

Mike Rich on Screenwriting

As a writer, I have the best job in the world—I get to tell stories for a living. But with that opportunity—more of a privilege, actually—comes a responsibility: to honor your story by telling it well.

I write screenplays for feature films and have been fortunate enough to see several make it to the screen. *Finding Forrester*. *The Rookie*. *Radio*. *The Nativity Story*. *Secretariat*.

Some screenwriters are skilled at writing a first draft: 120 pages of creativity born in the heart. Other screenwriters are skilled at rewriting, the ability to mold, shape and improve that initial flood of thought into a polished, honed script using one's head. Heart for the first draft, head for the countless rewrites that'll take place right up until the camera rolls on that first scene.

The most successful screenwriters are able to do both—write a first draft and then have the skill and persistence to break apart their own words (no small feat) with the aim of making the second draft better than the first, the third draft better than the second, the fourth better than the third.

I'm often asked how many rewrites I do on any given script, and the short answer is: It varies. With *Finding Forrester*, I went back to page one about six times and put together a story that was not only markedly different from the original, but markedly stronger. I wrote fewer drafts for *The Rookie*, more for *Radio*.

Young writers usually roll their eyes when the subject of rewriting comes up, but it's a vital and critical part of the overall writing experience.

As for the writing itself?

Everyone's different. I get up early in the morning and usually write for four to five hours, break for lunch, then brainstorm on the next day's set of pages. Try to keep the ball rolling forward on that first draft, because you'll have plenty of time down the road to do the rewriting.

Just keep at it. When I first committed myself to writing a screenplay, the thought of writing 120 pages of scenes, settings, dialogue and transitions was intimidating. But that was before I saw that if I wrote just three pages a day and wrote five days a week, I'd have a completed first draft in only two months.

I wrote the first draft of *Finding Forrester* in a little more than two months, then rewrote the script for the next two years; all of those words ending with a film released more than ten years ago. To say each page was worth the effort would be an understatement.

Writing is the first step of the journey. Rewriting completes it.