

JFK (1991) - A Screenwriter's Breakdown for Educators

Written by Oliver Stone and Zachary Sklar, “JFK” (1991) turns a political thriller into a masterclass in layered storytelling. With its nonlinear structure, bold montage sequences, and unwavering commitment to ambiguity, the screenplay blends fact, theory, and personal obsession into a gripping narrative that challenges perceptions of truth and power.

Key Themes for Screenwriters and Educators:

1. Nonlinear Narrative as a Truth-Seeking Device:

The fragmented timeline mirrors the disjointed nature of uncovering a conspiracy. This approach heightens mystery and reflects the chaos of conflicting evidence.

Screenwriting Takeaway:

- Use structure to enhance narrative themes.
- Fragmented storytelling can amplify suspense.

2. Montage as Exposition:

JFK’s opening montage weaves historical footage with narrative voiceover. It establishes tone, stakes, and urgency within minutes.

Screenwriting Takeaway:

- Montages can deliver exposition with momentum.
- Combine imagery, pacing, and narrative for impact.

3. Complex Character Arcs Amidst Conspiracy:

Garrison’s personal journey grounds the political thriller. His evolution from idealistic DA to obsessive seeker humanizes dense material.

Screenwriting Takeaway:

- Anchor plot in character.
- Make personal stakes central to complex narratives.

4. Dialogue That Balances Fact and Emotion:

Exposition blends with emotionally charged dialogue. Even legal arguments are layered with personal stakes and passion.

Screenwriting Takeaway:

- Infuse facts with character-driven dialogue.
- Avoid sterile info-dumps.

5. Moral Ambiguity and the Open Ending:

The film closes without a definitive answer, reflecting real-world ambiguity. Garrison's unresolved quest invites reflection rather than closure.

Screenwriting Takeaway:

- Ambiguity can enhance thematic depth.
- Open endings invite lasting engagement.

Legacy:

"JFK" remains a benchmark for political thrillers and investigative narratives. Its screenplay demonstrates how structure, montage, and moral complexity can transform real events into a compelling cinematic experience that resonates decades later.

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