, a film audience cannot keep track of as many characters as readers can.

Instead, focus on two key friends and try to keep main friend groups to about 5-6 people. Again, it's not to say too many friends is bad in a story, but that because of the film medium, the audience can only keep up with so many people before it gets confusing and they lose sight of what's more important – your story.

SIDE CHARACTERS

Side characters in this instance refer to anyone else besides family and friends. Anyone with minimal lines can be combined with others, and characters who only appear once and are easily forgotten should also be omitted. Any side characters that are left should feel distinct and memorable.



If you find you still love some of the side characters who don't have room in your film though, give them a silent role and have them exist in the background (literally) as a visual asset and storytelling.

SUBPLOTS

Unless you're adapting your story in a television series – a whole different type of writing – then you likely are going to want to trim down your number of subplots.

Subplots work wonderfully in films, so don't get rid of all of them. Instead, find your most powerful subplots, the ones that emphasize theme, character development, or the main conflicts. Look at the subplots that explore relationships and the internal as well, as these are features you cannot express the same way in film as you can in literature.

Once you've found a few subplots – ideally between 2-3 – cut out the rest as any more will not fit into a full-length film.



STRENGTHS FROM PROSE

Finally, the most tricky thing to cut out of them all – you’ll want to cut out and ignore the pieces of your story that make it unique to novel writing.

This means literary devices, use of language, and narrative styles that are strict to prose. The reason you must cut these things out is because they are strengths of prose and cannot exist in film. Instead, the strengths of film are visuals, sounds, and the camera, so you’ll want to fill up your adaptation with a focus on these strengths instead so that the work really stands out as a separate entity.

This notion might be a bit hard to wrap your head around, which is why I created a course specifically for literary fiction writers who want to write artistic screenplays called [Swank Up Your Script](#).

Most of the work you will do to cut your strengths from prose will happen in the actual adaptation part of this process – when you’re writing your script – however, noting ahead of time that you’ll need to let go of those literary devices will make the process much much easier.



CUTTING CHARACTERS

Now that you understand why some characters must be cut from your story, use the following questions to help you sort out who to cut

IF YOUR STORY INCLUDES A FAMILY, LIST ALL THE MEMBERS BELOW:

IF THIS IS NOT A FAMILY STORY, CAN YOU COMBINE ANY CHARACTERS TOGETHER? WHO?

Remember that family story here refers to whether the narrative is about the family, not whether the content is appropriate for a family.



CUTTING CHARACTERS

Now that you understand why some characters must be cut from your story, use the following questions to help you sort out who to cut

LIST ALL THE FRIENDS IN YOUR STORY:

**CAN ANY FRIENDS BE COMBINED TOGETHER?
BRAINSTORM IDEAS BELOW:**



CUTTING CHARACTERS

Now that you understand why some characters must be cut from your story, use the following questions to help you sort out who to cut

LIST ANY OTHER SIDE CHARACTERS IN YOUR NOVEL:

CAN ANY OF THESE CHARACTERS BE CUT OR COMBINED WITH OTHER ONES? LIST THEM BELOW:



CUTTING CHARACTERS

Use the space below to make a list of all the characters you are cutting or combining for your notes.

CHARACTERS I AM **CUTTING** FOR THE ADAPTATION:

CHARACTERS I AM **COMBINING** FOR THE ADAPTATION AND WHAT THEY ARE COMBINED WITH:



CUTTING SUBPLOTS

Now that you've cut out the appropriate characters, it's time to move on to subplots you can cut.

LIST ALL SUBPLOTS IN THE SPACE BELOW:

For any subplots relating to characters who have been cut from the narrative, be sure to cross them off this list.



CUTTING SUBPLOTS

Now that you've cut out the appropriate characters, it's time to move on to subplots you can cut.

WHICH SUBPLOTS DEAL WITH MY **THEMES** THE MOST?

WHICH SUBPLOTS DEAL WITH **CHARACTER EXPLORATION**?

Both of these types of subplots work best in films. Use these subplots for your guidance in picking the best 2-3 subplots for your film.

Then circle the ones of your choice either from this page or the previous one.



CUTTING PROSE

Perhaps the most difficult thing to intuitively cut, omitting strengths in prose will work best by evaluating what strengths your story relies on.

WHY DOES YOUR STORY WORK AS A NOVEL?

Whatever this reason is, you'll want to figure out how to change your story into a movie. Use the next question for extra help.

WHAT LITERARY STYLE OR LANGUAGE DO I USE MOST?

Think about narration, literary devices, metaphors, similes, chapters, self-paced narrative, etc. Anything that can **ONLY** work in prose.

Whatever features your novel uses, you'll want to cut it out. This might feel obvious – these features don't exist in prose – but the gesture exists to remind you not to try and force your movie to act like a novel.

4

TRANSLATE

YOUR

VOICE




HOW TO TRANSLATE YOUR VOICE

A lot of fiction writers fear losing their voice as a writer when they switch to a new medium. But as [my case study of J.K. Rowling demonstrated](#), you never can lose your voice when you write in new mediums. Instead you just use it in a new way!

DIALOGUE

Dialogue is one of the few features from your novel that you can carry over verbatim, which is why translating dialogue into a screenplay is so easy.

Though you will need to cut down some monologues or conversations, the lines of dialogue themselves can stay more or less exactly the same.



All you'll really need to do in the writing process is break up the dialogue with action somewhat if your story isn't doing that already.


DESCRIPTION

The voice of your description, backstory, exposition, and so forth will become the style guide for the rest of your film.

Highly descriptive passages and sentences with a lot of style suggest a more detailed and full background, whereas short passages and sentences lacking in adverbs and adjectives might suggest a more clean and minimalistic visual experience, though other factors like tone and themes can also influence your film's visual storytelling.

In general though, use the description to create a starting backdrop for your story, even if later on you may change things, this is your place to find what types of screenwriting tools you will use.

As a result, this is where you'll want to devote some time learning the strengths of screenwriting and how to use those



strengths, which I teach in [Swank Up Your Script](#) in great detail, as this will translate your descriptive voice the most accurately.

NARRATOR

For many novelists – especially those with a first person narrator – it is tempting to think your story needs a voice-over. However, voice-overs are often overused to explain the plot or the internal world of the characters, when in reality those things can be deduced via visuals instead.

To avoid using voice over as a crutch, I suggest [using the camera as your narrator](#) and imagining your narrator in your novel as the person holding the camera and telling the story that way. By doing this, you'll be able to translate their storytelling style in a new way, while still staying true to the film medium.

Otherwise, should you believe you need a voice-over narration, you must have a really strong reason for it that goes beyond someone providing backstory and internal monologues.



SENTENCES & PARAGRAPHS

Sentences and paragraphs are like the “shots” of your film that make up the scenes.


While how you translate these sentences and paragraphs is up to you, I like to mirror the style as accurately as I can, so that if I am writing long sentences and paragraphs, the shots go on for a longer period of time, whereas if I am writing short, quick sentences, the film is filled up with short shots.

Again, how you do this is up to you, and since you are not the one who will determine the actual shots, you can only take this exercise so far in the screenwriting process.

CHAPTERS

Chapters can easily translate into scenes. Most films have about 40-60 scenes, so that if you have that many chapters you can easily use those to guide your story.

However, if you have tons of chapters, this may mean cutting and combining them, or if you have incredibly lengthy chapters, it may mean dividing them up into separate scenes, like Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone as a film is divided.



Additionally, use the flow of your chapters to guide the flow of your narrative, so that if your novel has really short, introspective chapters, you'll want to fill your film with more quick visuals and indications of the internal. But, if you have longer chapters, you'll want to mirror that with hearty scenes and lengthy periods of story without breaks.

Again, this style is all up to you, but take notes on how you want to imitate your novel's style and translate it into a film.

TRANSLATION CHECKLIST

For each chapter you edit, use this checklist to better translate your voice

DIALOGUE

- Translate all dialogue verbatim
- Cut down monologues
- Cut down long conversations or break them up

DESCRIPTION

- Mark any descriptions of settings
- Translate the setting into a few sentences
- Mark the overall style of descriptions
- Determine how the style of your voice will match your film's aesthetics

NARRATOR

- Omit the narrator from your story
- Turn the narrator into the person holding the camera

- Jot down how they would shoot each chapter

SENTENCES & PARAGRAPHS

- Choose a handful of sentences and paragraphs
- Write down how to turn these into images and shots

CHAPTERS

- Evaluate whether the chapter has one full scene in it or more
- Break it up into other scenes
- Cut out unnecessary "scenes"
- Combine it with other chapters if it is not a full scene

5

PLAN

YOUR

FILM



FILM ADAPTATION OUTLINE

Use the space below to brainstorm your film outline. Keep in mind the five key scenes you picked out in chapter two. Use them as a starting point.

SCENE	SUMMARY



FILM ADAPTATION OUTLINE

Use the space below to brainstorm your film outline. Keep in mind the five key scenes you picked out in chapter two. Use them as a starting point.

SCENE	SUMMARY



GOALS FOR THIS FILM

Before you start getting to work, take some time to define your goals for this film you are adapting - not the novel. Be sure to treat it as a separate project altogether when you do this.

WHAT DO I WANT THIS FILM TO DO DIFFERENTLY THAN MY NOVEL?

WHAT DO I HOPE THIS FILM WILL DO FOR THE AUDIENCE?



GOALS FOR THIS FILM

Before you start getting to work, take some time to define your goals for this film you are adapting - not the novel. Be sure to treat it as a separate project altogether when you do this.

HOW WILL THIS STORY FEEL LIKE A **SEPARATE STORY** FROM MY NOVEL? WHAT WILL I CHANGE?

HOW DO I WANT **FANS OF MY NOVEL** TO PERCEIVE THIS STORY'S ADAPTATION?



WORDS OF WISDOM

In order to ensure you do your story justice, here is some advice to keep in mind while adapting.

TIP #1: TREAT THE SCREENPLAY AS A SEPARATE STORY ALTOGETHER

This tip actually speaks to both the audience and the author. When a book is adapted into film and done so with respect for the work, trying to translate the work as best as possible, these two versions of the story become two separate pieces altogether, not something to sit and compare.

Thinking about the process this way will ensure you give your screenplay version of your story everything you can, treating it as a new project altogether that you must alter and mould into the best version possible for film, not for your novel.

Should you get wrapped up in comparisons, you'll constantly think that the screenplay is holding you back instead of holding you back.



TIP #2: LEARN THE SCREENWRITING MEDIUM STRENGTHS

If you really want to tell your story again as a film and tell it in a unique and satisfying way that does justice to the original story, you'll need to learn what makes screenwriting so special and different from novel writing.

Luckily, this actually takes less time than you would think, especially with some of my courses like [Swank Up Your Script](#) and [Swiss Army Storytelling](#) that help writers perceive and implement the strengths of each individual medium.



TIP #3: BE PREPARED TO KILL YOUR DARLINGS TO TELL A BETTER STORY

Though this third tip ties in directly to the first, it's important to make a separate note that to write your story as a solid film, you'll have to be prepared to kill your darlings from your book so you can make more room for more medium-specific moments, such as a scene that focuses on sound design or shadows and light.

Again, take it back to tip #1 - this doesn't mean those moments are forever gone from your story. They just exist in a different form, a form that maybe cannot translate well into film. And instead of forcing those moments to work in film when they never could - arguably the reason many novelists hate their adaptations - it's better to let them remain in your novel and make room for new scenes and parts of your story in your new film version.

**CHEERS
TO YOUR
NEW FILM!**