

# **The Little Mermaid (1989) - A Screenwriter's Breakdown for Educators**

Written by Ron Clements and John Musker with music by Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) helped launch the Disney Renaissance, a golden era of animation. The film follows Ariel, a curious and rebellious mermaid princess, as she risks everything to be part of the human world. It's a musical, a romance, and a hero's journey—under the sea.

## **Key Themes for Screenwriters and Educators:**

### **1. Theme With Teeth:**

Ariel's longing to escape her world and embrace another is a powerful metaphor for adolescence, rebellion, and identity. The screenplay uses this universal theme to ground its fantastical premise.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Anchor your story in a relatable emotional truth.
- Use theme to connect with audiences of all ages.

### **2. The "I Want" Song Done Right:**

'Part of Your World' is a textbook 'I Want' song. It tells us who Ariel is, what she desires, and why we should care. It drives the entire plot forward.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Let your protagonist clearly express their desires.
- Musical moments should serve the story, not pause it.

### **3. Complex, Charismatic Villainy:**

Ursula isn't just evil—she's theatrical, manipulative, and deeply motivated. She views herself as the victim, not the villain.

#### **Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Give villains texture and personal logic.
- Great antagonists believe they're the hero.

### **4. Visual Storytelling in Motion:**

From shipwreck rescues to treasure troves, the script is packed with visual storytelling moments. Action and emotion unfold through movement and music, not exposition.

**Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Lean into visual structure over verbal explanation.
- Let your worldbuilding come alive through action.

**5. Supporting Cast That Sings:**

Sebastian, Flounder, and Scuttle aren't filler—they deepen the conflict and enrich Ariel's world. Their humor also offsets the dramatic stakes.

**Screenwriting Takeaway:**

- Give supporting characters meaningful roles.
- Comic relief should still move the plot.

**Legacy:**

The Little Mermaid redefined what animated features could be. It revived a studio, elevated the role of music in narrative, and left generations of writers, artists, and audiences dreaming of being part of another world.

© 2025

8FLiX Institute

545 King St., West

Toronto, ON., Canada M5V 1M1

+1 (647) 317-9057

8flix.com