

## **Argo (2012) - A Screenwriter's Breakdown for Educators**

Written by Chris Terrio, *Argo* dramatizes the CIA-assisted exfiltration of six U.S. embassy staff from Tehran during the 1979–80 hostage crisis. The screenplay credits two nonfiction bases: Tony Mendez’s memoir (Chapter 9 of *The Master of Disguise*) and Joshuah Bearman’s WIRED article “The Great Escape.” The film then shapes those facts into a high-tension thriller, compressing timelines and adding obstacles for a cinematic third act.

### **Key Teaching Angles (Truth vs. Cinema):**

#### **1. Sources & Attribution:**

Terrio cites Mendez and Bearman up front. Use this to illustrate the difference between 'based on true events' (factual scaffolding) and 'a true story' (narrative built for an audience).

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Credit your sources clearly and early.
- Explain to readers/producers what is dramatized versus documented.

#### **2. Compression & Invention:**

To intensify the finale, the film presents a night-before cancellation and a defiant push to proceed. Historical accounts indicate more lead time. Likewise, the airport sequence is staged with phone verifications and a runway chase—beats that amplify tension on screen.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Compression (time) and invention (events) are acceptable tools when used transparently.
- Build suspense from character goals and plausible constraints first; add spectacle sparingly.

#### **3. The Cover Story & Intellectual Property:**

The CIA repurposed materials from a real sci-fi project (commonly associated with *Lord of Light* art/script). Discussions around permission and credit raise teachable questions about authorship and rights.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- When adapting or referencing real projects, research IP status and potential approvals.

- Anticipate how behind-the-scenes choices will be interpreted by audiences and the press.

#### **4. National Framing:**

Debates continue over the relative emphasis placed on CIA/Hollywood vs. Canada's contributions. This is fertile ground for media literacy: how framing and end cards can shape collective memory.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Be precise when allocating credit; avoid erasing key partners. \*
- Use end cards responsibly: they carry outsized weight for audiences. \*

\* By the way (framing matters): Even with solid sources, choices about framing can tilt the story. *Argo's* released cut adds a brief Iran-history prologue (including 1953) that reshapes how audiences read the stakes. When you take similar liberties, note what's history and what's storytelling. For transparent models, see the scripts for *I, Tonya* (2017) and *American Animals* (2018).

#### **5. Ethics of Dramatic License:**

True-events films balance truth-telling with entertainment value. Ethical practice means being able to defend each change as clarifying, compressing, or safely intensifying without misleading the core historical takeaway.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Define your principles for adaptation before you write.
- Keep a change log noting what you altered and why (screenwriting software can help you do this).

#### **Classroom Discussion & Essay Prompts:**

- Compare the screenplay's airport sequence with historical summaries. List three invented or condensed elements and explain the cinematic purpose of each.
- Debate: Where is the ethical line between 'inspired by' and misrepresentation? Use specific scenes from the script.
- Attribution audit: Identify every on-screen element that required outside IP or historical sourcing (covers, art, article, memoir). How should credit be handled?

### Practice Exercise for Writers:

- Choose a short nonfiction article. Write a 1-page beat outline that is strictly factual.
- Write a second 1-page beat outline that heightens tension via compression/invention. Mark each change and justify it.

### References — Transparency in Scripts (Examples)

- I, Tonya (2017) — script opens with: “Based on irony-free, wildly contradictory, totally true interviews ...”
- American Animals (2018) — opening caption toggles “This is not based on a true story” ® “This is a true story,” followed by VO clarifying the claim.

### Argo (2012) – Fact Checking 8FLiX Biopic Advice

#### Contextual References — Where we got *our* information

##### What “based on” really means

- The **sources are real**, but the **story is dramatized**. Terrio’s cover page cites Bearman (WIRED) and Mendez (memoir), which supply the operation’s facts and texture; the film then heightens stakes for a thriller frame. [WIRED](#)

##### Where Hollywood cranks the tension

- **The last-minute White House cancellation**: on screen, Mendez is told the op is dead the night before, then defies orders. In the record, President Carter had already approved the mission (January 23, 1980) and **did not** reverse himself; the “go rogue” beat is invention. [CIA](#)
- **The airport finale**: the film shows a gate confrontation, desperate phone verifications, and a runway chase. In reality, the team booked an **early flight** to avoid guards—and there was **no chase**. [CIA on Twitter](#) | [Boston Magazine](#)

## The real “fake movie”

- The CIA’s cover used a genuine sci-fi screenplay and Jack Kirby concept art from **Barry Ira Geller’s** aborted *Lord of Light* project; the Agency repurposed those materials for “Studio Six.” Geller has long argued his work was used without his knowledge/permission. (Great for discussing authorship & attribution.) [CIA](#) | [VICE](#) | [SlashFilm](#)

## Whose hero story? (National narratives)

- Critics (especially in Canada) argued *Argo* **minimizes Canada’s role**—notably Ambassador Ken Taylor’s—and **amplifies the CIA/Hollywood angle**. Affleck ultimately revised the end cards after feedback. This is a clean case study in how films shape public memory. [Macleans.ca](#)

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## Discussion prompts (EDU)

1. **Define the label.** After students skim Terrio’s cover page and Bearman’s article, have them write a working definition of “*based on true events*” and list 3 acceptable forms of dramatic license (compression, composites, invented obstacles). [WIRED](#)
2. **Fact-check the finale.** Compare the airport sequence as written/shot to the CIA’s public fact-checks; identify which beats were invented and **why** they’re good cinema. (Pacing? Escalation? Visual jeopardy?) [CIA on Twitter](#) | [Boston Magazine](#)
3. **Ethics of emphasis.** Read Canadian critiques of the film’s framing. Where’s the line between national myth-making and misrepresentation in “inspired by” films? [Macleans.ca](#)

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## Screenwriting takeaways (for students)

- **Sources are scaffolding, not shackles.** You can compress time or manufacture obstacles, but be transparent about your **basis** and **purpose**. (Terrio’s cover page models proper attribution.) [Argo screenplay \(Final/FYC October 30, 2012\)](#)
- **Make tension ethically.** Build suspense from character goals and plausible constraints (papers, timing, unknowns) before you reach for spectacle. [CIA](#)
- **Respect ownership.** When borrowing from real-world IP (like *Lord of Light*), understand credit, consent, and how your choices will be read later. [CIA](#) | [VICE](#)

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