

COULD YOUR NOVEL WORK ON SCREEN?

A 10-Point Novel-to-Screen Adaptability Checklist

You can see your novel as a film. Or a series.

You know who should play the lead. You can imagine the locations, the music, maybe even the trailer.

But being able to picture your novel on screen isn't the same as having a story that can successfully be adapted for film or television.

Novels and screen stories operate differently. A novel can take us directly inside a character's thoughts, move across years in a paragraph, devote pages to backstory, and follow numerous characters and subplots. Film and television have different demands.

This checklist isn't designed to tell you whether your novel is "good enough" for Hollywood. No checklist can do that. Instead, use these ten questions to begin evaluating something more useful:

What would your story need to become to work on screen?

1. CAN YOU EXPLAIN THE CENTRAL STORY IN ONE OR TWO SENTENCES?

Try describing your novel without explaining the backstory, themes, world, secondary characters or subplots.

Who is the story about? What do they want? What stands in their way? What happens if they fail?

If answering those questions requires several paragraphs, the problem may not be the quality of the novel. You may simply not have identified the dramatic engine that would drive the screen adaptation.

ASK YOURSELF: *Can I describe the central dramatic story without explaining the entire novel?*

☐ YES ☐ NOT YET ☐ I'M NOT SURE

2. DOES YOUR PROTAGONIST DRIVE THE STORY?

Screen protagonists generally need to make decisions, pursue objectives and respond actively to escalating obstacles.

Ask yourself what your protagonist actually does. Do their decisions cause events to happen? Or do circumstances, other characters and coincidences largely move the story forward while your protagonist reacts?

A contemplative or reactive protagonist can work beautifully in a novel because prose gives us direct access to thought and emotion. On screen, that internal journey usually needs to become dramatically observable.

ASK YOURSELF: *If I removed my protagonist's thoughts from the novel and watched only what they did, would I still understand what they were fighting for?*

☐ YES ☐ NOT ALWAYS ☐ PROBABLY NOT

3. CAN THE IMPORTANT PARTS OF THE STORY BE SEEN OR HEARD?

This is one of the most important adaptation questions.

A novelist can write: “She suddenly understood why her father had abandoned them twenty years earlier.”

A screenplay has to dramatize that realization. What does the audience see, hear, or experience that allows them to understand it?

Look at your novel's major revelations, emotional turning points and conflicts. If they primarily exist through internal monologue, narration, memories or explanation, they will need to be reconceived for the screen.

That doesn't make the novel unsuitable for adaptation. It tells you where the adaptation work begins.

ASK YOURSELF: *Can the major emotional and narrative turning points in my story be dramatized rather than explained?*

☐ YES ☐ SOME OF THEM ☐ I'M NOT SURE HOW

4. DOES THE STORY HAVE A STRONG DRAMATIC ENGINE?

A premise gets our attention. A dramatic engine keeps the story moving.

Something should continually create new obstacles, decisions, complications and consequences for the protagonist.

A murder investigation naturally generates questions and discoveries. A romance generates attraction, obstacles, reversals and choices. A survival story generates escalating threats.

Ask what continually pushes your story forward. If that engine disappears for long stretches while the novel explores backstory, relationships or world-building, the screen version may require significant restructuring.

ASK YOURSELF: *Once the central story begins, is there something continually pushing it forward?*

☐ YES ☐ MOSTLY ☐ NOT CONSISTENTLY

5. DOES YOUR STORY CONTAIN CINEMATIC MOMENTS?

“Cinematic” doesn't mean explosions, car chases, or enormous visual effects.

A cinematic moment can be quiet: a woman removing her wedding ring; two former lovers seeing each other across a crowded room; a child realizing the person standing at the door isn't his father.

What matters is that an important story or emotional moment can be communicated through behavior, imagery, action, sound or juxtaposition rather than explanation alone.

Think about five of the most important moments in your novel. Can you imagine how an audience would experience them without being told what the characters are thinking?

ASK YOURSELF: *Can I identify at least five moments that would have real dramatic or visual impact on screen?*

☐ YES ☐ MAYBE ☐ I'D HAVE TO CREATE THEM

6. CAN THE STORY SURVIVE COMPRESSION?

This is where many authors understandably resist adaptation.

A screenplay cannot contain everything in a novel. Characters may need to be combined. Subplots may disappear. Locations may change. Backstory may be drastically reduced. Events may happen in a different order. Several chapters might become a single scene.

The question isn't: "Can everything in my novel fit?" It probably can't.

The better question is: "If significant material were removed, would the essential story still survive?"

Successful adaptation requires protecting the core of the story, not every element of the book.

ASK YOURSELF: *Do I know which parts of my novel are essential, and which parts could change without destroying what the story is really about?*

☐ YES ☐ SOMEWHAT ☐ EVERYTHING FEELS ESSENTIAL

7. IS THERE A CLEAR ESCALATION OF CONFLICT AND STAKES?

Screen stories need momentum.

As the story progresses, decisions should become harder, consequences greater, and options narrower.

Look at the middle of your novel. Does the protagonist encounter increasingly difficult obstacles? Do earlier decisions create later consequences? Does new information change what the protagonist believes or must do?

Or does the story remain at the same dramatic intensity for long stretches?

Adaptation often exposes structural issues that prose can disguise because novels have more room for atmosphere, reflection, and digression.

ASK YOURSELF: *Does the pressure on my protagonist meaningfully increase as the story progresses?*

☐ YES ☐ UNEVENLY ☐ NOT REALLY

8. IS YOUR STORY BETTER SUITED TO A FEATURE FILM OR TELEVISION?

Not every novel should become a movie. And not every novel contains enough story for a television series.

A feature generally requires a concentrated central narrative capable of reaching a satisfying conclusion within a limited runtime.

A limited series can accommodate greater complexity, multiple substantial storylines, and a larger ensemble, but still needs an overarching narrative destination.

An ongoing series requires something else: a repeatable story engine capable of generating new dramatic material beyond the original plot.

More characters and more pages do not automatically mean television. It is something to think about.

ASK YOURSELF: *Do I understand which screen format naturally fits the structure and scope of my story?*

☐ FEATURE FILM ☐ LIMITED SERIES ☐ ONGOING SERIES ☐ I'M NOT SURE

9. CAN YOU IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE AND MARKET POSITION?

“I think everyone would enjoy it” isn't a useful answer.

Who is most likely to watch this story? What genre expectations does it satisfy? What recent films or television series demonstrate an audience for something comparable?

Comparable projects (or comps) aren't about claiming: “My story is the next Avatar.”

Useful comps help communicate tone, audience, genre, scale or storytelling approach. You should also be able to explain what distinguishes your property from those comparisons.

Familiarity helps people understand where a project belongs. Difference gives them a reason to care about yours.

ASK YOURSELF: *Can I identify the likely audience, genre, and a couple screen comparisons for my story?*

☐ YES ☐ PARTIALLY ☐ NOT YET

10. WHAT MAKES THIS STORY WORTH ADAPTING?

This may be the hardest question to ask yourself.

There are already more books, screenplays, and existing properties than the film and television industry could ever produce. So why this story?

Perhaps it's an irresistible premise. A fascinating world. A character we haven't seen before. Access to a true story. A culturally relevant subject. An unexpected perspective on a familiar genre. A powerful emotional experience. Or some combination of these.

Don't answer with: “Because it's a great story.”

Instead, identify the specific quality that makes your property distinctive.

ASK YOURSELF: *Can I clearly articulate why someone would want to experience this particular story on screen?*

☐ YES ☐ I THINK SO ☐ NOT YET

NOW LOOK AT YOUR ANSWERS

Don't simply count your YES boxes. This isn't a scorecard.

A novel with ten confident answers isn't guaranteed to make a successful film or television property. A novel with several uncertain answers isn't automatically unsuitable for adaptation.

Your answers are diagnostic.

If you struggled with Questions 1, 2, 4, or 7, the challenge may involve the story's dramatic structure.

If you struggled with Questions 3 or 5, the adaptation may require finding visual and dramatic equivalents for material that currently works through prose and internality.

If Question 6 made you uncomfortable, the challenge may be identifying the difference between what is essential to your story and what is essential only to the novel's current form.

If you struggled with Questions 8 or 9, you may need to determine the project's format and market position before deciding what materials to develop.

And if Question 10 stopped you completely, that's where I would start.

Because before you ask someone in film or television to invest their time, money, or reputation in a property, you need to understand:

Why this story?

Why on screen?

Why now?

ADAPTATION ISN'T TRANSCRIPTION

One of the biggest misconceptions about adaptation is that the goal is to convert a novel into screenplay format while changing as little as possible.

It isn't.

Adaptation requires making creative decisions about how the experience of the story can work in an entirely different medium.

Ever heard the phrase *Killing Your Darlings*? Sometimes that means cutting something you love. Sometimes it means inventing scenes that aren't in the novel. Sometimes it means combining characters, restructuring events, or finding a completely different way to communicate an important emotional moment.

The objective isn't necessarily to preserve every page.

It's to preserve what made the story worth telling in the first place.

WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?

If this checklist raised more questions than it answered, that's useful.

Before paying someone to write a screenplay, or spending months trying to adapt the novel yourself, you need to first determine what you're adapting.

What is the screen story?

What format suits it?

What should remain?

What needs to change?

And how should the property ultimately be positioned?

Those decisions should come before screenplay pages.

LINDA CARYN JENKINS

Story & IP Development | LindaCaryn.com