

**Putting
Real Life
on Screen:
An introduction**

Brought to you by
[Reel Screen Life](http://reelscreenlife.com)

A new online magazine for
screenwriters and cinephiles

FADE IN:

EXT. MOVIE HOUSE - NIGHT

The doors to a downtown movie house open. People flood out on to the street and saunter off in different directions, chattering away with their companions.

A GROUP OF FRIENDS in their late 20s/early 30s walks away from the movie house towards a coffee shop at the end of the street.

One of the group, JAKE, 32, lingers at the back, listening to the following exchange between his friends.

FRIEND #1

Wasn't that a great movie?

FRIEND #2

Sure was. It was so realistic...

FRIEND #3

What movie were you watching?

It was terrible!

FRIEND #1

What are you talking about?

It felt completely authentic.

FRIEND #3

Only if you know nothing about history!

FRIEND #4

Exactly. That was so made up! It's like they didn't even bother doing any research. Just made the whole thing up out of thin air!

FRIEND #2

Who cares? It's not a documentary. It felt real and the story was so strong! What does it matter if some of it was made up? It's a movie!

FRIEND #3

That's stupid! If you base a movie on real life, that's what it should be...real! Otherwise, what's the point? It might as well be pure fiction...

They reach the coffee shop. The debate continues as they push open the door and head inside.

Jake lingers thoughtfully for a second before going inside to join his pals.

CUT TO:

Close on a computer screen. A blank Final Draft screenplay template document is open. The cursor blinks away on the left hand side of the screen, just waiting for someone to start producing magic.

We hear TWO TAPS on the keyboard. The cursor leaps over to the right side of the screen.

We hear MORE TAPS on the keyboard. With each tap, we see the enticing words 'FADE IN:' appear on the screen.

With a FINAL TAP, the cursor leaps back over to the left.

It continues to blink, still waiting for the magic to happen. But nothing does.

We hear A HUGE SIGH.

Pull back to reveal:

INT. JAKE'S APARTMENT - DAY

The computer sits on a cluttered desk filled with notepads of varying sizes, all kinds of 'how to write a great screenplay' guides and stacks of other weighty tomes.

Jake leans back in his desk chair and stares at the blank screen. It stares right back at him.

The cursor continues to blink away, taunting him.

JAKE (to himself)
Why is this so difficult!
You'd think writing about real
life would be easier...

Looking for a distraction, Jake goes back to the computer and brings up his email account.

The first unread email is from [Reel Screen Life](#) magazine.

JAKE (to himself)
Hmm, what's this?

We stay on Jake as he opens the email and reads the contents.

A contented smile slowly spreads across his face...

FADE OUT.

Why do we like true life adaptations?

Real life, or true life, adaptations are everywhere.

Indeed, look at the adapted and original screenplay nominees for the 86th and 87th Academy Awards and you'll find:

- *American Hustle* (2013)
- *American Sniper* (2014)
- *Captain Phillips* (2013)
- *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013)
- *Foxcatcher* (2014)
- *Philomena* (2013)
- *The Imitation Game* (Winner, 2014)
- *The Theory of Everything* (2014)
- *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)
- *12 Years a Slave* (Winner, 2013)

But what exactly are true life adaptations? And why do we like them so much?

Well, the true life adaptation takes an episode from the recent or distant past and transforms it into a screen story.

These films can be 'based upon', or 'inspired by' a true story, depending on how faithfully they adhere to the known facts.

Source material for these films can include:

- Historical documents (*Selma*, 2014)
- Interviews/first-hand accounts (*Dallas Buyers Club*)
- Biographies (*The Imitation Game*)
- Autobiographies (*12 Years a Slave*)
- Non-fiction books (*American Hustle*)
- Magazine/newspaper articles (*The Butler*, 2013)

But whatever their source and however diverse the subjects and time periods they cover, true life films all have the added dimension of portraying the lives of actual people.

As such, when they are done right, a true life adaptation can bring history to life in a way no dusty textbook ever could.

They can take us into the heart of the civil rights movement with Martin Luther King (*Selma*), the inner sanctum of the White House at the height of the Civil War (*Lincoln*), or the mind of a young Stephen Hawking (*The Theory of Everything*).

They can also invoke debate that reaches far beyond the confines of the arts pages, as highlighted by the controversies surrounding *American Sniper*.

As well as being popular with audiences, critics and awards-deciders, true life stories are often seen as easy for aspiring and established screenwriters to adapt.

After all, the story and characters, and maybe even some of the dialogue, are already in place. So all the screenwriter has to do is correctly format the script, fill in a few blanks and sell it to Hollywood for a million dollars, right?

Actually, no.

Real life adaptations come with their own specific problems and issues for the screenwriter to address, such as:

- When it comes to history, what is 'the truth'?
- How can writers interpret different versions of the same event?
- Do screenwriters owe any kind of duty to the real people and events they choose to portray?
- What kind of material makes a good true life adaptation?
- What if the material is screen-worthy but its structure doesn't lend itself to an effective narrative?

It's these challenges that [Reel Screen Life](#) will explore, with regular in-depth features and reviews designed to help cinephiles, writers, and students of film alike better understand, enjoy, and create true life adaptations.

Read on to find out more!

What are the essential ingredients of a true life film?

We've established that true life films are plentiful and diverse, but study any at length and you're likely to spot several common elements that indicate the writer has done a good (or not so good) job of bringing the tale to life.

Some of these include:

Focused storyline

Whether the source material is a 1,500-word magazine article or an 800-page non-fiction book, a good true life adaptation will have a strong central storyline that audiences can easily identify and follow.

Usually this will involve a compelling lead character (protagonist) with a clear goal that he/she either reaches or falls short of, with plenty of obstacles/conflict along the way and a powerful enemy (antagonist) out to ruin the party. There will also be a defined end point with a satisfying (but not necessarily happy) resolution.

In order to achieve this, the screenwriter might have:

- added or omitted material from source information
- cut out or combined characters
- shifted the order of events
- incorporated or omitted subplots

For example:

In *Serpico* (1973), we follow cop Frank Serpico (Al Pacino) as he pursues his goal of exposing corruption within the New York Police Department. Throughout, he's faced with growing threats to his career and even his own life as the NYPD tries to thwart his efforts. The film is an adaptation of Peter Maas's biography of the real Frank Serpico.

Identifiable themes

A good adaptation (or any type of film, actually) will have a clear, yet subtle, theme running through it, with reinforcing or contradictory subplots woven around the central story.

It is up to the writer to either find the main theme already present in the source material and emphasise it throughout the script, or incorporate one which fits the material.

For example:

While the theme of *12 Years a Slave* (based upon Solomon Northup's account of his own experiences) might seem obvious, it's a good example of how each character and each element of the story can become part of a coherent whole.

The film examines all facets of slavery - not just Solomon Northup's struggle to regain his freedom. Watch (or re-watch) the film and you'll find such related themes as: the impact of slavery on society; the role of religion; man's humanity and inhumanity; and the impact of slavery on slave-owners.

Adheres to the spirit of the original

While the point of adapting is to craft a story for the screen, this should not be at the expense of what makes the original story and characters so compelling.

Every story, no matter how 'easily' it seems to lend itself to adaptation will require plenty of reworking in order to transform it into a viable and strong screenplay, but the true skill is to make the script stand on its own two feet whilst being appropriately respectful to the people whose lives are being dramatized.

For example:

Despite the collective fawning that occurred when *American Hustle* came out, read the book the film was (loosely) based upon and you'll find that much of what made the true life story so compelling was stripped away, representing a huge wasted opportunity to make a really great, maybe even classic, film. Discuss. ([Reel Screen Life](#) doesn't shy away from controversy!)

Another illustration is *Argo* (2012), which departs from the source material in order to fictionalise events and shape a compelling narrative. The film presents an exciting and suspenseful, 'Hollywood-style' ending when the truth, according to the non-fiction book by the protagonist's real-life counterpart, Tony Mendez, was far more mundane; yet the essence of the film remains essentially true to the historical record.

What are the main challenges of adapting 'real life'?

To get a bit abstract for a moment, let's ponder the following question: What is the truth?

Deep, huh?

Let's take an example:

Think for a second...is how you remember events from your childhood the same as how your siblings or parents remember them?

Maybe one of your siblings was the favourite and had a wonderful childhood while you, growing up in the same house with the same parents at the same time, felt no one paid attention to you?

Maybe you felt misunderstood, while your parents remember you as a little troublemaker always seeking attention?

Maybe you're the youngest and were doted upon, while your older siblings felt pushed out after your arrival?

Maybe your parents thought they were 'strict but fair', while you thought they were just plain mean and never gave you the benefit of the doubt?

See? Now, if each of you in that house was tasked with writing an account of living there, the likely result would be several very different stories.

It's pretty easy to see how this applies to the true life adaptation. Indeed, the word 'story' is baked right into the word 'history'. Mixed with the facts are tales spun to inform, entertain or even support a specific point-of-view.

For example:

A person seeking to demonstrate that war is always wrong will offer up a very different version of, say, the Vietnam War than a person trying to prove the US only sends its troops into battle as a last resort. While there are indisputable facts about the Vietnam War on record, how each person 'spins' their version will be very different.

The first version is likely to focus on the devastating and destructive effects of the conflict while also drawing upon 'misguided' decisions by people in power, in order to underline the point they want to make.

The second version is likely to eschew the effects of battle, instead focusing on the difficulties faced by politicians in deciding what course to chart in resolving foreign policy crises.

This might sound a little bit dry, but the point is that the writer seeking to present a true life tale has any number of decisions to make, with the remit of not just portraying certain people/events, but coming up with an exciting and compelling story that will, if he's lucky, be made into an equally exciting and compelling film adored by critics and audiences alike.

So where does this leave the writer seeking to tell a 'true life' story. Where does he look for information? Who does he believe?

Let's take a quick example from cinema. *Selma* focuses on the three-month period of Dr Martin Luther King Jnr's non-violent campaign to give the black population of Selma, Alabama a say in how they were governed. It culminates in the historic march to Montgomery.

The dramatic thrust of the film is King's bid to force an initially reluctant US President (Lyndon B. Johnson) to pass legislation to ensure everyone had the right to vote without restriction (in what was eventually passed as the Voting Rights Act of 1965).

Following the film's release, a former aide to LBJ emphatically [refuted the film's portrayal](#), instead suggesting the President took a leading role in getting the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law and even that the Selma march was his idea. Academics and historians have since joined the criticism. In turn, others, including the film's director, Ava DuVernay, [leapt to the defence](#) of the portrayal and presented evidence to support LBJ's actions, as portrayed in the film.

Which side is right and, more importantly, should it matter?

Indeed, there is an argument that accuracy in 'true life' stories doesn't matter; the only thing that does matter is creating a compelling piece of cinema.

But surely filmmakers and screenwriters have a duty to be honest? After all, how many of us will go to watch a film like *Selma* then, as soon as the lights come up, run off to the nearest library and read up about the events portrayed to get a full picture? Not many, I'll bet.

What if the subject matter is really obscure? The film's account is likely to be the only exposure an audience gets to those particular events, so surely there's some obligation to tell a version of the truth; not least to honour the real people portrayed?

What if someone made a film about your life, or that of your family? Wouldn't you care how you and they were portrayed?

As you can see, 'the truth' is a huge subject...but it's one that [Reel Screen Life](#) will fearlessly tackle!

What about stories that don't lend themselves to adaptation?

Of course, not every true life tale lends itself to obvious adaptation. But that fact alone doesn't always mean the story won't work on screen. This is where a screenwriter's creativity comes into its own; taking seemingly unadaptable material and transforming it into screen gold.

Here are three problems adaptors might find themselves up against and how the ingenious screenwriters overcame them to great effect.

Unsympathetic protagonist

One of the things drilled into screenwriting students is that their protagonist must be likeable so the audience will root for him/her throughout the story. Really?

OK, well hand's up if you think *Raging Bull* (1980) is a screen classic..

Keep them raised if you actually like the character of Jake La Motta...

You get the point.

You might love Robert De Niro's intense performance; you might admire the film as a creative work; you may be blown away by the awesome fight sequences. But you'd be hard pressed to get all warm and fuzzy about the jealous, destructive, animalistic, self-loathing protagonist.

So why do we love *Raging Bull*?

Why do we want to follow La Motta?

Because, on some level, we can relate to him.

A character does not have to be likeable, but he/she does have to be relatable. They should also be redeemable in some way. This is done through highlighting their human weaknesses. Think about it.

We all have weaknesses.

We all have parts of our character of which we aren't proud.

We all have things about ourselves that we'd like to change.

We've all made mistakes and often felt the need to change our behaviour as a result.

We might not all be charging around like raging bulls, but La Motta's weaknesses make him a human being like us and we want to see some degree of redemption.

The film is a classic for many reasons; not least because it takes an unsympathetic real-life character and elevates him into a pitiful yet highly compelling protagonist. In the film, the boxing ring becomes the place where La Motta is 'punished' and eventually crucified for his earthly sins.

[For more see [here](#)]

Dramatizing a life full of achievement

Few could argue Abraham Lincoln packed much in to his life before that fateful trip to Ford's Theatre. Yet, the makers of *Lincoln* (2012) - writer, Tony Kushner, and director, Steven Spielberg - turned to a brief chapter in the President's life; specifically the final months, during which time he successfully got the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution passed by the House of Representatives.

The [process by which the film came about](#) is an interesting one and provides a good example of how rich source material can provide almost endless creative opportunities.

Spielberg originally acquired the rights to Doris Kearns Goodwin's biography, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, which covers not only Lincoln's ascent to the Presidency and his time in office, but also the stories of his main rivals, all of whom ended up in his Cabinet.

Initial drafts of the script (firstly by John Logan and secondly by Paul Webb) focused on Lincoln's friendship with Frederick Douglass and his entire Presidency, respectively. Eventually, Kushner was brought on board and his initial 500-page draft focusing on the final four months of Lincoln's life was cut down further focus on the final two.

Your homework, folks, is to read Kearns Goodwin's book and identify how much of it actually made it into the film! Hint: it's not a whole lot. Seriously, though, *Lincoln* is a great example of a great many aspects of the true life adaptation, including:

- thorough research
- a strong and focused storyline
- how direction, acting and production design can bring the 'historical' script memorably to life

[For more see [here](#)]

Awkward structure

There were plenty of problems facing writer Nicholas Kazan as he set about dramatizing the appeal by socialite Claus von Bulow against two convictions for attempted murder of his wealthy wife (who was actually in a coma). These included questions over von Bulow's actual guilt or innocence, ambiguous evidence and conflicting theories about the 'crime'.

Indeed, anyone familiar with *Reversal of Fortune* (1990) will appreciate it's not your typical whodunit; nor your typical legal thriller.

The solution was to focus the film not on von Bulow, but on his lawyer, Alan Dershowitz (on whose book the film was based), and the process he went through to assemble the case for his client's appeal. As such, we are swept along with Dershowitz and his law students as they wrestle with defending the enigmatic von Bulow.

It's a film filled with interesting, colourful characters and is so cleverly structured that the biggest weakness in the material (its ambiguity) becomes a virtue.

[For more see:

The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film by Linda Seger (Holt, 1992) pp 56-62]

What does *Reel Screen Life* bring to the table?

To help you navigate the world of true life adaptations, every two weeks, *RSL* brings you a selection of **in-depth features, articles and reviews**, both current and classic, which aim to explore the subject in all its glory.

It will bring together **expert comment** from the screenwriting gurus and offer discussion on key issues and current debates.

There will also be a round-up of news and a selection of regularly-updated **resources** to help you explore further.

For cinephiles: *RSL* aims to be an informal and entertaining film resource focussing exclusively on true life adaptations.

For screenwriters: *RSL* will provide even more, with a series of no-nonsense **lessons** taking you from idea to sale and everything in-between, as well as additional bits and pieces to help you **breathe new life into those true life tales**.

The first issue will include:

- An in-depth introductory article discussing the crucial question: Why tell a true story?
- A retrospective review of the controversial *American Sniper*, highlighting how the writer tackled a story set largely amid the polarising and emotive Iraq war
- A quick run-down of some true life tales which have become forgotten classics
- For screenwriters there will also be the first lesson in the on-going series, covering initial factors to consider when selecting material to adapt

***Reel Screen Life* launches on 25 May 2015.**

Visit us at: reelscreenlife.com

Follow us on Twitter at: [@reelscreenlife](https://twitter.com/reelscreenlife)

Contact us at: editor@reelscreenlife.com

References

Films and source material (where applicable)

American Hustle

Screenplay: Eric Warren Singer and David O. Russell

Inspiration: *The Sting Man* by Robert W. Greene

American Sniper

Screenplay: Jason Hall

Source: *American Sniper* by Chris Kyle, Scott McEwen and James Defelice

Argo

Screenplay: Chris Terrio

Source: *The Master of Disguise* by Antonio J. Mendez and '[The Great Escape](#)' by Joshua Bearman (featured in *Wired Magazine*)

Captain Phillips

Screenplay: Billy Ray

Source: *A Captain's Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALs, and Dangerous Days at Sea* by Richard Phillips and Stephan Talty

Dallas Buyers Club

Screenplay: Craig Borten and Melisa Wallack

Foxcatcher

Screenplay: E. Max Frye and Dan Futterman

Lee Daniels' The Butler

Screenplay: Danny Strong

Inspiration: '[A Butler Well Served by This Election](#)' by Wil Haygood (featured in the *Washington Post*)

Lincoln

Screenplay: Tony Kushner

Source: *Team of Rivals: Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Philomena

Screenplay: Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope

Source: *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* by Martin Sixsmith

Raging Bull

Screenplay: Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin

Source: *Raging Bull: My Story* by Jake La Motta with Joseph Carter and Peter Savage

Reversal of Fortune

Screenplay: Nicholas Kazan

Source: *Reversal of Fortune: Inside the von Bülow Case* by Alan M. Dershowitz

Selma

Screenplay: Paul Webb

Serpico

Screenplay: Waldo Salt and Norman Wexler

Source: *Serpico* by Peter Maas

The Imitation Game

Screenplay: Graham Moore

Source: *Alan Turing: The Enigma* by Andrew Hodges

The Theory of Everything

Screenplay: Anthony McCarten

Source: *Travelling to Infinity* by Jane Hawking

The Wolf of Wall Street

Screenplay: Terence Winter

Source: *The Wolf of Wall Street* by Jordan Belfort

12 Years a Slave

Screenplay: John Ridley

Source: *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup