How to Acquire Book Rights

Research who controls the film rights to the book.

A. Publisher: At the beginning of all books is the information on the publisher. Contact the publishing house and ask for the contact information for the Rights and Acquisitions Department. When you write or fax the publisher to inquire about the film rights, be sure to include a legitimate proposal for seeking the rights, your contact information, as well as your qualifications to write the adaptation.

B. Author’s agent or author: Most authors have a website, and if you’re lucky, there will be personal contact information on it. If you can find a way to connect directly with the author, s/he might be agreeable to selling you the rights more easily. Most authors would love the chance to see their book on screen. If the author is based in the United States, you might also be able to find them via The Writers Guild of America.

What if the rights are not available?

If the film rights are not available, you absolutely should not do any work on adapting the book for the screen. Simply put, the rights don’t belong to you, and you’ll open up a legal can of worms by infringing upon those rights.

When do book rights become public domain?

Public domain means the author no longer owns the film rights to the book and anyone can adapt the book into film (Jane Austin, Sherlock Holmes, etc). Books become public domain when the author’s copyright on the material expires. Here’s an article on ScriptMag.com that goes into more detail: Alt Script: Screenwriter and Public Domain

The rights are available. Now what?

Develop a proposal to option the book and present it to the publisher, agent or author. The proposal should include research on competing stories in the market place, target demographics, your vision for adaptation, and any film industry connections you may have to aid in getting the movie made. Above all, remember, a production company will not get involved unless you have legally secured the rights to the book.
What’s a book option and how much does it cost?

By entering into a book option, you reserve the rights to the book for a limited period of time in order to make the film. An option typically requires paying the author and/or publishing company an agreed upon amount. Option prices range, so research what that publishing company typically agrees to before negotiating. Example: If you pay a publishing company $100,000 for a 1-year option, the author would receive a percentage, such as $10,000, and then the balance, if the film is made that year. After an option expires, you might have the ability to renew the option for another year... paying another agreed upon price.

Some authors, such as self-published authors, may be willing to enter into a much cheaper option agreement in hopes a movie deal can be made, leading to a significant increase in book sales.

Bottom-line, the option agreement is one that’s negotiable, therefore research as much as you can about the publishing company and the author to see what offer will work for all parties.

Note: Publisher's Weekly Magazine lists information on books recently optioned, including the cost of the options.

I have no idea how to negotiate a deal!

No worries. That’s what entertainment lawyers and agents are for. Make sure whomever you hire has experience negotiating deals for book rights. Many don’t understand the intricacies of the film industry, so be sure to obtain a professional versed in film contracts.

I have the option… now what?

Once you obtain the rights by either buying them outright or optioning them, it’s time to write the script and/or contact producers, directors and actors to get them interested in the film. You might not be able to build a team until you have a solid script, but if the book is popular, that might be enough to attach talent and producers. Remember, options often have to be renewed due to the time it takes to write a script, gain interest from producers and acquire the money necessary to make the film.
7 Steps to Adapt a Book into a Screenplay

1. **Length matters.** Books are hundreds of pages, but a script’s sweet spot is 110 to 120 pages (often less). In order to tell the story in two hours, you'll need to slice and dice the novel. After reading it thoroughly (at least twice), beat out the most compelling plot points that drive the story.

2. **Examine characters and subplots.** Identifying the story's theme will help you make the difficult choices of carving out what’s important to the story. Cutting the story down to a manageable size often requires losing characters as well as subplots. If they don't affect the overall story, cut them.

3. **Build the story's foundation.** The structure of a film isn't always the same as a book. Filmgoers are used to a certain style of storytelling. Examine the critical plot points in the book to see which ones work and which might need to be beefed up.

4. **Film is a visual medium.** Because of this, any and all internal dialogue a character is having must be cut. The number one rule of screenwriting is to only write what can be seen on the screen. Finding ways to convey a character's internal struggles externally is part of the art in successful adaptations.

5. **Add scenes to make the story more cinematic or add conflict.** In order to speed up storytelling, or to make it more compelling for film audiences, you might need to add scenes that help support the visual story and increase tension and conflict at the right moments for your new structure and characters.

6. **Dialogue and descriptors.** If the author is gifted in writing dialogue, don't reinvent the wheel. However, most scene descriptors written by novelists are too verbose and need to be tightened. The general rule is to not have a descriptor more than four lines long.

7. **Change the ending.** Let's be clear, don’t change the ending just to change the ending. Only change it if the story would be better served by doing so. While an alternate ending might enrage the book's author or the readers, the fact is, filmmaking is a unique art form, different than novel writing. You are the screenwriter, and the canvas is yours to paint on.

Remember, the number one rule is to tell an amazing story. Make the changes necessary.

Bottom-line, adaptation is a fine balance of crafting a new story from an original one, all while
respecting the author, the reader, and the filmgoers. It’s a bit of a circus act, but a version of writing every screenwriter should try.

In fact, try an adaptation just to add to your writing samples. Pick a classic that is public domain, with no need to garner an author’s permission, and then practice. This is your “Save the Cat!” moment. What will you do? What choices will you make to progress the story and make it your own?

Above all, enjoy the process of remolding a well-told story into your own.

NOVEL TO SCRIPT: How to Adapt, Structure, and Sell a Screenplay Based on a Book

At a Glance:
• How to successfully adapt a story based on a novel or non-fiction book; including, how to translate key elements from source material to best effect in a screenplay.
• How to create a story structure that determines what characters, dialogue, and settings will survive the transition from book to screen.
• How to option, adapt, and sell a literary property to Hollywood and stay attached

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