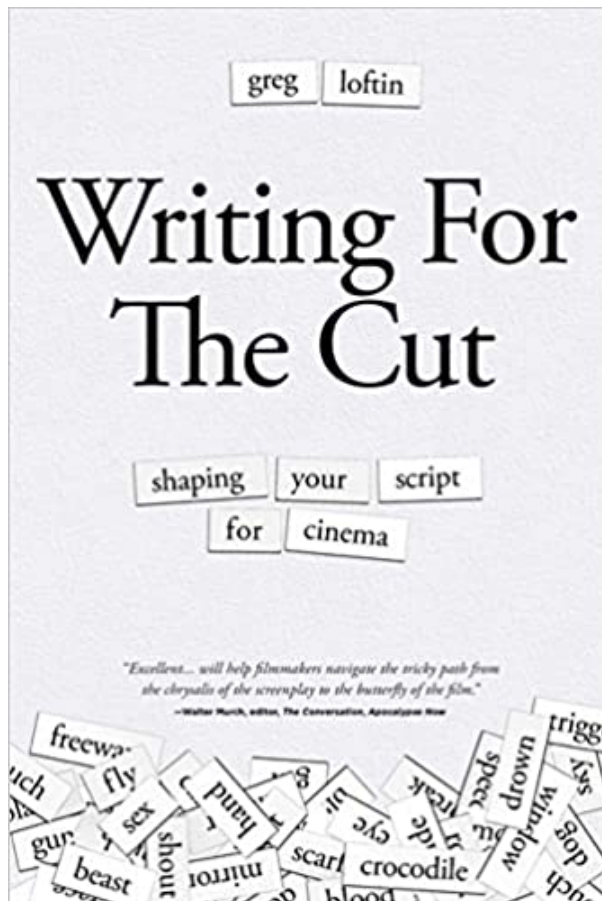


Project details

Project title	Writing for the Cut
Researcher	Greg Loftin
Start Date	2017
End Date	2019



“Writing-for-the-cut” is a fresh approach to screenwriting; it looks at one craft through the lens of another. It starts from the premise that film is made in the edit suite; that editing continues the writing project begun by the screenwriter. It suggests that by anticipating and embedding the dynamics of the cut in our writing, we may deliver scripts that are closer to the big screen. The benefits of such an approach would be better stories, less narrative waste, and significant savings in both budget and time.

When conducting my initial PhD research, the concept of writing-for-the-cut was only a hunch. I could find very few ‘authorities’ supporting this idea, though I discovered later two significant film practitioners had certainly made declarations for editing as the primary pulse of screenwriting: Quentin Tarantino and David Mamet.

There is a perception of editing as a process of joinery and mending: editors remove the dross, choose the best takes, and cut to measure according to the ‘pattern’ of the script. This indeed would fairly describe the process of many fast-turnaround drama products such as TV soap operas.

But feature film editing operates in quite a different register; films are long-form and bespoke. Many have global markets in their sights; both the budget and quality thresholds are set high. Directors are chosen for their 'vision'. Typically, editors may take between three months to over a year to complete their work. One might ask, what can they be doing all that time? The answer is: they are 're-writing' the story.

Editing certainly is about joinery and mending, but it is also, fundamentally, a storytelling craft with its own unique 'poetic' properties and temporal dynamics. The edit suite is an extreme environment; here story is a kinetic construction of continuity, discontinuity, juxtaposition, motion, emotion, and time. It is a process characterised by perfection through iteration; cut, play, re-cut, re-play.

If writing-for-the-cut has any validity, how can writers come to understand the dynamics of a craft that may seem so far removed from their own? Editing takes place behind closed doors; it is a secret craft. The finished film is such a fine weave of light, sound and meaning. It seems to present a sheer surface to the viewer.

Finished films have an aura of 'it can only be told this way'. However, every film contains the ghosts of possibly hundreds of story variations that were tried and tested, and eventually discarded. This is all off-limits to the viewer; the magic of editing is a closely guarded secret.

It was, therefore, the express intention of my PhD thesis to break the surface of the finished film and in a sense, make the cut visible. Through interviews with practicing film editors, analysis of Soviet theories of montage, and the examination of case studies, many of the storytelling properties of editing were clearly identified as they relate to screenwriting.

My essential question is 'what can screenwriters learn from film editors about storytelling?' Writing-for-the-cut is at odds with the approach taken in many self-help manuals which tend to discourage technical/aesthetic consideration of the contiguous crafts such as cinematography, sound design, and editing. With a few notable exceptions, if editing is ever discussed, it is usually represented as a finishing craft, far removed from the screenwriter's purview. The orthodoxy of 'manual culture' (as exemplified in the writings of Syd Field, John Truby, Robert McKee, and Blake Snyder) has come to foster a screenwriting strategy which we might call 'writing for cinema'; that is to say a spectator-in-the-stalls view of the film as an end product, one that unfolds as a seamless flow of projected images and sounds. Writing-for-the-cut proposes a more technically nuanced strategy that sees film as a constructed product; the edit suite is the destination of our screenplays.

For my PhD I adopted an interpretive methodology. This is one that values individual practice and experience over 'scientific' or generalising theories. I adopted predominantly an immersive approach to data collection. I interviewed editing practitioners in the work place, undertook field observations of film processes, applied theory to practice in the writing of a screenplay, and experimented with hybrid software.

Outputs and outcomes

Loftin, G. (2019) *[Writing for the Cut: Shaping your Screenplay for Cinema](#)*, Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions (ISBN 9781615933006)

Since the publication of the book, I have designed an animated mock-up of my proposed software called Storyjig.

Impact and Recognition

Since publication of *Writing for the Cut: Shaping your Screenplay for Cinema* the BFI have invited me twice to their 'Future Film Labs' 2019 events to give a masterclass and to contribute to their panel discussions.

I presented a paper entitled *Prototyping the Screen Story* in July 2020 at the UFVA virtual conference which featured the software chapters of my book.

Writing for the Cut has attracted a wide range of very complimentary reviews from both academics and from seminal practitioners. Some of these reviews include:

Betsy A McLane, Director Emerita of the International Documentary Association and author of *A New History of Documentary Film*. She wrote a critical review for Cine Montage which can be found [here](#):

Baptiste Charles, author at Raindance Film Festival – his review can be read [on this link](#):