



MasterClass

# Aaron Sorkin

—  
Teaches Screenwriting





## ABOUT

# AARON SORKIN

Aaron Sorkin was born in 1961 and raised in New York City. As a youth, he discovered an early love for the theater and dialogue. Aaron devoted his life to stagecraft and studied acting at Syracuse University where he graduated with a degree in the subject. While searching for work as an actor, Aaron's fascination with dialogue boiled over, and he began to explore dramatic writing. After many misses, he wrote the stage play, *A Few Good Men*, which became an instant hit on Broadway. He later adapted the story into a feature-length screenplay. Upon the film version's release, Aaron's Hollywood career exploded. He eventually turned to TV and created *Sports Night*, a critical hit. Aaron then created the cultural phenomenon *The West Wing*. More recently, he penned *The Social Network*, which netted him an Oscar for best-adapted screenplay, *Moneyball*, *Steve Jobs*, and the HBO series *The Newsroom*.





## 1. INTRODUCTION

### CLASS WORKBOOK

Aaron's Workbook supplements each lesson with Chapter Reviews, Take It Further opportunities, and Assignments. This printable PDF is filled with places for you to take notes as you go.

### THE HUB

Share your works in progress and ask your peers for help and support if you've hit a road-block, in The Hub.

### OFFICE HOURS

Submit your questions on the MasterClass site and keep your eyes peeled for Aaron's personal responses.

### AARON'S SCRIPTS

*The Social Network* and *A Few Good Men* are available for download from MasterClass. Use these scripts to follow along with Aaron's examples.

## HOW TO USE AARON'S MASTERCLASS

Welcome to Aaron's MasterClass! The exercises in this workbook are designed to teach you the craft of screenwriting from Aaron's unique perspective. You'll learn the ins and outs of storytelling and develop the skills to craft and pitch your next script. Use Aaron's workbook to follow along with the video lessons and share your assignments with the MasterClass online community to put his teachings and experiences into practice.

1.

## NOTES

## 2.

# INTENTION & OBSTACLE

*"It's not until you introduce the intention that you've really begun the story."*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Start With Intention & Obstacle
- Press on Intention & Obstacle
- How to Show Intention & Obstacle
- When to Introduce Intention & Obstacle
- Introducing Intention & Obstacle: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*

### CHAPTER REVIEW

The intention and obstacle of the story are like the driveshaft of the car. Who wants what, and what is stopping them from getting it? Developing the intention and obstacle in your story creates the friction and tension needed to create a strong screenplay. Have you seen a movie where you thought: "That's not that hard of a problem!" Avoid that by pressing on your intention and obstacle. Make the stakes high, urgent, and convincing to keep your story compelling and believable.

Introduce intention and obstacle early. If you're writing a movie, you have a few minutes. If it's a TV show, you need to do it immediately. If it's a play, you have a bit of time.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Aaron discusses his mentorship from screenwriter William Goldman, who wrote *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Princess Bride*, and *All the President's Men*, among others. Read *Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* by Goldman.

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Watch *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Take note of when and how Goldman introduces the main character's intention. What does Butch Cassidy and the Hole in the Wall Gang want? Next, take note of when and how Goldman introduces the main obstacle. Is the obstacle formidable?
- Now, watch your favorite film, play, and TV show. Write down each of the main characters as they are introduced, and their intentions and main obstacles. Do you notice differences in when and how the intentions and obstacles are introduced in TV, movies, and plays?

2.

## NOTES

### 3.

## STORY IDEAS

*"You don't have an idea until you can use the words 'but,' 'except,' 'and then...'"*  
—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Find the Conflict
- Feature vs. TV Ideas
- You Can Start Without Having the Ideas
- Start With Already-Broken Plot
- Idea Case Study:  
*The American President*

### CHAPTER REVIEW

You have an idea for a screenplay—great! The next step is to make sure you have a story. Aaron's test is simple: You don't have a story unless you can use the words "but," "except," or "and then," which means an obstacle has been introduced and now there's conflict.

If it's the location that attracts you, consider the idea for TV. Watching ESPN's *SportsCenter* inspired Aaron to create a story set behind-the-scenes at a cable sports show. Setting the idea in a workplace allowed for enough stories and characters that could last multiple seasons. The result was his show *Sports Night*.

If an idea is centered around a character that metaphorically "dies" at the end, consider it for a feature screenplay.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Aaron says he signed on to write the screenplay for *The Social Network* after identifying the conflict in the book proposal for *The Accidental Billionaires*, on which the movie is based. Read this roundtable in *Time* magazine where Aaron and director David Fincher discuss adapting elements of that book proposal for film.
- Read this 20-year retrospective piece on *The American President* and watch the film. How soon is the conflict presented between the characters Andrew Shepherd and Sydney Ellen Wade? How would you define the intentions and obstacles of each of the main characters in the film?

## STORY IDEAS

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Time to take Aaron's advice. He suggests new screenwriters should dramatize a favorite short story whose plot has already been broken. Adapting a story with an already defined intention, obstacle, and conflict allows you to practice writing characters, scenes, and dialogue without being stuck on trying to come up with the perfect story idea.
- Find a short story, fairy tale, fable, favorite book—and write the first 10 pages of a would-be adapted screenplay. Here's a collection of short stories in the public domain that you can peruse for this assignment. Take the time to define what the intention, obstacle, and conflict are in the story, and map them out scene by scene to the ending. Upload the screenplay to the Rate & Review tool to share with your classmates.



3.

## NOTES

## 4+5.

# DEVELOPING CHARACTERS

## PARTS ONE AND TWO

*“The properties of characters and the properties of people have very little to do with each other.”*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Start With Intention, Obstacles, and Tactics
- Intention & Obstacle: Mark Zuckerberg
- Tactics: Toby in *The West Wing*
- Tactics: Leo in *The West Wing*
- Don't Write Long Biographies
- Write Characters, Not People
- Writing Characters Unlike Yourself
- Identify With Your Anti-Heroes
- The Actor Will Complete the Character

### CHAPTER REVIEW

A character is born from the intention and obstacle—they want something, and something stands in their way of getting it. How they overcome those obstacles, or what tactics they use, define who the character is.

Stick to the facts of a character that matter to the conflict—this saves you the trouble of writing long, unnecessary character bios. Focus on their intention and obstacle, rather than details that are irrelevant to the story.

When writing characters unlike yourself, try to surround yourself with people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives. This helps inform your writing and maintain realism for the character and the plots that you are writing about. When writing anti-heroes, it's important to identify with them and not judge them. By believing in their point of view, you avoid creating overly cartoonish villains or, as Aaron says, “hanging Christmas ornaments” on them.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Listen to this interview with Emmy Award-winning actor Richard Schiff, who played Toby Ziegler on *The West Wing*, where he discusses his character and his experiences working on the show.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Write a scene where one character is asking another for money. The other character won't give them the money. Determine each character's intention and obstacle. Why does Character A need money from Character B? Why doesn't Character B want to give money to Character A? Now come up with three different tactics the characters could use to overcome their obstacle. How do the different types of tactics define who that character is, how they speak, and how they behave?

## 4<sup>+</sup>5.

### NOTES

6+7.

## RESEARCH + INCORPORATING RESEARCH

*"You never know where a cool story is gonna come from... that's why you want to talk to as many people as possible."*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Two Types of Research
- Talk to People
- How to Interview
- Meaningless Research
- Researching Lines of Dialogue
- The More Important Truth

### CHAPTER REVIEW

There are two types of research when it comes to writing a screenplay. The nuts-and-bolts research is specific and leads to hard facts about a place, a subject, or a person. Then there is the research done when you are breaking the plot of a movie. Avoid meaningless research and look for nuggets that can lead to an engaging plot point. When talking to experts, use open-ended questions like: "Tell me something I don't know about..."

When it comes to interviewing, keep it under an hour with your subjects. If you have the opportunity to have several meetings with someone, like Aaron did with Lisa Brennan-Jobs while researching for *Steve Jobs*, save the difficult questions for later. Focus first on building trust and a rapport with your source.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Learn more about Andy Hertzfeld, the computer scientist who was a member of the original Apple Macintosh development team during the 1980s. Andy was instrumental in providing key lines of dialogue and scenes to Aaron for *Steve Jobs*.
- Aaron says his interviews with Lisa Brennan-Jobs when writing *Steve Jobs* led to the fundamental structure and plot points in the movie. Read this piece in which Aaron further details how these interviews helped shape the movie.
- Aaron says he was inspired by the daily presidential diaries he was provided to build the plot and storyline for *The American President*. Browse the presidential diary of Richard Nixon to get a taste of the same kind of research Aaron accessed. What do the daily agendas tell you about the former president?

6+7.

## **RESEARCH + INCORPORATING RESEARCH**

### ASSIGNMENT

- Pick a specific location/environment for a brand-new TV series or feature film. For the next five days, conduct extensive research on this location and its typical inhabitants. As part of your research, conduct an in-person interview with someone. Don't forget to ask them: "Tell me something I don't know about..." Only after you have compiled your findings, write down two story ideas incorporating details from your research. Identify a few potential conflicts that might come up in the story and how you'd resolve them.



$6+7.$ 

## NOTES

## THE AUDIENCE

*"If you put confusion into the mix, even the tiniest bit of confusion, an audience is gonna be apprehensive."*  
—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- The Audience Wants to Participate
- Don't Lose the Audience
- Avoid Confusion

### CHAPTER REVIEW

The audience does not want to be a casual observer of the movie you're writing. They want to participate. They want to be given the same clues as everyone in your film and to be putting things together in their head. If you're able to surprise them with a reversal they didn't see coming, you've given them a very satisfying experience.

With an audience that loves to participate, you have to be careful not to lose them. They must trust that you know what you are doing and that their time spent watching the movie will be rewarded. Treat them as intelligent and don't lose them by writing something that may seem unbelievable.

You can also lose an audience if you confuse them. Even the tiniest bit of confusion can ruin the experience. However, be careful of the antidote to confusion: telling them something they already know. It's a fine balance to maintain properly informing the audience and to avoid telling them what they already know. Ultimately, you should never pander to an audience or talk down to them.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Aaron refers to the artist Georges Seurat, the French post-Impressionist painter, who used pointillism in his piece *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* to involve the viewer in the experience of the art. Compare the up-close details of the painting to the overall painting you see when you step back. However, if you can make it out to Chicago to see the painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, don't miss out on experiencing the effect in person.

### ASSIGNMENT

- To help avoid confusion in your screenplay, do your own audience testing for your scripts and ideas with your classmates in the MasterClass community. Ask them: is the story/scene comprehensible? What other things do they wish to know about the stories or the characters that you haven't researched yet? If you have a reversal, were they able to see your reversal coming?

8.

## NOTES

## 9. RULES OF A STORY

“Rules are what make  
art beautiful.”  
—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Learn the Rules of Story
- The Rulebook: *Aristotle's Poetics*
- Be a Diagnostician
- The Only Rules Are Rules of Drama

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Dismiss the idea that art is not a place for rules. Art, much like music and sports, is made much more enjoyable by certain rules. Learn those rules by watching films, reading screenplays, deconstructing their parts, and putting them back together. Read Aaron's bible for storytelling: *Aristotle's Poetics*.

Become a diagnostician. Watch TV shows, plays, and movies with the screenplay in your lap. When something doesn't work, figure out why it doesn't work. Did it break one of Aristotle's rules?

Don't confuse the rules of drama with the rules invented by people about what stories or characters are culturally appropriate or popular enough to appear on TV. Society and cultural norms shift. The rules of drama are the only principles you need to concern yourself with.

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Included in the appendix of Aaron's workbook is a “Rules of Drama Cheat Sheet,” outlining *Aristotle's Poetics*. Read the original text, as provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- There are several online resources where you can find TV and film screenplays. The New York Film Academy provides a list of ten websites.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Pick a movie to watch tonight. Critically look at why the movie works or doesn't work. If you find yourself using snarky terms, remember, that doesn't help you diagnose the script. Keep a journal and write down what works about your five favorite movies and what doesn't work about your five least favorite movies. Share your findings with your MasterClass classmates and see if they agree or disagree.

9.

## NOTES



## FILM STORY ARC

*“Before you can do anything else, you have to tell the audience what they need to know.”*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Story vs. Drama
- Setting Up a Three-Act Drama
- Stakes
- Exposition
- Inciting Action
- Use Page Numbers as Road Signs
- The First 15 Pages Are the Most Important

### CHAPTER REVIEW

The queen died is a fact. The queen died and left a king with a broken heart is a story. The queen died, and she was the brains behind the king who is now struggling to keep his throne is drama. Always keep the stakes of your drama high by strengthening and pressing on your intentions and obstacles. Now you can begin setting up the arc of your story. Aaron breaks down what happens in each act:

- Act 1: You chase your hero up a tree.
- Act 2: You throw rocks at them.
- Act 3: You get them down (or not).

Be sure to avoid any magical surprises in Act 3 by setting up and introducing everything in Act 1 through exposition. Exposition is the first part of drama, but it’s not easy. One way to get through exposition in your screenplay is to have at least one character early on who is a stand-in for the audience; Rashida Jones’s character in *The Social Network*, or Chrisann in *Steve Jobs* for example, because they ask questions of the main character that the audience might have.

After you’ve set up the exposition, introduce the story’s main conflict with the inciting action. In Aaron’s example of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the inciting action happens when Hamlet’s father’s ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him. Hamlet’s intention becomes clear—to avenge his father’s death—and the story begins.

You can’t wait very long to introduce the inciting action. Aaron says if you’ve gotten to page 20 or 25 and you haven’t yet introduced it, you’re in trouble. Use page numbers as road signs to know if you’ve hit a certain milestone in your script.

When setting up your story arc, remember to make the first 15 pages the most memorable. When a producer or studio executive is deciding whether to produce your script, you have to hook them with the first 15 pages.

## FILM STORY ARC

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Review the basics of the three-act structure, but remember that the three-act structure is not a hard and fast rule. Learn how Aaron manipulated normal conventions of film storytelling when he proposed the structure for his film *Steve Jobs*.

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Literally every story has an inciting action. Pick and watch five recently released films. Note when the inciting action occurs—does it happen in the first five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes of the story? If you're having trouble locating the action, here's a tip: without the inciting action, there can be no story. Is there a common time in the film when the inciting action occurs?
- Break down your script ideas into three acts. Describe in one line what happens to your main character in each act. Does it reflect what happens in Aaron's breakdown?
- Dive deeper into the art of exposition. Pick a couple of screenplays and ask yourself: What does the audience need to know for the world to make sense? Who tells them? When and how? Challenge yourself further by selecting screenplays that take place in a complete, fantastical world, like *Star Wars*. How quickly do you as a viewer understand the rules of this world? How did you learn this?

10.

## NOTES

## WRITING HABITS

*“The only thing that makes me feel good about writing is making progress.”*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Bulk Up to Write
- Start With the First Scene
- Use Tools to Organize Your Writing
- Write What You Like, and Write Like Yourself
- Writer’s Block
- Listen to Music to Get Unstuck & Inspired
- Focus on Progress

### CHAPTER REVIEW

You now know the rules of a story. Your characters have defined intentions and obstacles. It’s time to “bulk up” and prepare to write.

After months and months of thinking about your idea, begin writing. Once you have a strong, formidable intention and obstacle, you’re ready to write at least the first scene. This gets Aaron typing, and once he starts, it’s hard to stop. If you find the writing coming out slowly and painfully, you probably aren’t ready to sit down and start writing it yet.

Despite all of Aaron’s accomplishments, he also still struggles with writer’s block. Being a writer comes with days of the mental anguish of having not been able to write a single word—it comes with the territory. So what tactics can you use to push past that?

Aaron drives around and listens to music to both get unstuck and to inspire himself. Sometimes the music itself can be the inspiration for the score for a scene, like it was for *The West Wing* episode “Two Cathedrals.”

Be prepared with research. Define the intention and obstacle of the first scene you are going to write. Use index cards to map out the next few scenes. Focus on progress and give yourself little milestones that you can complete at the end of every day. And most importantly, write what you like and write like yourself.

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Give yourself the tools needed to become a great screenwriter. Get Final Draft or find a screenplay template online. Buy a stack of notecards and a Sharpie.
- Now, take your story idea and set out to create a schedule for yourself to write it to completion (it can be the story idea that you were sparked by in the research chapter). Do you want to aim to write a certain number of pages a day? To have certain scenes completed by certain dates? Share your goals with your MasterClass classmates to maintain motivation. Remember, every writer works differently. Don’t be stressed by how productive others are. As long as you are making progress, that’s all that matters.

11.

## NOTES



## GROUP WORKSHOPS

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Welcome to the Group Workshop! As Aaron critiques each script, take this opportunity to continue to be a diagnostician: Use everything you've learned in his MasterClass so far to identify the strengths and weaknesses in each script you read. Did you understand the story? Are the intention and obstacles clearly defined? Here are some of Aaron's thoughts that can apply to all your scripts:

#### *Keep Action Descriptions Pithy*

In J.J.'s script, Aaron points out how he likes to write action so it takes roughly the same amount of time to read it as it does to play on the screen. This allows you to focus on the written words that will be said on screen, while the director only needs the blueprint of the description and action to translate your vision to the screen.

#### *But...Don't Forget to Write the Pertinent Details*

Jeanie's story *E Is for Edie* is set in the Midwest with rolling cornfields around her characters in the opening scene. However, cornfields were not mentioned till much later in the script. As a writer, you're able to see the whole vision of the scene, but remember to take the time to jot down key points so you don't confuse and lose your audience.

Also, remember to ignore rules that aren't the rules of drama. Jeanie's script is a perfect example of what might not have made it on the air according to the rules invented by executives from the past.

#### *A Probable Impossibility Is Preferable to a Possible Improbability*

For Roland's script, *Chronic*, Aaron calls out the principle of probable impossibility. Probable impossibilities present extraordinary events in a way that is believable to an audience. Improbable possibilities (or as Aaron calls it, possible improbability) take ordinary events that could be coincidental but presents them in a way that is forced and too convenient for your script to move forward. To create believable scripts, always use a probable impossibility. If you are going to use a possible improbability, Aaron suggests calling it out explicitly.

12-16.

## GROUP WORKSHOPS

### CHAPTER REVIEW (CONTINUED)

#### *Try the Unexpected*

For Evelyn's script, *The Merc*, it's very easy to begin with the typical scene of traders doing drugs and being raunchy. Try surprising the audience by not going for the easy scene and instead establish the world of your show in a different, unexpected way. Always give your minor characters names so that actors don't have to go home and say they've been cast as "Waiter #2."

#### *Write With Confidence*

Finally, having confidence is key as a writer. Always write with conviction.

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Form a writers' group of five to seven writers in the MasterClass community and workshop each other's scripts. Set up a Google Hangout. Ask if your script was easy to understand and ask for specific notes. If you find the session helpful and useful, set up a time to meet regularly with the group.

12-16.

## NOTES

17+18.

## WRITING SCENES

*“At the end of a scene,  
we have to be at least  
one step further  
than we were before.”*  
—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Purpose of a Scene
- Launching From One Scene to the Next
- Reward Patience
- Comedy Scenes
- Opening Scenes:  
Lay the Theme
- Opening Scenes:  
Grab the Audience
- Character Introduction Scene
- Character Introduction Scene:  
*The American President*

### CHAPTER REVIEW

A screenplay is just a series of scenes. Here are a few tips to help strengthen your scenes:

- Every scene in your screenplay should move the plot forward.
- Not every scene needs to end dramatically, but you should feel satisfied with how it does end.
- If you are struggling with what the next scene should be, try answering a question posed in the previous scene.
- Grab the audience as soon as you can. Try dropping the audience in the middle of a conversation—it forces the audience to pay attention and play catch up.
- It’s also satisfying to lay out the theme to your entire movie right in the first scene.
- If you’re introducing a character in a scene for the first time, show the audience what the character wants.
- If a character doesn’t want something, then they are cluttering up your screenplay.

And remember, a great scene clearly shows each character’s intention and obstacles, the exposition is laid out without impeding the story, and the stakes are high and clear. Aaron loves writing courtroom dramas because all of these elements are built into the setting.

17+18.

## WRITING SCENES

### ASSIGNMENTS

- With these basic principles in mind, continue to be a diagnostician. Select several scenes from TV shows and movies with different parameters:
  - A one-page scene
  - A five-page scene
  - A scene containing only one character
  - A scene containing multiple characters and conversations

Compare all the scenes you collect in each category to each other. Why do they all work (or don't work)? Does the scene move the plot forward? How does each scene end?

Now, write your own opening scene for a film that starts in the middle of a conversation. If you've already started your script, rewrite your initial scene to start this way. How can you establish who the characters are and their intentions and obstacles?

- Write a scene that takes place in a courtroom or deposition environment. Make your main character on trial for a crime. What is their intention? The lawyers'? What are their obstacles? Have a jury or judge be the stand-in for the audience and use them to introduce any exposition.



17+18.

## NOTES

19+20.

## CASE STUDY: STEVE JOBS + THE WEST WING

### CHAPTER REVIEW

#### SUBCHAPTERS

- *Steve Jobs*
  - Intention
  - Obstacles & Tactics:
    - Steve & Andy
  - Three Things in a Pile
  - Only Write Description
    - When Necessary
- *The West Wing*
  - *The West Wing* - S3E21
  - Bartlet's & Ritchie's Intention
  - Humanizing Bartlet
  - Draw on Your Own Perspectives

#### STEVE JOBS

Aaron walks us through the first-act scene between Steve Jobs and Andy Hertzfeld, breaking down the intention and obstacles of each of the characters and what the scene accomplishes. Remember from previous chapters that Aaron always advises showing what a character wants and that their tactics to overcome obstacles define who the character is. Steve wants the voice demo to work. His tactics are to threaten Andy with humiliation in front of his colleagues. Andy's intention is to have Steve understand that the voice demo will not work. He uses the tactics of logic to try to break through to Steve. The scene works because the conflict is clear. The intentions and obstacles between the main characters in the scene are properly shown and understood by the audience.

When writing, Aaron only includes completely necessary description. The description written in this scene emphasizes that Andy is being embarrassed in front of his own team, increasing the stakes for him.

#### THE WEST WING

Aaron explains an infamous scene from the season 3 episode "Posse Comitatus" in *The West Wing*. President Bartlet and his presidential opponent, Robert Ritchie, meet alone for the first time during the election. The setting is the back room of a Broadway theater.

Bartlet's intention is to convince Ritchie to not waste the opportunity to have an intellectual debate in this campaign. Ritchie's intention is to get respect from Bartlet.

These intentions have been set up very well throughout the seasons of *The West Wing* and make for a very satisfying meeting between the two characters. By building the "drive shaft" first, you're allowed to engage with the really fun parts of writing, like snappy dialogue.

19+20.  
NOTES

21+22.

## WRITING CAPTIVATING DIALOGUE + CASE STUDY

*"It's not just that dialogue sounds like music to me. It actually is music."*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Dialogue Is Music
- Don't Imitate Real People
- Don't Make Them Sound Like They're on TV
- Be Physical When Writing Dialogue
- Perform Dialogue to Test It
- Case Study
  - *The West Wing* - S3E21

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Dialogue is the most personal part of writing. Aaron likens it to music—dialogue can follow all of the same rules of music, including pacing, cadence, tone, and volume. How do you know if the dialogue you have written is like a beautiful piece of Beethoven, or clunky and awkward like music on amateur night? Try to be physical with your dialogue. Say it out loud to hear how it lands. Remember: you are in the business of writing things that are meant to be performed, not read.

Don't be intimidated if what you're writing is not how people sound. Screenwriting is an art—feel free to take liberties to create a fantastic piece of dialogue.

With these lessons in mind, let's revisit the Ritchie-Bartlet scene in "Posse Comitatus" in *The West Wing*. Rewatch the scene, this time deconstructing the musicalities of the dialogue. Can you hear the percussion thuds? How about the rhythm in the line "people who like baseball can't like books?"

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Find a local showing of the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the same play that Aaron saw when he was nine years old that made him fall in love with dialogue. Later, review the script of the play and notice how the actors' deliberate delivery choices of the words affected your experience.
- Look at David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992). Pay attention to the musicality of the dialogue. Does it sound like allegros for you like it does for Aaron? How does the sound of dialogue (volume, speed, emphatic words) reinforce meaning, and what do they reveal about the character?

21+22.

## **WRITING CAPTIVATING DIALOGUE + CASE STUDY**

### TAKE IT FURTHER (CONTINUED)

- Aaron also mentions how any writing that's meant to be performed sounds like music, including a politician's speech. Watch Barack Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2008 or George H.W. Bush's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 1988. How does the language differ from what it would be if the politician were speaking to one person about the same subject?

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Write a one-page dialogue scene between two characters. Try to apply some music theory lessons you've learned from both this chapter and from your own additional research: pacing, alliteration, assonance, cacophony, etc. Be purposeful. When you employ a certain musical technique, what is the specific outcome you hope to achieve?
- Now, read the dialogue scene out loud and feel and hear how it sounds. What changes would you make now that you've heard it out loud?

21+22.  
NOTES

23+24.

## REWRITES: FIRST DRAFT & NOTES

*“Rewriting is a lot easier than writing, because you have a problem to solve.”*

—Aaron Sorkin

### SUBCHAPTERS

- Rewrites: First Draft
  - Get to the End Before You Rewrite
  - Chip Away Anything That Isn’t the Main Conflict
  - Kill Your Darlings
- Rewrites: Notes
  - Collect the Right Script Editors
  - Be Careful Who You Listen To
  - Listen for the Problem, Not the Solution
  - How to Get Through Notes
  - Ask for Specific Notes
  - Common Notes
  - Retype Your Drafts

### CHAPTER REVIEW

You’ve finished your script! Now it’s time to rewrite. Get to the end of your draft first before attempting any rewrites. This allows you to focus on a single problem (fixing your script) versus all of the problems you need to tackle while you initially write, like story ideas. Liken rewriting to the idea of a sculpture—your first draft is the hunk of marble. To get to the statue of *David*, begin to chip away anything that isn’t related to the main conflict. It will certainly be hard to “kill your darlings,” but be comforted by the fact that even Aaron has to take out what he considers are some of his favorite lines and moments.

When receiving notes, be careful whom you listen to. You can rely on some people to spot a problem, but unless you’re talking to someone who’s smart, understands scripts, and understands the way you write, take their notes with a grain of salt. For those who may have opinions about your script but aren’t necessarily informed script editors, don’t just disregard their comments. Use their opinions as a sign of a problem that still needs to be fixed.

Ultimately, you need to collect the right script editors—ones who you can trust, who know your writing style, and who know and understand scripts. And once you find them, never let them go. Ask for specific notes and begin a checklist to work your way through them.

One of Aaron’s most common notes involves avoiding scenes that are “too wet”—when you start having the characters perform the emotion that you want the audience to be feeling. Other notes he has commonly received are that aspects of the central conflict are not landing hard enough. Take comfort that one of the best screenwriters today (and your instructor) has to deal with notes, and no one’s first draft is ever perfect.

Finally, retype your scripts in the rewriting process—once with it by your side and another time from memory. This allows you to surgically examine every word of your screenplay: Is each joke landing? Is each piece of dialogue absolutely necessary, and does it have the exact rhythm you are looking for?

23+24.

## **REWRITES: FIRST DRAFT & NOTES**

### ASSIGNMENTS

- Find a partner in the MasterClass community and offer to critique each other's first drafts. Take Aaron's advice and provide specific notes, utilizing the lessons you've learned so far in this MasterClass. Do the characters have clearly defined intentions and obstacles? Is the story easy to understand? Does each scene move the plot forward?
- For the notes that you receive on your own script, evaluate each one critically. After you choose which ones to address, retype the entire script. How does each line and scene feel now that you are retyping the whole thing?



23+24.  
NOTES

25-32.

## THE WEST WING WRITERS' ROOM

### CHAPTER REVIEW

Welcome to the virtual writers' room. Watch Aaron in action as he and the writers tackle episode 501 of the *The West Wing*.

As you take notes, consider the following:

- **Intention and Obstacle:** What do each of the characters in *The West Wing* want coming out of episode 422, and what's stopping them from getting it?
- **Incorporating Research:** How does knowing the limitations of the 25th Amendment affect possible plot elements?
- **The Audience:** Remember to always keep them in mind. What do they need to know in the exposition of the season opener?
- **Rules of a Story:** There are a lot of crazy ways Zoey's kidnapping could be resolved. But don't forget about probable impossibilities and other rules from *Aristotle's Poetics*.
- **Writing Scenes:** Each scene should accomplish something and move the plot forward.
- **Writing Habits:** As soon as you have an idea for a good scene, put it on an index card and put it up on the board. This helps give you the feeling of progress and makes the task less daunting.

Take note as well of some of the unique needs of a TV writers' room: examining the "leave" of the season finale, remembering "where a show lives," understanding characters' intentions and obstacles and their web of relationships, and mapping out loose plot points that you can't forget about.

25-32.

## THE WEST WING WRITERS' ROOM

### TAKE IT FURTHER

- Read this profile about the *Breaking Bad* writers' room.

### ASSIGNMENT

- Now it's your turn. Gather with your writers' group and break the first episode in a new season of one of your favorite TV shows. Map out the episode with index cards and assign everyone in the group to write a scene. Come back together and stitch together the spec script. Work like a real TV writers' room to get the script completed. Upload the screenplay to the Rate & Review tool to share with your classmates.

## 25-32. NOTES

## GROUP WORKSHOPS: PITCH SESSIONS

### CHAPTER REVIEW

You have your completed script. Now it's time to pitch it. Luckily, with the advent of online streaming platforms, you are no longer limited to the rules and tastes of the big three networks for a TV script or the pressures for a traditional theatrical release for a film. But what hasn't changed is coming up with a strong, compelling pitch to sell your screenplay.

Apply the lessons you've learned throughout this MasterClass for your pitch. A good pitch will lay out the basic "drive shaft" of the story, as Aaron calls it. Are the intention, obstacle, and conflict of the story clearly defined? Are you using words like "but," "except," or "and then?" Are the intention and obstacle for your story and main characters "pressed" enough, believable, and compelling? Is your story understandable and not confusing?

Here are some other things to keep in mind for your pitch, particularly for a TV pitch:

- The pilot should be clear in your head—but so should the second episode.
- Be able to describe several episodes down the line and the arc of the season. Is each episode dealing with a new crisis of the day, like *The West Wing*? Or is each episode building on a longer term goal, like *Silicon Valley*?
- Where will it be shot? Is there a "home-base" set that production only needs to build once?
- Be prepared to answer questions from executives like, "Will there be a love interest for your characters?"

### ASSIGNMENT

- It's time to apply all that you've learned from Aaron. Film yourself giving your best pitch for your screenplay and upload it to Rate & Review to receive feedback from your fellow classmates. When critiquing and reviewing the pitches of your classmates, write notes for yourself as well. Why do you like a certain pitch? Why don't you like others?

33+34.  
NOTES

[illegible]

35.

## CLOSING

*“Go ahead and take chances because that’s the only way you’re actually gonna find out where your sweet spot is.”*

—Aaron Sorkin

### CONGRATULATIONS!

- You’ve finished your MasterClass with Aaron! We hope you feel inspired to write a new screenplay. We want to make sure that your experience with Aaron and your peers doesn’t end when you finish watching the video chapters. Here are a few ways to stay in touch:

### MASTERCLASS ONLINE COMMUNITY

- Stay active in The Hub by posting questions and assignments, and be sure to provide feedback to your classmates!
- Upload your relevant assignments to Rate & Review for peer feedback.

### OFFICE HOURS

- Submit your questions on the Office Hours page of the MasterClass site. Keep your eyes peeled for Aaron’s personal responses.

## NOTES



## NOTES

## NOTES

## NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## NOTES

## APPENDIX.

# ARISTOTLE'S POETICS CHEAT SHEET

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### RULES OF DRAMA

- *Drama Is Imitation:* Drama is not “real life.” In other words, the emotions an audience feels when they’re watching a good dramatic work aren’t exactly what they’d feel encountering the same scenarios in real life. Learning how to imitate life in a way that keeps your audience interested and emotionally involved is the secret to good dramatic storytelling. As Aaron says, “People don’t speak in dialogue... people’s lives don’t play out in a series of scenes that form a narrative.”
- *Drama Is Not History:* Real life is full of confusion, chaos, and contradiction—good storytelling isn’t. Don’t ever let a dedication to “the facts” get in the way of crafting a tight, understandable story. Relate this to how Aaron writes with the “more important truth” when he’s incorporating research.
- *Drama Is Action:* Stories are more than just descriptions of interesting people or interesting places—they have to be descriptions of events. One way of testing if your story is appropriately “active” is by asking yourself: Do my characters undergo a major change (e.g., from happy to sad, broken to stable, etc.) over the course of the story?
- *Stories Have Harmony and Rhythm:* Dialogue shouldn’t sound like real conversation and scenes shouldn’t feel like interactions in real life. Almost always they’ll be snappier, more condensed, and more focused. They might also be funnier or more emotionally charged. Choosing certain phrases over others because of the way they sound, or their length, or their emotional resonance are important choices that give a script its harmony and rhythm and often separate the good from the great.
- *Genre:* In a tragedy, your main character should undergo a major change of fortune—almost always from good to bad, happy to sad. In comedy, even though your characters have defects, their defects should never wind up being painful or destructive. Tragic characters have to suffer. Comic characters make it through unscathed.

### STRUCTURE

- *Good Stories Have a Beginning, Middle, and End:* Aristotle was the first to formulate this now well-worn formula. He put it this way: “A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” In other words, your audience should be able to watch your story without being distracted with wondering what happened before the story started, what more happened after it ended, or how the characters got from the beginning to the end.
- *A Plot Should Be Serious, Complete, and of a Certain Magnitude:* The plot shouldn’t be made up of ridiculous and unlikely episodes. It shouldn’t wander or leave actions unfinished, and it shouldn’t be too long and lofty, or too small and unimportant.

## APPENDIX.

# ARISTOTLE'S POETICS CHEAT SHEET

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### STRUCTURE (CONT'D)

- *Unify Your Plot:* A unified plot consists of one central action and nothing more. Aristotle's test of this was to ask of every element of the story (every scene, line of dialogue): If this was gone, would the story still function? If the answer's always "no"—you've written a unified plot. Relate this back to Aaron's advice on rewriting and "killing your darlings"—chip away at anything that isn't related to the main conflict.
- *One Thing Should Lead to Another:* Each element of a plot—each scene, each line—should come out of what preceded it and lead to what follows. Aristotle thinks the worst mistake you can make in plotting is to have episodes "succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence." Remember, each scene has a purpose—it should move the story forward.
- *Cause and Effect, Not Coincidence:* Good stories are driven by the actions of their characters, not by coincidences or forces outside of the main action. Aristotle cautioned against the use of *deus ex machina*—where a hero is saved by a stroke of good luck that has no relation to their own activities over the course of the drama (many films and TV shows fall prey to this sin; keep your eyes peeled for them).
- *Not Too Big or too Small:* A good story should be easy enough for an audience to digest in one sitting—large enough that they have to pay attention but not so large that they lose track of crucial details before the story's done. Remember to not lose or confuse the audience, as Aaron details in "The Audience" chapter.
- *Complex Plots Are Best:* The two elements of complex plots are reversals and recognitions. Reversals occur when a character's intentions result in unexpected and opposite outcomes. For recognition, the character is destroyed not by what happens but by the knowledge of what really happened. Recognition scenes usually come as surprises to the hero and the audience. And remember, as Aaron says, the best type of reversal happens when the audience doesn't see it coming.
- *Probable Impossibilities Are Better Than Improbable Possibilities* (or as Aaron calls it, a "possible improbability"): If you're wondering whether a scene or an element of a story is too ridiculous for your audience, don't ask, "Could it happen?" Instead ask, "Would it happen?"
- *Use Your Imagination to Make Things Credible:* An audience is very perceptive when they're imaginatively engaged in a story—a good writer should be too, so make sure you don't leave any glaring errors for the audience to pick up on.
- *Stay Away From Narration:* Remembering that drama is imitation, stay away from "telling" your audience too much. Remember to show the audience what a character wants, rather than telling them.

## APPENDIX.

# ARISTOTLE'S POETICS CHEAT SHEET

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### CHARACTER

- *Anti-Hero*: A character who does not necessarily have virtuous or villainous qualities but is able to behave heroically if the opportunity arises. As Aaron says, when writing anti-heroes, treat them as heroes and relate to them as much as you can to write a believable character.
- *Character Is Action*: An audience gets the deepest sense of your characters by watching what they do. A vivid main character must undertake an important action—this will be, of course, the main action of your plot.
- *Good Dialogue Comes From the Characters' Choices*: Audiences come to understand characters in the context of their choices—when they're moving toward or away from things. When engaging characters talk, they exhibit preferences—strong ones and clear ones—they don't just relate facts. These preferences are grounded in the tactics they use to overcome obstacles.
- *Create Characters That Make an Audience Feel*: The audience should be able to feel pity for a tragic hero—that means you have to create a situation that the audience can understand in the context of their own lives.
- *Good Characters Are Complicated*: In good drama, a hero undergoes a major change of fortune. If you want this change of fortune to make an audience feel deep emotions, certain types of heroes work better than others. The most emotionally engaging movement, according to Aristotle, is when a good man with certain shortcomings meets tremendous suffering. A flawed hero is someone we can all relate to, and his downfall will fill us with pity and fear.
- *Credible, Consistent Characters*: Credible characters follow, more or less, universal rules of probability. Again, if you're wondering if you've written a credible character, don't ask, "Could that person exist?" Instead ask, "Would the audience be likely to understand a person like that?"

### NOTES

- Full Text of Aristotle's Poetics, provided by The Internet Classics Archive.
- *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets From the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization* (2002)



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