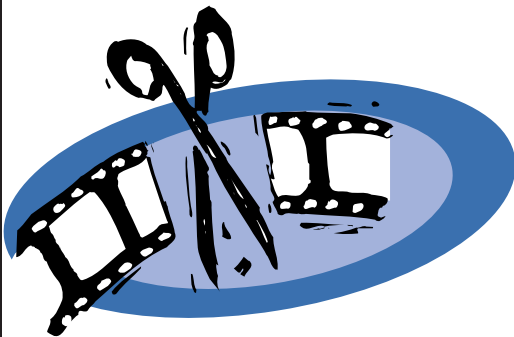
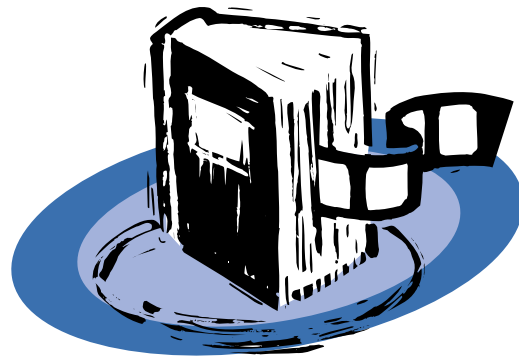
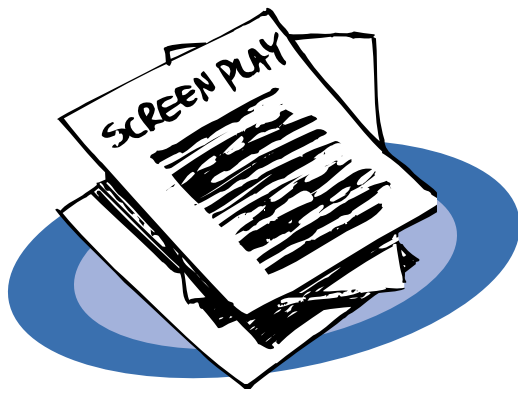
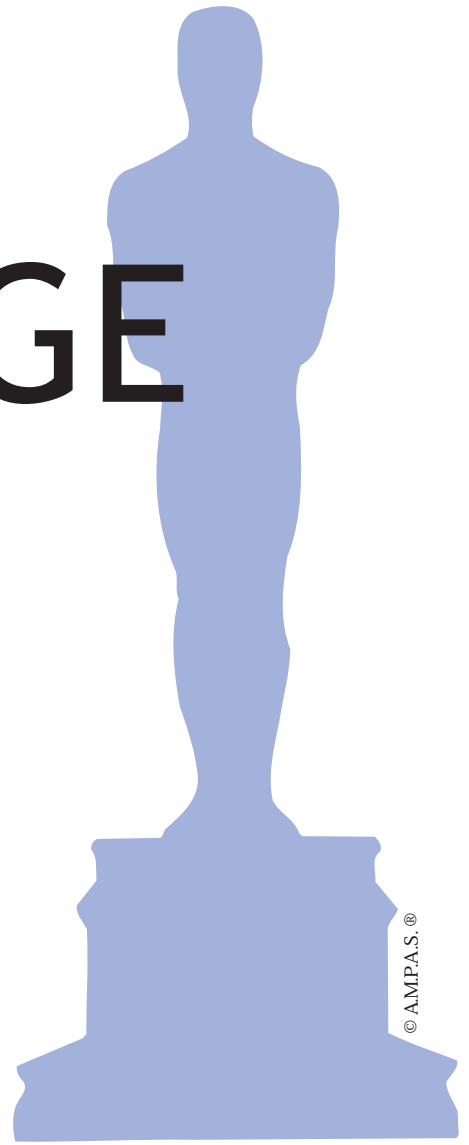


# SCREENWRITING:

# THE LANGUAGE *of* FILM



Teacher's  
Resource  
Guide





Dear Educator:

Youth Media International, in cooperation with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, is proud to present the first in a series of annual study guides that will focus on the different branches of the Academy. The guide is keyed to the 71st Annual Academy Awards® presentation, which will take place on Sunday, March 21, 1999, when Oscars® are handed out for distinguished achievements in film during 1998.

This guide focuses on the art of writing, one of the many craft areas involved in creating a motion picture. Students will learn about screenwriting as they complete the activities in this kit, which has been designed for students in secondary school English, language arts and communications courses. The activities are designed to capitalize on students' natural interest in current films and the excitement generated by the Academy Awards to teach valuable lessons in critical thinking and creative writing, and to develop visual literacy skills.

The Academy, organized in 1927, is a professional honorary organization composed of more than 6,000 motion picture craftsmen and women. Its purposes include advancing the art and science of motion pictures; fostering cooperation among creative leaders for cultural, educational and technological progress; recognizing outstanding achievements, and fostering educational activities between the professional community and the public at large. Academy members are the people who create movies—the cream of the industry's actors, art directors, cinematographers, costume designers, directors, film editors, make-up artists, composers, producers, sound and visual effects experts, and writers.

Please share this material with other teachers in your school. Although the material is copyrighted, you may make as many photocopies as necessary to meet your students' needs.

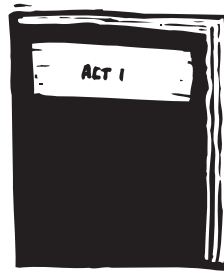
To ensure that you receive future mailings, please fill out and return the enclosed reply card. Also, feel free to e-mail us at [schoolroom@aol.com](mailto:schoolroom@aol.com) to comment about the program at any time. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions.

Sincerely,



Roberta Nusim  
Publisher

This is the first in a series of guides that will focus on different branches of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. If you would like to receive future kits from the Academy and its various branches, please be sure to fill out and return the enclosed reply card.



## Program Components

1. This instructional guide
2. Four student activity masters
3. A four-color wall poster for classroom display
4. A response card for teacher comments

## Target Audience

This program has been designed for students in secondary school English, language arts and communications courses.

## Program Objectives

1. To enhance student interest in and knowledge about the motion picture development and production process.
2. To encourage students to use critical thinking, creative writing and language skills as they learn how writers contribute to the process of creating a motion picture.
3. To engage students in an exploration of film as a medium of communication.
4. To help students become more visually literate.

## Introduction

The first Academy Awards were handed out on May 16, 1929, just after the advent of "talkies." By 1930, enthusiasm was so great that a Los Angeles radio station did a live, one-hour broadcast, and the Awards have enjoyed broadcast coverage ever since.

The number and types of awards have grown over the years. Since 1981, Awards of Merit—Oscars—have been presented for achievement in each of the following categories or sub-divisions of categories: acting, art direction, cinematography, costume design, directing, documentary film, film editing, foreign-language film, make-up, music, best picture, animated and live-action short film, sound, sound-effects editing, visual effects and writing. In an age when awards shows seem as common as nightly news programs, the Academy Awards are unique because the judges—Academy members—are

the top filmmakers from around the world. The question, "Who gets the Oscar?," is decided by a true jury of peers.

With the exception of the best picture, documentary,

foreign-language film and short-film categories, nominations (of up to five selections for each category) are determined by a secret ballot of Academy members representing each category. All Academy members vote to select the final winners.

The awards nomination and selection process provides a wonderful opportunity to teach your students about the many craft areas—and the many communications techniques—that play a part in creating a motion picture. Filmmaking is by nature a collaborative process, with each craft area supporting and being supported by the others. Because our space is limited, this kit focuses on just one of those areas—writing.

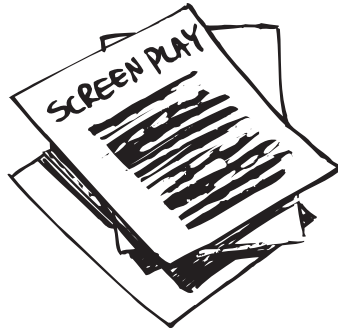


## Selecting Films for Student Viewing

Students may select the films they wish to view during the following activities, or you may wish to suggest films that you believe are appropriate.

The following films have won Academy Awards for screenwriting and may be appropriate for your students: *Forrest Gump* (adapted screenplay, 1994), *Howards End* (adapted screenplay, 1992), *Ghost* (original screenplay, 1990), *Dead Poets Society* (original screenplay, 1989), *Driving Miss Daisy* (adapted screenplay, 1989), and *Breaking Away* (original screenplay, 1979).

The following films were nominated for Academy Awards and may be appropriate for your students: *Shine* (original screenplay, 1996), *Toy Story* (original screenplay, 1995), *Babe* (adapted screenplay, 1995), *Apollo 13* (adapted screenplay, 1995), *Field of Dreams* (adapted screenplay, 1989), and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (original screenplay, 1982).



### Activity 1.

## STRUCTURING a SCREENPLAY

The creative process of writing is the same regardless of the medium—whether the writer is working on a book, a play or a screenplay. However, there are important differences in the technical process of writing for a visual medium like film. Perhaps most important, the writer must be able to think in visual terms—he or she must be able to *show* what is happening.

Syd Field, author of several books on screenwriting, describes a screenplay as being “like a noun—it’s about a *person*, or persons, in a *place* or places, doing his or her or their ‘*thing*.’” In a screenplay, the story is told with pictures, and it follows a very definite form. Like a play, the screenplay unfolds in acts: In act one the writer sets up the story. Act two contains the conflict—the basis of any drama. According to Field, “All drama is conflict. Without conflict you have no character; without character, you have no action; without action, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay.” Finally, act three provides some kind of resolution.

Some writers begin their work by writing the ideas for their scenes on index cards. Others begin with an outline. Still others start with a treatment—a narrative synopsis of what happens in the story. Regardless of format, each approach takes into consideration character descriptions, central story conflicts and key plot points.

In this activity your students will learn about the structure of a screenplay; they will view a film, identify the three basic parts, and analyze how each part con-

tributes to the dramatic whole. Then, they will develop the treatment for their own original story.

**Supplementary Activity:** Have students identify and discuss the “plot points” in the film they viewed. (A plot point is an incident or event that ties into the action in the first act of the film and connects it to act two. Another plot point occurs at the end of the second act, and connects it to act three.) Have them incorporate plot points into their treatments.

### Activity 2.

## FORMATTING theSCRIPT

The rules for screenwriting extend to the format in which the script is prepared. The script section on the activity

sheet provides a good example for your students to follow (parts of it have been abridged for space). For a more detailed discussion of proper script format, you might want to review the discussion on screenplay format that is included in the Nicholl Fellowships section of the Academy Web site (<http://www.oscars.org/academy/nichollformat2.html>).

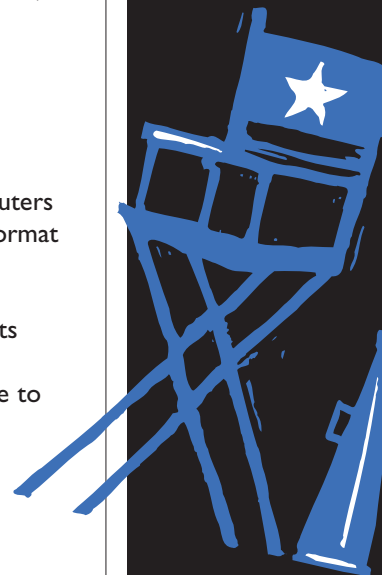
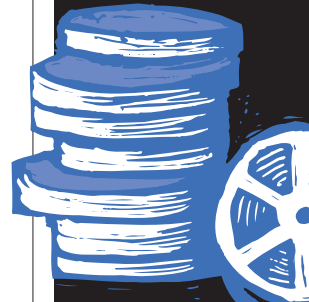
Be sure to note that “shooting scripts” (the scripts you are most likely to find at the library) are not the same as the scripts that screenwriters prepare. These scripts—known as submission scripts, sales scripts, or first-draft scripts—do not include scene numbers and designate few, if any, camera shots.

Before your students begin to work on their scripts, you might want to give them some practice in writing visually. Give your students a situation—for example, two members of the homecoming court show up for the game in the same dress, or the star forward on the basketball team does laundry for the first time and ends up with a pink jersey. Ask each student to “script” the situation. Then, have your students take turns explaining the approaches they took.

*Note:* If your students have access to computers, encourage them to set up their scripts according to the model provided. If computers are not available, students can approximate the format as they write by hand.



**Supplementary Activity:** Have students complete their scripts and hold a “screenwriter’s showcase” where each young writer has a chance to discuss his or her script with classmates.





### Activity 3.

## DEVELOPING a SCREENPLAY from a BOOK

If a book is adapted to film, a screenplay also must be developed for it. To begin this activity, have your students view the film *Sense and Sensibility*—either as a class or individually at home. Then, have them read the book. As they read, ask them to make notes on how the book differs from the film.

The book and the film revolve around Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who with their younger sister and mother are left in reduced circumstances after the death of their father. They are taken in by a kindly cousin, but their lack of fortune affects both young women's chances for marriage. Elinor forms an attachment with the wealthy Edward Ferrars, but his family disapproves.

The exercise on the activity sheet will require you or a student to read the following passage from the book aloud to the class. In this passage, Elinor is talking with Lucy Steele, a wealthy young woman whom she has only recently met. Elinor speaks first:

"But really, I never understood that you were at all connected with that family, and therefore I am a little surprised, I confess, at so serious an inquiry into her character."

"I dare say you are, and I am sure I do not at all wonder at it. But if I dared tell you all, you would not be so much surprised. Mrs. Ferrars is certainly nothing to me at present,—but the time *may* come—how soon it will come must depend upon herself—when we may be very intimately connected."

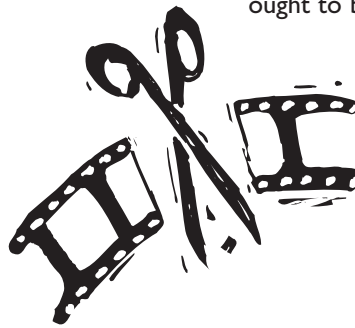
She looked down as she said this, amiably bashful, with only one side glance at her companion to observe its effect on her.

"Good heavens!" cried Elinor, "what do you mean? Are you acquainted with Mr. Robert Ferrars? Can you be \_\_\_\_\_?" And she did not feel much delighted with the idea of such a sister-in-law.

"No," replied Lucy, "not to Mr. *Robert* Ferrars—I never saw him in my life; but," fixing her eyes upon Elinor, "to his elder brother."

What felt Elinor at that moment? Astonishment, that would have been as painful as it was strong, had not an immediate disbelief of the assertion attended it. She turned towards Lucy in silent amazement, unable to divine the reason or object of such a declaration, and though her complexion varied, she stood firm in incredulity and felt in no danger of an hysterical fit, or a swoon.

"You may well be surprised," continued Lucy, "for to be sure you could have had no idea of it before; for I dare say he never dropped the smallest hint of it to you or any of your family; because it was always meant to be a great secret, and I am sure has been faithfully



kept so by me to this hour. Not a soul of all my relations know of it but Anne, and I never should have mentioned it to you, if I had not felt the greatest dependence in the world upon your secrecy; and I really thought my behaviour in asking so many questions about Mrs. Ferrars, must seem so odd, that it ought to be explained. And I do not think Mr. Ferrars can be displeased, when he knows I have trusted you, because I know he has the highest opinion in the world of all your family, and looks upon yourself and the other Miss Dashwoods, quite as his own sisters."—She paused.

Elinor for a few moments remained silent. Her astonishment at what she heard was at first too great for words; but at length forcing herself to speak, and to speak cautiously, she said with a calmness of manner, which tolerably well concealed her surprise and solicitude—"May I ask if your engagement is of long standing?"

"We have been engaged these four years."

"Four years!"

"Yes."

"I did not know," said she, "that you were even acquainted till the other day."

This passage is very similar to the corresponding scene in the film. However, Jane Austen *tells* us a great deal about what Elinor is thinking and feeling. In the film, we must rely on the writer's ability and the ability of the actress who plays Elinor (Emma Thompson, who also wrote the film's Oscar-winning screenplay) to *show* us what she is thinking and feeling.

### Activity 4.

## LEARNING from the WINNERS

Each year, the film industry produces an array of outstanding new releases. Some are especially appropriate for families, some are appealing to teens, and some are geared toward adult audiences. If you or the parents of your students feel that some, or even all, of this year's nominees might be inappropriate for viewing by young people, you can modify this activity in several ways. Students can locate reviews in newspapers and magazines, compare what the critics have to say, and determine their selections for this year's winning films. They can view Academy Award nominees and Academy Award-winning films from past years to complete the exercises. A list of past nominees and winners appears at the beginning of this teacher's guide.

ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES





# STRUCTURING a SCREENPLAY

Every good film starts with a good screenplay, or visual story. Unlike a novel, where the action unfolds in the mind of the main character, or a play, where the action unfolds through the words of the characters, film is a visual medium. The viewer must be able to see the action unfold.

The process begins when the writer develops a "treatment" of the story. A treatment is a brief synopsis that tells the core of the story. It is generally 4 to 20 pages in length and includes the plot, action, central characters and emotional sub-plots of the story. It is an excellent tool to allow the writer to see where story points work, and where they do not.

Next, the screenwriter begins to work on the screenplay itself. In doing so, he or she uses a very specific three-act structure: In the opening act (usually about 30 minutes), the writer sets up the story and establishes the relationships between the characters. Then, there is a second act (usually about 60 minutes), when the main character must face a series of crises or overcome obstacles that keep him from achieving his goal. Finally, there is a final act (generally about 30 minutes), when the crises or conflicts are resolved.

One page of screenplay is equal to about one minute of time in the film. That means the screenwriter must set the story up in about 30 pages, develop the conflicts or complications in 60 pages, and resolve the conflicts and tie up the loose ends in the last 30 pages.

Pick a film that you would like to see. As you watch, try to identify the beginning, middle, and end. Use the space below to make notes.

Title of film: \_\_\_\_\_

How is the story set up? How are the characters introduced?

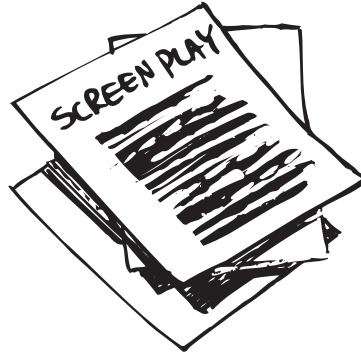
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the conflict in the film? How does the conflict develop?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How is the conflict resolved? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



Now, think about a story that you would like to tell. Make your rough notes in the space provided. Use the other side of the paper if you need room.

How will you "set up" the story and introduce the characters?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What conflicts will your characters face as the story unfolds?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How will you resolve the conflicts as you end your story?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Now you are ready to write a "treatment" for your story. Use another sheet of paper to write a one-page treatment.



# FORMATTING *the* SCRIPT



There are two kinds of screenplays—those that are developed specifically for film, and those that are adapted for film from another published work. Both use the same standard format, typed in 12-pt. Courier.

Dialog is centered on the page in lines of about 3 inches. The characters' names are typed in capital letters. Descriptions of how a character is to speak the lines and what he or she does as they speak are enclosed in parentheses. Scene headings ("slug lines") appear in capital letters. Descriptions of settings and the action that takes place are typed in lines of about 6 inches long.

This section of the script for the film, *Good Will Hunting*, at right, shows the correct format (*Good Will Hunting* won the 1997 Academy Award for original screenplay). Notice how little dialog each character has at one time, and how much the characters convey by *how* they say their lines and what they do. Some dialog and description of the setting has been omitted where the \*\* appears.

CUT TO:

## INT. SEAN'S OFFICE—DAY

*(Sean's office is comfortable.\*\* There is a PAINTING on the wall behind Sean. Sean is seated behind a desk.)\*\* It is a picture of an old sailboat in a tremendous storm—by no means a masterpiece. Will studies it.)*

WILL  
You paint this?

SEAN  
Yeah. Do you paint?

WILL  
No.

SEAN  
Crayons?

WILL  
This is a real piece of s\_\_\_\_\_.

SEAN  
Tell me what you really think.

WILL  
Poor color composition, lousy use of space. But that s\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't really concern me.

SEAN  
What does?

WILL  
The color here, see how dark it is? It's interesting.

SEAN  
What is?

WILL  
I think you're one step away from cutting your ear off. You ever hear the saying "Any port in a storm"?

Now, watch another film that you would like to see. Concentrate on the visual elements of the story. How much do you learn about the story from what the characters *do*? How much do you learn from what they *say*?

Title of film: \_\_\_\_\_  
On the back of this sheet, briefly explain what the story was

about, describe one or two scenes that you thought were especially effective and explain why.

Now it's your turn to become a screenwriter. Working from the treatment you developed in Activity 1, develop the script for the first 10 minutes of your story. Keep in mind that a film is a visual story and that it isn't necessary to have lots of dialog. Each page of your script should equal about one minute of screen time.



# DEVELOPING a SCREENPLAY from a BOOK

While *Good Will Hunting* was developed from an original screenplay, *Sense and Sensibility* was adapted from the classic novel of the same name by Jane Austen. Adaptations are original works in themselves, but they begin with the previously published material as their source. Adapting a work can be a challenge because the writer must not only create a story that is compelling in its own right, but he or she also must remain true to the original story. *Sense and Sensibility*, which, like *Good Will Hunting*, won an Academy Award for screenwriting (1995), is a good example of a successful adaptation. It is true enough to Jane Austen's original story to please readers, but it also captures viewers who have not read the book.

Compare the scene in the film and the passage in the book where Lucy surprises Elinor with the news that she has been engaged to Edward for four years. How does the scene in the book differ from the scene in the film?



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Pick another film you would like to see that was adapted from a book, play, short story or magazine article. Read the book and then watch the film. Then, answer the questions below. Use the back of this sheet if you need additional space.

Title of original material: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of film: \_\_\_\_\_

List three specific ways in which the film and the book differed.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think the screenwriter made the changes he or she did? \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you think the adaptation was successful? Why or why not?

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# LEARNING *from* the WINNERS



In the first three activities, we learned that a good screenplay is a story told with pictures—we see more of the story than we are told in words. We learned that a screenplay has three acts—a beginning, a middle and an end. And, we learned that screenplays can be original works or they can be adapted from previously published material. Now it's time to look at this year's nominees. They will be announced on February 9. List the nominees for each category in the space below.

The nominees for best screenplay based on material previously produced or published are:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

The nominees for best screenplay written directly for the screen are:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Pick one film that you would like to see from the list of nominees for best adapted screenplay. After viewing the film, read the book or other source material upon which it is based. Then, in the space below, tell whether you agree or disagree with the nomination. (Keep in mind that the nomination is based on the screenplay, not the source.) How does the screenplay compare to the source? Why do you think the screenwriter made the changes that he or she did? Do you agree with the changes? Would you have made other changes? Which version of the story did you prefer—the film or the source material?




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Now, pick one film from the list of nominees for best original screenplay. After viewing the film, describe why you think the nomination was given. How well did the writer set up the story? Did the writer maintain the tension as the story unfolded? Did you like the way the story was resolved? If not, how would you have resolved it differently?

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Now, you be the judge. Using what you know about each of the nominated films—either from seeing them or reading about them—predict the winners. Draw a star by the film in each category that you think will win for best screenwriting. Then, watch the Academy Awards on March 21 or read the paper the following day to see how you did!

**For more information about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, visit these Web sites:**

- <http://www.oscars.org>
- <http://www.oscar.com>

**Additional Resources**

- American Cinema: One Hundred Years of Filmmaking*, Vol. 1, by Jeanine Basinger. Rizzoli, 1994.
- From Script to Screen: Collaborative Art of Filmmaking*, by Linda Seger and Edward Jay Whitmore. H. Holt & Co., 1994.
- Movie Magic: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Filmmaking*, by Robin Cross. Sterling, 1996.
- Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, by Syd Field. Dell Publishing, 1994.
- Writing for Film and Television*, by Stewart Bronfeld. Touchstone, 1986.