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# DRAMATICA<sup>®</sup> FOR SCREENWRITERS<sup>™</sup>

How to get the most out of Dramatica Pro  
while writing or rewriting a Screenplay

by

*Armando Saldaña Mora*

Based on a theory developed by  
Melanie Anne Phillips and Chris Huntley



Write Brothers<sup>®</sup>

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INTRODUCTION

**WHAT TO EXPECT  
FROM READING  
THIS BOOK**

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## THE REAL LOWDOWN ON THIS BOOK

Are you afraid this may be a “Dramatica For Dimwits” manual?

Don’t worry—it’s not.

Mostly because you’re not a dimwit (look, you bought the book!).

But also because Dramatica (the theory) and Dramatica® Pro (the software) are deep and expansive tools for creative writing. So this book is for creative types (or for those who want help to be), and it takes a very creative approach. It merges software reference, inspirational exercises, and literary theory. It is part *Dramatica Query System Quick Guide*, part “What Would Happen If...?” and part Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

So don’t expect the instructions to be as concrete as “Press the ENTER key...” or “Type C:/Setup...” Rather, expect them to be as imaginative as: “Picture your characters as people you know...” or “Think of several possibilities for the scene that illustrates...”

This book asks you to be inventive, productive, inspired, original, and much more. It coaches you through one screenwriter’s way of understanding Dramatica’s features and, if you stick with it all the way through, it equips you to use Dramatica to write numerous well-developed and entertaining stories for the screen.

Isn’t that what you really want?

### How To Use This Book

*Dramatica for Screenwriters* is a companion piece to the Dramatica® Pro software. Specifically, the book works best with version Dramatica® Pro 4. Though there are many references to specific features and reports unique to version 4, most examples, tips, and exercises apply to all versions of Dramatica, and often, to screenwriting in general. A passing familiarity with Dramatica’s basic terminology is recommended.

### Who This Book Is For

*Dramatica for Screenwriters* focuses on the practical application of Dramatica® Pro for the development, writing, and rewriting of motion picture screenplays. This

book is for everyone involved in developing a script. This includes writers, script doctors, story editors, development executives, producers, directors, and anyone else interested enough in the script to take part in improving its character depth, entertainment value, meaningfulness, and satisfying completeness.

## What This Book Is Not

Though this book is chock-full of general purpose advice on writing, it is *not* your basic “How to Write a Screenplay” reference book. *Dramatica for Screenwriters* does not describe proper script format, nor does it tell you how to sell your script or get an agent. Dozens of fine books on those subjects are already available online or in bookstores. This book focuses strictly on how to use the profound writing tool called Dramatica to develop great stories for the screen.

## What If You Don’t Have Dramatica® Pro?

If you don’t have Dramatica® Pro software, but you do write screenplays or other forms of fiction, you may find *Dramatica for Screenwriters* loaded with useful information and ideas. Like the Dramatica Theory, this book offers concepts that numerous professional fiction writers now praise as the most insightful and biggest paradigm shift they have ever learned, regardless of their previous literary training.

## Dramatica Terminology

Dramatica is filled with specific terminology. Some of it is unique to Dramatica. Most are familiar terms used in specific, non-traditional ways. Over the years there have been changes to some of the Dramatica terminology. If you are new to Dramatica, you won’t notice these changes. If you’re a longtime Dramatica user, a list of the changes appear on the next page.

In addition to the terminology, there are four acronyms frequently used in this book. They are:

- OS—Overall Story, the “big picture” part of your story which typically involves a Story Goal and the efforts of the characters to achieve it.
- MC—Main Character, the character through whose eyes the audience experiences the story.
- IC—Impact Character, the character who holds an alternative perspective to that of the MC.
- SS—Subjective Story (also known as M/I, MC/IC, Main Character v. Impact Character Story), the key relationship explored in the story.

## Dramatica Terminology changes since its first Introduction

Current Term	Original Term
Overall Story .....	Objective Story
Impact Character .....	Obstacle Character
Main vs. Impact.....	Subjective Story*
Throughline** .....	Domain
Situation.....	Universe
Activity.....	Physics
Fixed Attitude .....	Mind
Manipulation.....	Psychology
How Things Are Changing.....	Progress
Gathering Information.....	Learning
Developing A Plan.....	Conceptualizing
Conceiving An Idea.....	Conceiving
Playing A Role .....	Being
Changing One's Nature .....	Becoming
Memories .....	Memory
Impulsive Responses .....	Preconscious
Contemplation.....	Conscious
Innermost Desires .....	Subconscious
Symptom [ <i>element</i> ] .....	Focus [ <i>element</i> ]
Response [ <i>element</i> ] .....	Direction [ <i>element</i> ]
Issue.....	Range
Benchmark.....	Stipulation
Main Character Growth .....	Main Character Direction
Main Character Problem-Solving Technique.....	Main Character Mental Sex*
Logical / Linear.....	Male* [ <i>Mental Sex</i> ]
Intuitive / Holistic .....	Female* [ <i>Mental Sex</i> ]
Story Driver.....	Story Work
Story Point .....	Appreciation

\* The original term is used in this book in lieu of the new term.

\*\* For simplicity's sake, Throughline is used in place of Domain in Dramatica® Pro 4 even though they aren't truly the same. See the Dramatica Dictionary at [www.dramatica.com](http://www.dramatica.com) for further clarification.

Brief definitions for many of these terms are in the appendix at the back of this book. Longer definitions may be found online at [Dramatica.com](http://Dramatica.com), in Dramatica® Pro's online dictionary, and in the Dramatica theory book, *Dramatica: A New Theory of Story* (10th edition).

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SECTION I

**WHAT DRAMATICA  
OFFERS THE  
SCREENWRITER**

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# 1

## THE DRAMATICA PHILOSOPHY

Okay, forget the philosophy. Let me tell you what's really on your mind:

*Does Dramatica guarantee I'll sell my screenplay?*

and...

*Should I obey and comply with all Dramatica rules?*

Am I right? Are those the questions burning holes in the brain of every Dramatica user, or what?

Long ago, when I started with the Dramatica software, I wondered, "*Should I obey and comply with all Dramatica rules?*" and "*Does Dramatica guarantee I'll sell my screenplay?*" I was ignorant of several truths about the art of selling a screenplay. Since then I've learned a lot. Here's what I found out:

- Every single script I write competes against 39,999 other scripts written each year. Even the most meager independent filmmaker gets piles and piles of new stories to read. Agents get them by the ton. Studios get them in truckloads. In a nutshell:

**THE SCREENPLAY MARKET HAS REACHED A POINT WHERE  
WRITING A GOOD SCREENPLAY IS JUST NOT ENOUGH.**

- No matter how much I polish a script, somebody will ask me to rewrite it. That's the nature of screenwriting. An optioned script goes through a dozen drafts before it's sold. Once it's sold, it goes through two dozen more rewrites before it even sees the light of pre-production. My conclusion is this:

**IN THE SCREENWRITING BUSINESS, REWRITING IS AT  
LEAST, IF NOT MORE, ESSENTIAL THAN WRITING.**

- Every agent, producer, or director who doesn't already know me opens my script, instinctively looks for the writer's name on the cover page and thinks: *Who the heck is this guy? Does he even know what he's doing? What if he's an amateur? I can't waste my time with amateurish scripts! I don't have time for this!* So, without reading anything but my name, they throw my manuscript into the "Read Later" pile—where it gathers dust for a thousand years. Here's the catch-22:

**A SCREENWRITER HAS TO SHOW DEEP  
KNOWLEDGE AND CRAFT EXPERTISE JUST TO  
EARN THE HONOR OF BEING READ.**

- The few times I got past the reading stage and got a meeting with an agent/producer/director, I find out they don't have much interest in discussing my story. They have lots of interest in discussing the potential stories I could write for them: *"Can you write maybe a light, romantic comedy?"* or *"Can you write a vehicle for this young actor?"* I found that there is a "screenwriters A-list." It consists of writers who can tackle any idea, who can handle and deliver all the potential projects pretty much as requested. So the moral of the story is:

**IN THIS SWARMING, OVERFLOWING MARKET OF SPEC  
SUBMISSIONS, SCREENPLAYS HAVE BECOME CHEAP—WHILE  
SCREENWRITERS (GOOD ONES, WHO CONSISTENTLY KNOW  
WHAT THEY'RE DOING) HAVE BECOME PRIZED CITIZENS.**



So I wrestled with these colossal truths of the trade while also trying to understand how to write with Dramatica—all the time tortured by an underlying doubt: *Does Dramatica guarantee I'll sell my screenplay?*

Well sure, Dramatica gave my stories better structure. And sure, the software suggested possibilities I hadn't thought of for my script. And—I had to admit—my screenplays showed an overall improvement the more I grasped this theory. But...

*Would that be enough to overcome the colossal truths of the trade, to defeat the market's hurdles and make a sale?*

Just to get past my insecurity, I resolved to put aside my doubts and keep learning, writing, and sending out my Dramatica-informed scripts.

And, lo and behold, one of those scripts got a positive answer from a producer. She asked me for a pitch meeting! She gave me the usual third degree about my story's structure, characters' personalities, use of genre, and thematic premise. But because I'd written this story with *Dramatica*, I could answer every question with precise, confident answers. At the end of the session, the producer had nothing else to ask, and the story structure still stood as pristine as the Pellegrino water on her desk. She gave me a curious look—which became a warm smile as she said:

*"Well, you obviously know what you're doing."*

Of course she asked me for a rewrite—but for the very first time in my life, a producer spent a whole hour of her busy schedule giving me enthusiastic suggestions about how I should do the rewrite!

I went home to work on the rewrite with a newfound self-confidence. My credibility was greatly enhanced when I used my *Dramatica* learning to explain the story's structure. I had a hunch that, because of *Dramatica*, I had shown this producer a level of knowledge and expertise she'd rarely seen—and thus I'd finally taken the first step toward "the other side of the market."

More importantly, the rewrite came out *exactly* as the producer wanted it. Since I wrote it with software that gave me complete control over the plot, characters, theme and story ending, this was a cinch. She congratulated me and asked me to participate on several newer, bigger, more important projects.

From then on, my life as a writer changed. I was on the "A-list." I got a couple of large projects to develop. Some big-shot producers started asking me for opinions on their optioned screenplays. The Berlin Festival level directors gave me their personal phone numbers. I gave a couple of lectures on story analysis, and got a regular gig teaching a class for screenwriters. My students were happy. The producers were happy. I was happy.

The best part was, the things I wrote were no longer competing in that 40,000-script race. I'd earned the right to actually be read, instead of just being thrown into the pile. The big shots had started viewing me as an "up-and-coming writer," instead of an "unknown wanna-be." I was getting through to producers instead of just their personal assistants. The market was considering me, not automatically dismissing me, all because I showed a producer that I knew what I was doing—once.

**DRAMATICA DOESN'T GUARANTEE THE SALE OF MY SCREENPLAY,  
BUT IT SURE HELPS ME SELL MYSELF AS A SCREENWRITER.**

Can it do the same for you?

I don't see why not.

But you'll have to pay the price. You'll have to master *Dramatica*.

Which leads us to the remaining question:

*“Should I accept and abide by all of Dramatica’s rules?”*

I agonized over this . . . until I accepted:

*“No, not really.”*

Not really, because Dramatica doesn’t give me any “rules.” It gives me a framework, a model to which I compare my story—to see where I want to follow the model closely, and where I want my story to fly free on its own. Dramatica is a set of writing tools:

- A compass that I can use to find navigational points whenever I lose my writing direction.
- A blueprint I can employ to disassemble a story and rebuild it.
- A grid I can use “behind my story,” like a painter uses a grid to sketch in her initial composition lines before applying one dab of paint.

It turns out that Dramatica is NOT:

- The slate of commandments I initially thought it was.
- The implacable and cold Development Exec who throws formulas and arbitrary demands into my story.
- The shamanistic Writing-Theory-Of-The-Day that twists all scripts into its precepts.

**DRAMATICA CONSISTS OF TOOLS TO DRAW UPON  
WHEN NEEDED AND LAY ASIDE WHEN NOT.**

And every time I work with it, I confirm that the Dramatica model is anything but arbitrary. It’s a model where every story point (every plot event, every character trait, every thematic argument) supports all the other story points.

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# 2

## DRAMATICA'S ADVANTAGES

Before starting a project with Dramatica, you should know what to expect. As with any creative approach, Dramatica has its own special style, particular limits, and unique powers. Dramatica makes many writing tasks easier to accomplish. Others are still tricky, even with Dramatica. So you'd better know what you're going to get up front to help you decide when to go with Dramatica.

Here are some distinctive advantages of writing a story with Dramatica:

- **Dramatica Can Get You To Write Really Fast**

You can finish a complete first draft in three months. Rewrite periods are even faster.

- **Dramatica Can Get You To Consider Ideas You Hadn't Thought Of.**

It gives you perspectives on your story you hadn't contemplated – but producers or the audience will. With Dramatica's help, you'll arrive at a more complete, audience satisfying story.

- **Dramatica Allows You To Start Writing Your Story At Any Point While Assuring Perfect Sense**

No more “don't type a letter until you have a solid premise” or “leave the dialogue for last.” If you have a favorite scene and you can find a way to squeeze it into the storyform, the software will make sure the rest of your story fits in nicely, coherently, and entertainingly around it.

- **Dramatica Clarifies A Process That's Usually Trial and Error**

With a little practice, you can accurately anticipate how any new idea would affect the whole story – which aspects fit and which don't—without even opening the software. Practice pays off.

- **A Dramatica Story Has “Heart”**

The Dramatica model is structured in a way that won't allow you to ignore the inner workings of your characters. It will urge you to show their true nature and, at some point, make a significant change in a character's nature. As a result, your story compels your audience to identify with your characters and feel *moved*. A deep emotional response is the result of stories with *heart*.

- **A Dramatica Story Has Diversity**

In the Dramatica model, every subject should grow until it reaches its last consequence. A story that starts with a simple problem develops into unsuspected predicaments and serious difficulties that stem from the original problem. Dramatica won't let you linger forever on the same issue.

- **A Dramatica Story Is Fully Developed**

This means that every view, thread, and layer of your story is developed to its full potential and its ultimate stages. Dramatica separates your story into co-functional threads and components, makes you develop each one as an independent piece, then helps you rejoin them cohesively.

This gives you a coherent theme and a plot without holes. But more importantly, it makes a convincing argument to the audience, a story that exhausts every alternative and independently considers every side before reaching its final, unavoidable conclusion.



There you have it. Dramatica may not be for everyone, but it is a great writing tool if you learn how to use it.

Have you made your decision to continue reading? Then open your Dramatica software and let's get into some actual writing.

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SECTION II  
**THE OVERALL  
PICTURE**

THE DIFFICULT  
DECISIONS OF  
STORYFORMING

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# 4

## DRAMATICA IN THIRTY SECONDS

Not actually thirty seconds—more like ten minutes—but anyway, this is a fast and fun method to evaluate if a storyform fits, to fine-tune a storyform, and to create a solid brief synopsis to start our storytelling.

Cool, huh? Here it is in a nutshell:

- *Driver + Consequence*
- *Goal + Requirements*
- *Forewarnings + Limit*
- *Driver + Outcome*

Here's how it works:

### Example 1: A Horror Story

Suppose we're writing a *Horror Story* about a haunted house, and we have set our storyform to the following items:

*Driver:* **Decision**

*Limit:* **Timelock**

*Outcome:* **Success**

*Goal:* **The Future**

*Consequence:* **Innermost Desires**

*Requirements:* **The Present**

*Forewarnings:* **Gathering Information**

First we start by putting these items in the following order:

- Decision (*Driver*) + Innermost Desires (*Consequence*)
- The Future (*Goal*) + The Present (*Requirements*)
- Learning (*Forewarnings*) + Timelock (*Limit*)
- Decision (*Driver*) + Success (*Outcome*)

Now we write a short synopsis consisting of four short paragraphs:

- The *1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph* tells the beginning of our story by blending the *Driver* and the story's *Consequence*.
- The *2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph* recounts our story's development by blending the *Goal* and the *Requirements*.
- The *3<sup>rd</sup> Paragraph* describes the critical moment that forces the characters to a decision (that is the Crisis) by blending the *Forewarnings* and the *Limit*.
- And the *4<sup>th</sup> Paragraph* tells how the story ends by blending another instance of the *Driver* and the *Outcome*.

We end up with something like this:

“To change her shy personality and stop her subconscious fears (*Consequence of Innermost Desires*), a teenager decides to join her friends for a party at an allegedly haunted house (*Driver of Decision*).”

“Unexplainable events start killing the group of teenagers one by one. They must survive this terrifying current situation (*Requirements of The Present*) and escape to secure their future (*Goal of The Future*).”

“The few survivors wait until sunrise—when the house's curse is supposed to end (*Timelock Limit*), but a few minutes before dawn, they find a clue that one of them is the murderer (*Forewarnings of Learning*). Unmasked, he tries to kill them all.”

“The shy girl decides to face the killer (*Driver of Decision*) and gets him to fall into one of his own traps, saving herself and the remaining teenagers (*Outcome of Success*).”

That's it, neat and simple. It's enough to give us a clear idea of our storyform, to evaluate if it's the way we want it to go, and if so, to start telling our screenplay.

If not, this is the time to choose:

- If our story needs an *Action Driver* instead of a *Decision Driver*.
- If our *Consequence* should be *The Past* instead of *Innermost Desires*.
- Or, if our *Goal* should be *Developing a Plan* instead of *The Future*.

With our four-paragraph synopsis, structure changes come easily. Better to do them now than when we are on page 117 of our final draft.

## Example 2: A Courtroom Drama

Let's do another example: A *Courtroom Drama* about a woman unjustly accused of murder.

Here are the storyform Items:

- Action (*Driver*) + The Present (*Consequence*)
- Contemplation (*Goal*) + Innermost Desires (*Requirements*)
- Changing One's Nature (*Forewarnings*) + Optionlock (*Limit*)
- Action (*Driver*) + Failure (*Outcome*).

Let's give it a try and write our four paragraphs:

- "A married man is discovered dead (*Driver of Action*), and evidence incriminates his lover, so she is arrested and put in jail during the trial (*Consequence of The Present*)."
- "Her lawyer presents several arguments that should make the jurors consider her innocence (*Goal of Contemplation*), but she's an adulterer which drives the jurors' emotions against her (*Requirements of Innermost Desires*)."
- "This harrowing experience changes her and makes her tough (*Forewarnings of Changing One's Nature*). The sexual implications of the charges bring her unbearable sexual harassment by the bailiffs and prison guards, until she can't stand it any longer (*Limit of Optionlock*)."
- "This situation takes her to a point where she attacks a bailiff (*Driver of Action*), and this act condemns her in the jurors' eyes. She is declared guilty and sentenced to death (*Outcome of Failure*)."

That's okay for a first draft—though it could improve if we upgrade the storytelling a little:

*“Sarah is a shy woman who falls for a married man. Even though she’s against adultery, she starts an affair with him. One day, her lover tells Sarah they should end their affair. She agrees, and they say farewell amicably. The next day he is found dead in the same hotel room where they used to meet. The hotel clerk identifies Sarah as the last person who saw him. Sarah is arrested. Word hits the media, and suddenly Sarah becomes the “adulteress-murderer” in all the tabloids. Sarah’s lawyers present hard evidence of her innocence, but the jury is biased because of her adulterous behavior and is not convinced. While imprisoned, Sarah is also under the constant sexual harassment of a sinister bailiff. The media pressure, the prosecution, and the officer’s harassment are too much for Sarah who assaults the menacing bailiff right in the courtroom. This is seen by the jury as the clear evidence of Sarah’s guilt. She’s pronounced guilty and sentenced to death.”*

There, with the same storyform items, we now have a synopsis strong enough for a pitch meeting.

Still, this is only a partial view of our story. Just some of the major events to see if we—and the producers—like this particular storyform or another. From here we develop our story. We have the rest of this book to do so.

### Example 3: An Action/Historical Drama

But, for now, let's do another example: How about an **Action/Historical Drama** about the Hindenburg Disaster?

Here are our items:

- Decision (*Driver*) + Changing One's Nature (*Consequence*)
- Obtaining (*Goal*) + Doing (*Requirements*)
- Impulsive Responses (*Forewarnings*) + Optionlock (*Limit*)
- Decision (*Driver*) + Failure (*Outcome*)

Now let's do it:

- “To avoid being transformed by the rabid Nazi ideology (*Consequence of Changing One's Nature*), a young German decides to flee his country (*Driver of Decision*) by getting a job on the Hindenburg and a passage to America.”

- “His idea is to escape on arrival at Lakehurst, to ask for political protection, and eventually to gain American citizenship (*Goal of Obtaining*). His plan is jeopardized because he enrolled and served in the Nazi Party (*Requirements of Doing*) to get the job on the zeppelin.”
- “Onboard the aircraft the young man feels impulsively attracted to an American woman (*Forewarnings of Impulsive Responses*) who is presumed to be of Jewish descent. A Nazi Officer notices and puts the young man under veiled observation until the young man has no choice but to confess he doesn’t believe in the Nazi ideology (*Limit of Optionlock*).”
- “At the moment of the fire, the Nazi Official offers the young man a quick exit—with a tacit debt to the Nazi Party—but the young man refuses and stays aboard to help the American woman (*Driver of Decision*). He saves her, still happy that he’s made the right decision, but loses his life (*Outcome of Failure*).”

Try writing several drafts of your synopsis, experimenting with different storyforms, exploring the possibilities, and going crazy. Try everything until you find the storyform that truly fits the story you want to write.



Now, with a synopsis based on structure, a strong premise, clearly defined characters, and a setting based on our genre, it will be a breeze to complete the perfect storyform for our story and write the treatment from it.