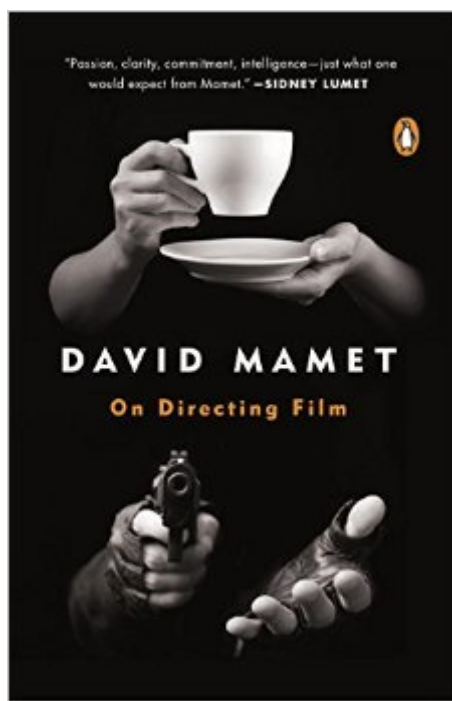


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# On Directing Film



## Synopsis

Calling on his unique perspective as playwright, screenwriter, and director of his own critically acclaimed movies, *House of Games* and *Things Change*, David Mamet illuminates how a film comes to be. He looks at every aspect of directing—from script to cutting room—to show the many tasks directors undertake in reaching their prime objective: presenting a story that will be understood by the audience and has the power to be both surprising and inevitable at the same time. Based on a series of classes Mamet taught at Columbia University's film school, *On Directing Film* will be enjoyed not only by students but by anyone interested in an overview of the craft of filmmaking.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

After reading screenplay books for years -- the likes of Syd Field, McKee, Howard, Hunter, etc. -- Mamet is a refreshing change. I realized how the other books, for all intents and purposes, were analyses of scripts, avoiding or skirting the issues of method and process. In other words, it's not hard to look at a huge box office and critically-acclaimed hit (*Chinatown* being the consensus favorite) and explain what makes it so good. We all know it's good. We've seen the movie. We've read the script. We're all in awe. And we all know the elements. But the actual process of writing, of formulating a story visually, of actually creating instead of merely analyzing, seems to be an afterthought to these folks. I mean, in some way, you've got to ask yourself why these fellas -- McKee, Field, and others -- have never actually written a thing! Mamet espouses a simplicity to the process of storytelling in film, beat by beat. It's a bit repetitive and sterile, as is the man himself. I

don't agree with him on everything, and neither will you. He contradicts himself all the time and seems to take delight in his own presence, but he is a great craftsman, and anyone looking to tell stories visually would be mistaken to think this book unimportant or trivial. A must read for aspiring filmmakers, especially those who write.

"...so they don't have to suffer through the lives they lead." Mamet is always Mamet. Even when talking about directing-- after having directed only two films, *HOUSE OF GAMES* and *THINGS CHANGE*. Never heard of 'em, you say? Yes, this book is taken from a series of lectures he gave at Columbia film school in 1990. Since then, Mamet has directed Steve Martin not to be funny (*THE SPANISH PRISONER*) and Gene Hackman not to be cool (*HEIST*) as well as other actors not to "inflect." Most people, like me, love Mamet's writing but find his directing stilted and wooden. This book explains why. Written half as rant and half as Socratic dialogue, Mamet lays out his film theory with second-rate Sergei Eisenstein (I think he means Kuleshov) and third-rate Bruno Bettelheim (who wrote about fairy tales, not film). The result is a mixed bag, not too informative about directing, but always entertaining. If you want to know why telling a story on film is like telling a dirty joke, this is your book. If you'd like to read how to construct a movie about a farmer who has to sell a pig, or a student who wants to "get a retraction," this is your book. If you want to know why "[t]he less the hero is described to us, the better off we are," this is your book. It's slim, it reads fast, and it's easier to understand than *THE THREE USES FOR A KNIFE*. If you want a book about directing by a real director, I recommend Sidney Lumet's *MAKING MOVIES*.

I have found this book to be of great use. I have highlighted much of the text and have been assimilating it since it came out in hardcover. Technology is evolving toward consumer movie making and this book can serve as a point of departure for anyone with a video camera and a desire to tell stories but no pressing desire to become a part of "the industry". His technique is admittedly rigid but is simple to understand. When one honestly and patiently applies the technique in order to conceive a story outline, the results--since the unconscious is employed instead of the ego--can be quite enchanting. This book aims toward a more poetic cinema. I highly recommend it.

Of course the question begs, why is David Mamet teaching us how to direct? In one instance, aside from the films he has directed, his expertise and notariety is in writing the script or even the play for the theater. On the other hand, when a good writer has control of his craft, it will be written well enough for any director who takes the script and turn out similar products (either to each other, or

even to the script writers vision). Yet, Mamet discloses himself as a competent teacher and director. Its a short book, but there is some good practical information that is discussed, and with student dialogue Q&A to give a sort of "interactive understanding" of how to write and direct a film. On the other hand, Mamet is dogmatic about his approach to the craft and the student answers are all wrong unless answered, not only correct, but the way he wants you to answer them, that is, what he knows to be correct. The dilemma I personally have with all books about writing or directing is they are from a single perspective and allow very little intuition or personal style to interfere. This book is, for the most part, no exception when one has to meet Mamet's standards for what is right or wrong. Given the fact that it works for David, it does not mean it will work for everyone. The trick is to take it all with a grain of salt and skim it off the top. Take what appeals to you and what feels good and what can be applicable to your writing. Its a short book that is clear and concise which is based on lectures given at Columbia University. One of the better books on the subject, so if you feel you need a little more study before you write, I would reccomend this one (although not before Lajos Egris book Art of Dramatic Writing).

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