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## Screenwriters on Nailing That All-Important Opening Scene

By [RANDEE DAWN](#)

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[Greta Gerwig](#)'s screenwriting style starts in the middle and fans out.

"I don't write in a straight line," admits the "Little Women" writer-director. "It's like a quilt I try to stitch together."

But one piece was more important than the others: the opening scene.

"Getting the opening just right was so important," says Gerwig. "When I had it, I thought, 'There's a movie here.' I knew I could make that movie."

Direction, performances and technical details are all critical to a film, but it's the opening scene that sells the picture — or sinks it. And every writer has a different approach to start telling their stories.

Early on, "Queen & Slim" began with the execution of Queen's client, recalls screenwriter [Lena Waithe](#). "I thought, 'I have to show that, so when she shows up on her date you know this won't go well.'" Instead, Waithe took a note and jumped straight into the fateful date between Queen and Slim.

"I like being slammed in the face right away [with a film's opening]," Waithe says. "After we made that change, in early screenings people would say, 'You're doing an interesting thing, we're getting to know the characters as they get to know each other.'"

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Starting a few beats too early is a common speed bump for many screenwriters. "Hustlers" writer-director Lorene Scafaria says she wasn't sure how much backstory to give the audience about stripper Destiny, finally settling on following her through a night at her job.

"I honestly had thrown the kitchen sink at [the opening]," she says. "But it was a lesson in writing — you could get rid of the first 10 pages of the story, and that's where things really begin."

Similar to "Queen," "Marriage Story" also begins with the audience meeting two oppositional yet sympathetic characters: the divorcing couple Charlie and Nicole, who narrate a montage that reveals their shared lives.

But director-writer Noah Baumbach says that scene initially served another purpose. "I wrote the sequences as much for myself as the script," he says. "It was a way to engage in the characters and get inside their marriage. But in doing that, I uncovered the beginning of my movie."

The dual-person cold intro is a common way for many of this awards season's most lauded films to begin, whether it's two lighthouse keepers heading into fog ("The Lighthouse"); a young woman meeting her editor ("Little Women"); the Tinder date ("Queen & Slim") or a young woman chatting on the phone with her grandmother ("The Farewell").

"A lot of older films take more time to set up," says "Farewell" director-writer Lulu Wang, who embedded a number of little white lies (and one giant one) visually in her opening, even as Billi and Nai Nai have their affectionate conversation. "Modern audiences have become more sophisticated with visual language, and pick things up quickly. I wanted to establish the main relationship of the movie, the two different worlds they live in, and have audiences lean in and say, 'This isn't what we expected.' I was able to do all those things while simultaneously building character."

A writer who directs her own script, as Wang does, can ultimately choose that first scene, but it helps having a sibling as the director, too. Max Eggers and director Robert Eggers shared "Lighthouse" writing duties, and agreed early on to stick with both lighthouse keepers amid the fog.

“It’s such an arresting image,” says Max. “It was hard to want to change.”

So they didn’t. “Rob knows exactly what he wants,” says Max. “If we didn’t trust each other, we couldn’t know that anything would work on the film.”

Helmer Marielle Heller’s “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” opens with subject Fred Rogers walking through the classic opening of his PBS series, followed by a small but unexpected plot twist. Screenwriters Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster say they got lucky: That was the way the script read from Draft One.

“It’s super rare [to not have to change the opening],” says Fitzerman-Blue. “Everything is usually so up for grabs. But we weren’t easing the audience in. It’s a microcosm of the movie, and hopefully it asks a lot of questions.”

Which is every director’s hope: That in those first moments, the audience doesn’t just plunge into the deep end — they surface wanting more.



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**GRETA GERWIG**

**LENA WAITHE**

**NOAH BAUMBACH**

