“Most movies celebrate the ways we connect with each other.”

—Jeremy Irons, at the 68th Annual Academy Awards

“Conflict may certainly arise, but I think it’s on a secondary or more superficial level; in a sense, it arises when we are frustrated in our efforts to achieve love and affection. It is not part of our most basic, underlying nature.”

—His Holiness The Dalai Lama
The Art of Happiness
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This book is the distillation of a decade and a half of teaching screenwriting and dramatic technique at Florida State University—and an epiphany I had halfway through.

During that decade and a half, to my delight, I’ve seen the American short film (thirty minutes or less) rise in importance from a résumé piece intended to launch a filmmaker’s career to an art form in its own right. As interest and access to short films increases, as well as outstanding venues like homestarrunner.com and triggerstreet.com, the short screenplay/film is becoming the central short narrative form of our time, analogous to the short story in the 1940s, argues Ray Fielding, former Dean of the Florida State University Film School.

“It’s a new day for the short film,” Fielding said. “It’s a phenomenon, a phoenix rising from the ashes. With the gradual perfection of wideband Internet transmission, and the already well-established market for long-play DVD discs, the short film is coming into its own. Not since the golden years of live television, when distinguished original dramatic plays were presented several times a week to national audiences, has the marketplace for short film and video drama looked so bright.”

But during my decade and a half of teaching at F.S.U., I found three things sorely missing: A nuts-and-bolts book about crafting short screenplays; access to short films and their screenplays so writers (and teachers and students) can see the choices and changes—good, bad, or ugly—that were made in production; and any discussion in screenwriting books that there is more going on in good screenplays than conflict (stay with me; there is). To liquidate this lack over the years—often through trial and error—I designed the practical, hands-on approach to crafting short screenplays that I’m offering here. And, to give you easy access to outstanding short films and their screenplays, I’m including a DVD of the seven short award-winning films made from the screenplays published in Part III of the book.

By craft I mean “the sum total of all means used to draw the audience into deep involvement, to hold that involvement, and ultimately to reward
it with a moving and meaningful experience,” as Robert McKee writes in *Story*.

In other words, to connect. This book is dedicated to the proposition that connecting—to oneself and to others—is the source of great screenplays, regardless of length.

And craft, I’m convinced, can be taught, though I agree with playwright William Gibson’s wry observation, “The rest is art and up to God.” Craft must be taught to those who want to write effective short films, which require “deft characterization, a compressed narrative style, and something to say that is focused and fresh in voice,” as Michael Rabiger reminds us in *Directing the Film: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*. The shorter the film, in fact, the taller the order for craft.

“A good five- to ten-minute film is actually more demanding to make than a passable thirty-minute one,” Rabiger says.

Screenwriting is such a complex and difficult craft, I have found it most effective to break it into teachable, learnable pieces that you can tackle one at a time. This approach underlies the design of this book.

I believe in learning by doing, so you will write—and rewrite—five short screenplays of increasing length and complexity that focus on a different essential aspect of dramatic technique and the craft of screenwriting. Each screenplay will build on the skills and techniques you learned in the previous one. Ideally, by the time you’ve written all five, you will have grappled with most of the issues, small and large, in screenwriting.

My purpose has always been—and still is—to elicit the richest, most resonant work from my students—short screenplays that are, at once, unique and universal. The goal of this book is the same—to offer an experiential approach that will help you—or your students—craft short screenplays that connect. To that end, the book is divided into three sections:

Part I—Preparing to Write the Short Screenplay—explores essential preliminary issues: the importance of connecting to others; connecting to your unique material and vision; connecting to your own creative process; and connecting to what screenplays are at their deepest level—patterns of significant human change—and to what they are on the surface level of screenplay format. I have also added a new chapter, “Connecting to Collaboration,” about the art of collaboration, both in the workshop and the increasingly popular and productive process of co-writing scripts.

Part II—Five (Not So) Easy Screenplays—guides you through crafting five short screenplays, each focused on a crucial aspect of dramatic technique:

1. The Discovery: A three-page screenplay focused on a character making a discovery that makes a difference to the character.
2. The Decision: A five-page screenplay focused on a character making a decision that makes a difference to the character.
3. The Boxing Match (creating conflict): A five- to seven-page screenplay focused on one character wanting what another character does not want to give.
4. The Improbable Connection (creating connection): A seven-page screenplay focused on creating a plausible, but not predictable, pattern of human connection.

5. The Long Short Screenplay: A ten- to fifteen-page screenplay focused on telling the best story you can for the screen, using the techniques you’ve learned in the first four screenplays.

Part III—Seven Screenplays That Make It Look Easy—offers, for your illumination and, I hope, inspiration, the screenplays of the seven award-winning undergraduate and graduate F.S.U. thesis films on the companion DVD, from the Student-Emmy-Award winners for Best Comedy, Kosher and The Making of “Killer Kite”, to the Student-Academy-Award winners Slow Dancin’ Down the Aisles of the Quickcheck and A Work in Progress. I’ve included A Work in Progress and two other outstanding and strikingly different short-short screenplays, Kosher and My Josephine—all under ten minutes and all outstanding examples of how well you can tell a story in a very short time—to inspire anyone faced with writing and making a film on a very small budget. As these three amazing films show, less can truly mean more.

I asked the seven screenwriters to select the version of the screenplay that they wanted published. None is transcribed from the screen like so many published screenplays you’ll find. As Bob Gray said when he sent me the screenplay for The Making of “Killer Kite”, “I resisted the temptation to rewrite the script and make it fit the edited film. This is the shooting script from which the film was made. It is, I think, a better educational exercise to see how a project can change from the final script to the completed edit.”

I agree. And you will have the opportunity to see and study the changes that were made on that arduous journey from script to screen by comparing these seven screenplays to their finished films on the DVD that accompanies this second edition. I strongly urge you to read the screenplays before screening the films and even before reading the rest of the book, as I will refer to them throughout.

In the brief introduction to each screenplay, I’ve let the writer describe how the screenplay changed in production. Five writers—Aimee Barth, Barry Jenkins, Wes Ball, Lani Sciandra, and Thomas Jackson—directed their films, Kosher, My Josephine, A Work in Progress, Cool Breeze and Buzz, and Slow Dancin’ Down the Aisles of the Quickcheck, respectively. Matt Stevens—who wrote the story for The Making of “Killer Kite”—directed the film, but Bob Gray wrote the screenplay. And Rachel Witenstein wrote Lena’s Spaghetti, but Joe Greco directed. Each introduction also describes where these talented writers are now and what they are doing.

Some, like Matt Stevens, are writing short-short-short films (thirty seconds) for Web sites like Mattel’s myscene.com and other new media, a burgeoning market for those skilled at writing short scripts. Others are writing features, a testament to the often overlooked truth that the short film—while an art form in its own right—is excellent preparation for writing long screenplays. The dramatic principles explored in this book are found in all good
screenplays, long and short. And even if you’re writing long screenplays, crafting short scripts will help you hone your skills (after writing five features, I took a whack at a short screenplay—what a challenge!—and came away with renewed respect and admiration for the screenwriters published here in the book).

Writing short screenplays that connect requires the craft and concentration of a medieval artist carving scenes in a walnut. And writing in a nutshell, in a nutshell, forces you to be more creative, resourceful. That is why I beg to differ with people who say that writing short scripts is as useful as lips on a chicken. It may well be the toughest screenwriting training you’ll get.

And writing short screenplays is the best way to see your work on the screen and have others see it. “Getting seen is the precursor to getting noticed,” Michael Rabiger says, “and for actuarial reasons alone short films are always more likely to be shown in festivals than long ones.” Feature-length screenplays, alas, are like sperm: There’s a one-in-a-million chance they’ll get made.

But perhaps most important, this book is the first to explore connection (and not just conflict) as a crucial part of good screenplays and the screenwriting process. Including human connection in the stories they tell has helped my students write richer, more resonant short screenplays that have become award-winning films screened and celebrated at festivals all over the world. In the spirit of their own screenplays, they have competed and they have connected. I hope, with this book, you will, too.