



📁 INTERVIEW

Interview: John Warren On The Process Of Story

NYU/Tisch screenwriting professor John Warren talks about teaching screenplay to younger students, the universal challenge of learning the process, and his upcoming project *Young Screenwriters*.

🕒 14 MIN READ 📅 MARCH 12, 2020

Several weeks ago, our Community Development Specialist spoke to [NYU/Tisch](#) screenwriting professor John Warren about teaching screenplay to younger students, the universal challenge of learning the process, and his upcoming project [Young Screenwriters](#).

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Tell me about your teaching experience.

I've had a fantastic education by way of teaching. I was a screenwriter in Hollywood for about 25 years and had a lot of scripts and movies made. I came back here to New York City and started teaching at NYU about 9 years ago. I've had the fantastic privilege of teaching all over the world. I've taught in Australia, I've taught private school students in Spoleto, Italy, NYU students in Florence. I've taught in New York City public schools, I've taught private school for learning challenged middle school students in Manhattan.

Last summer I taught in Kenya. I had sixteen students from slums in Nairobi, which was an incredible experience for me. I hope it was for them. The age range was 17 to 34 years old, and I can say without exception that the common difficulty the challenge for all of these students across the board is *story*; learning story, and what is story.

I teach an advanced screenwriting class here at NYU. It's a year-long class, the thing they wrestle with most frequently is story. A lot of what I do is distill that and deconstruct it, and explain the basics.

Anyone who sees the film "Up" knows, I hope, that Carl is the protagonist and the objective is to get to Paradise Falls. That starts this thread of the story, and that's where arguably most storytelling begins: *who is your protagonist and what does he or she want?* And then you can put in all the lovely touches, all the [dialogue](#), the comedy or the drama or if it's a musical, the songs, but it all, the underlying factor of the framework for all of this is *story*.

Here's the thing I would ask; if a teenager says "give me an answer here" what would you say is the chief misconception that a younger person has when they're first trying to connect with this discipline? If you ask "what is story" what is the thing you that you get back that you have to go and unpack?

I have good news: students today, and again across the spectrum — from 19 to 9 years old — they don't know how sophisticated they are, or how intuitively they understand story already, because they've seen so much story. I don't know if it's good news or bad news but they've been watching tv and seeing films since they were 4-5 years old.

They go: "Oh, god, I knew that. I never knew I knew that, I never thought of it in those terms I thought of it that storytelling was dialogue, I thought storytelling was where you put the camera, how to tell a joke." But once you start to talk about story, this lightbulb goes off and they look back at this wealth of story that they've seen, and they go "oh my god, right, Romeo is the protagonist, and Shakespeare was brilliant enough that he put the objective in the play's title." The objective is Juliet. Romeo and Juliet is just a boy-wants-girl movie.

Then the design of the movie is *how do you keep the protagonist from getting what they want?* Because that doesn't happen until the 3rd act. The objective that the protagonist wants should be unattainable.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but basically what you reorienting students' perspective towards is the reason they're really there: what they love is story.

They love story. We all do.

I think it's a human quality, we like patterns, we like resolution, we like all the scary difficult emotions because even they're uncomfortable because even when we see them in a narrative context, we see them and connect with that. We feel like we're not alone.

It's why cavemen and women were writing on the walls. They were telling stories – *this is what we did, and how we did it.* They're leaving their stories behind.

Little kids often tell the same story, if you take drawings on the refrigerators the world over, the stories are very very similar. As the young person who then grasps the concept of story then has to shift over into the concept of voice. So what would you say to somebody who's young about finding their voice?

I don't want to make this oversimplified — I mean, designing story and what I refer to as the elements of story, for instance, the [inciting incident](#). What is the inciting incident? What sets the protagonist on his or her journey? The antagonist, who or what is keeping the protagonist from getting what he or she wants? There are a lot of variables.

As far as voice goes, voice is fun. In every class I teach I have this terrifying week where I say to them “okay, Victoria, today's your day, stand up and tell your story.”

[Laughs] That is terrifying.

It's terrifying, and it's wonderful because everyone gets to do it. Once we get into kind of a rhythm with it, you see all of these students pick their own

stories. When they choose their own story, they're actually beginning to reveal their voices.

One of the great pleasures that I have is the diversity of story. I've got twelve students in my advanced screenwriting class [at NYU] right now. They're writing [horror thrillers](#), romcoms, action adventures, dramas, all kinds of stuff. It all came out of their heads. So once they say "this is a story that intrigues me" what they're starting to do is say "this is my voice".

Martin Scorsese is gonna make mafia movies. Hitchcock — he knew his voice. When you see a Hitchcock movie you know it's a Hitchcock movie. So what you're attracted to, that's where you find your voice.

Anyone at any age can turn back and say "this is my favorite movie and this is why". For younger people, I think a lot of people tend to give the same advice over and over again. I think that it's interesting for younger writers to be given kind of an in that's a little bit more accessible than "oh you should work hard and watch a lot of movies and read a lot of scripts and think about what inspires you."

Right, that's completely antithetical to what I do. And by the way, it should be a lot of fun. Story telling's fun.

That's something too — if it's not fun, then it's probably not the story you really want to be telling. But I like the idea that you can connect the part of you that loves these stories with the story you want to tell — it's another thing that seems really simple, but even for young people who may not fully understand the concept have a fear of being seen as derivative.

I mean, there are prototypes. That's a lot of what we do in class. We talk about genres. The students [determine what genre they're in](#) by virtue of what they pick out of the sky. "This is the story I want to write". You find that your genre and so make yourself more familiar with that genre by seeing how other people have done it, and the nuances of any particular genre. It becomes really interesting because you can go back and look at other films and see what they did, and see the choice they made.

I had a really interesting class the other day. The students had seen 1917, Sam Mendes' film. They said "We saw it together and started laughing about you" I said "What did I do?"

"In the first seven minutes, the general says to the soldier, 'take this letter to the front and by the way it will be impossible to get there, you'll probably get killed but if you don't get there with the letter your brother will die'"

Yes, I saw it.

In the first seven minutes, Mendes set up all or some of the basic story designs, which then explode into a great action-adventure film.

Then there are some films — I think that this is where the writing comes in – there are films that almost seem like formulas. They're like chemistry. Once you add the elements, you add the inciting incident, you know what is going to happen is going to happen. It's now fate. Sometimes that reads in a way that feels far too directed.

Paint-by-numbers

Paint-by-numbers, that's a good way of putting it. If you're just an amazing writer, then the script is amazing, all of that disappears.

Now you're talking about talent. Alexander Payne uses all the elements of story and uses them in such a subliminal way that you can't see them. He's a great filmmaker, but if you take Robert Zemeckis' Flight, with Denzel Washington, it's pretty close to paint-by-numbers. Zemeckis is a great filmmaker and he knew what he was doing, but it's there every beat on the page.

If you're being subliminal or nuanced about that, that's when you get into the David Russells or the Paul Thomas Andersons, who are still using the elements of story, but they're just doing it in a very creative and artistic way.

I definitely see a lot of anxiety about this. Also from older people who have a lot of stuff very developed and sophisticated self doubt- it's the same questions across the age range. "What is talent? Do I have it? Can I obtain it? Am I doomed if I don't feel like I have it, or if other people don't

recognize that I have it?” What would you say to someone with those anxieties?

I mean this is just my opinion, for what it's worth, but you did ask.

Fair.

The bad news is, you either got it or you don't. You can't...you know, not everyone who sits down can be Paul Thomas Anderson or Shakespeare or Tolstoy...Paul Thomas Anderson would be thrilled I lumped him into that group, wouldn't he?

The good news is — and I saw this play out in Hollywood many many many times — if you're willing to sweat, you can make a career. Michael Crichton was a very smart guy. He was smart enough that he became a doctor because his father said “you have to be a doctor”. so Crichton said, “okay if you insist, I will”. As soon as he became a doctor, he quit and became a writer.

Jurassic Park is a brilliant piece of work by a guy who was, in my opinion, not a great prose stylist. What he did was come up with a great idea. Jurassic Park is a brilliant concept. So if you don't have talent—I don't mean to knock Michael Crichton—you can still learn the craft. You can learn the craft if you're willing to work.

By the way, I've seen students who were very very very talented who were not willing to work. And they were not successful. So the *work* is a variable, it must be. Then talent, you've either got it or you don't. I knew a lot of people in Hollywood who made a fantastic living who were very successful who were not particularly talented.

Do you rate the importance of collaboration highly and what benefit do you think it would bring? I think it can feel really — really psychologically unavailable, the whole concept of collaboration, either in a room or working in a workshop — or what the whole process all ends up looking like you end up producing, or being involved in having someone else make your film.

Writing is a lonely sport if you do it by yourself for years, which I did. But once a film goes into pre-production, you start to collaborate because you're working with your director, producers, so on. I know a lot of people who [write with partners](#) and are wonderfully successful, but the loneliness of writing never bothered me but for some people it does.

Though, it helps having a sounding board. Friends of mine, Doug Cook and David Weisberg, wrote a large number of films. I said to Doug, "How did you become writing partners?" And he said "David's the smartest guy I know".

When you have an idea and you're sitting there by yourself and you go "that's a good idea", to throw it to someone else and for them to say "yes" or "no", "let me finesse it a little bit", can be enormously helpful.

So tell me about Young Screenwriters.

Young Screenwriters. There are a lot of high school students out there who love movies and TV and want to know how that happens, how they can do that. They're enthusiastic and smart — and again if you don't understand the design of telling a story, then those pages you're likely grinding out won't come to anything. I came up with Young Screenwriters to say "There is a process, there is an approach to this."

I'll go out on a limb here and say anyone can learn it [the process] but without it...I run into a lot of people who say "I was writing a screenplay and it didn't work" and I'll say "at about page 60?" They'll look at me like I'm on to something. Yeah, because you didn't know where the movie was going.

Young Screenwriters is intended to teach an approach, which is a way to avoid 60 pages that don't amount to anything. This is a way to look at it objectively, analytically, ask *why am I writing this scene, why does this scene belong in the movie?* That's ultimately the question you have to answer — at some point when you get notes from the studio they're gonna go through the script with you before you go into production and they'll say this scene right here on page 75, why is this scene in the movie?

There's a lot of interrogation.

Because it costs a lot of money to shoot every day, so if you've written a scene that's going to take three days to shoot, that's arguably a couple hundred thousand dollars. So the student needs to know why the scene is going to be in the movie. So that's pragmatic.

No pressure.

No pressure. One of the greatest lessons I had early on, Frank Oz was gonna direct a film that I'd written and we were scouting locations. We had one more day in Washington DC, he said "Okay why don't we meet in my room at 9am". Breakfast was there, and coffee. It was fantastic, he had this big suite.

We both had a copy of this script and he said "Okay, turn to page 1, and let's read it."

Oh boy.

And I thought *oh my god. We're gonna read it. We're gonna read out loud every page in the script.* And that's what we did all day long. And every page and every scene I had to explain why that scene was necessary. And it was a great, great lesson. I should've paid him, because it taught me if you're gonna write it, you have to know what you're doing. *You have to know why that scene belongs in the movie.*

Going back to the Young Screenwriters: the idea is to say have an approach to story, know what you're doing, and in doing so, you certainly increase your odds of being successful.

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You can find John Warren on his [NYU Faculty page](#) or visit his project Young Screenwriters [here](#).

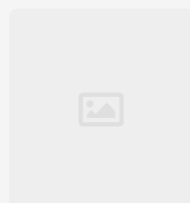
Victoria De Capua



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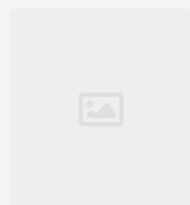
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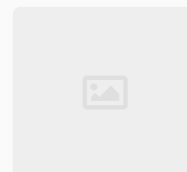


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