



## Original screenplay Oscar contenders talk writing

Diablo Cody, Dustin Lance Black, Thomas McCarthy and Jeff Nichols detail their work spaces, instruments, inspirations and processes.

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By Rande Dawn, Special to the Los Angeles Times December 15, 2011

Writing doesn't happen just like that. Except when it does. Either way, writers have to be prepared for all eventualities, and that means having the right space, the right instruments and the right mind-set to get down to business. Here, we speak with four original screenplay contenders about where their latest script idea came from, and how they first create their space (whether an office, a noisy coffeehouse or an RV) before they create that next prize-bait screenplay.

Thomas McCarthy ("Win Win")

**Where he writes:** In an approximately 300-square-foot office on New York City's Lower East Side. "It's in an industrial, old building full of everyone from fine artists to architecture firms," McCarthy says. "There's a guy down the hall who makes pickles." In attendance: his "black lab hound dog mutt" Georgia. "She's a perfect writing companion because all she does is sleep."



**Instruments of success:** iMac laptop for traveling; desktop iMac for the office; a wall in his office covered with Ideal Paint, which turned it into a whiteboard.

**Germ of a notion:** For his story about a lawyer who coaches high school wrestling and takes in a young athlete, McCarthy was inspired by his friend Joe Tiboni for "Win Win." "We were both on the high school wrestling team, and we were laughing about our shared horrible experience," he says. "So it started as kind of a joke."

**Working it up:** McCarthy and Tiboni started sketching it out about two years ago, and finding the right tone was a challenge. "Elder law, let's be honest, it's not the most dramatic area," he says.

**Final draft:** Around 20 drafts later, "Win Win" was ready. "I always attribute rewrites to tightening the hubcaps on a tire," he says. "You have to keep going around until it feels balanced."

**End notes:** When stuck, McCarthy visits bookstores. "I love randomly picking books off of shelves and reading in bits and pieces," he says.

Dustin Lance Black ("J. Edgar")

**Where he writes:** Black shifts coffee shops about every two hours around Hollywood. "I'm completely over-caffeinated by the end of the day," he says. "It's less distracting than being alone with my thoughts in an empty office."

**Instrument of success:** A "very beat up" Macintosh laptop. "It's covered in food and is disgusting. I open it up on a plane and I'm so embarrassed because it's covered with coffee and croissant crumbs," he says.

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**Germ of a notion:** Biographies on J. Edgar Hoover failed to explore the "why" of the man's life. "He was incredibly promising and brilliant, so why did he become such a monster? That's where my research began," he says.

**Working it up:** Black started in 2008, before his Oscar-winning "Milk" had come out. "When I heard that Brian Grazer at Imagine was interested in Hoover, I made a quick call, then set off doing research."

**Final draft:** Two years of writing and around five drafts later, Black was ready. He'd heard the script would go to Clint Eastwood, and recalled that Peter Morgan once said that Eastwood would shoot first drafts of a script — "horrifying" to Black. "So I wheedled myself onto the set as a historian, and was able to rewrite a few things."

**End notes:** The Oscar (for "Milk") is an intimidating factor, so Black puts it away or sends it to his mother's house while writing. "She takes him to her hair appointments," he says and chuckles.

Diablo Cody ("Young Adult")

**Where she writes:** A shared office on Hollywood Boulevard "in an area with a lot of stripper shops and tourists," says Cody, but she occasionally will write in the RV trailer parked in her driveway.

**Instrument of success:** MacBook laptop. "I treat them roughly. I type so hard it's like I'm trying to murder the machine."

**Germ of a notion:** "I'd wanted to write something about adults, since I'd been writing about teenagers for a while. Paradoxically, I decided to write about an adult who writes children's novels, who behaves in an adolescent fashion."

**Working it up:** She knocked out a first draft easily, but finessing was the hard part. "I think I spent more time on this than on 'Juno,'" she says. Jason Reitman — who went on to direct the film — read an early version of the script.

**Final draft:** Having Reitman offering advice helped in shaping the final product. "He had great suggestions; for instance, the ending, he said you should make it even more specific, and darker," she says.

**End notes:** Cody says she's superstitious about everything ("including what order I eat my food on my plate") but when it comes to writing she mainly tries not to get ahead of herself — like thinking who might play the role of Mavis before the script was done. "When people ask stuff like that, I'm like, 'Are you kidding me?'"

Jeff Nichols ("Take Shelter")

**Where he writes:** A closet-sized office space in an Austin, Texas, real estate office owned by his friend. "It's perfect," says Nichols. "It has this window that looks out at a hospital's big commercial air conditioning units. There is some sky." Inside: a large corkboard, a stereo and a "pretty terrible" drawing desk he's had since high school.

**Instrument of success:** Writing ideas, scenes and bits of thought on index cards, tossing them on the floor and eventually posting them up on the big corkboard. "I'll have scenes that scoot around on the floor and brush up against each other in ways you might not have thought of before. It helps confuse the process while keeping it somewhat ordered." Serious writing takes place on his MacBook.

**Germ of a notion:** For "Take Shelter," about a man's impending sense of doom, Nichols recalls having a vision of a storm shelter in a backyard with the doors flung open and a man standing over it. "I had no clue what the context was, and I thought it was interesting. It was a visual anchor for the writing of the film," he says.

**Working it up:** The script gestated for about six months, and then took three more to write during summer 2008. "I don't do a lot of rewrites," Nichols says, and because he's also the director they may not be necessary.

**Final draft:** After writing, Nichols passes the script around to friends and family, including his musician older brother ("he has immaculate taste") and father ("it's hard for him not to like something I write").

**End notes:** Nichols often breaks through any blocked periods by taking friends out for enchiladas and telling them the story of the movie. "I'm like a vampire," he says. "I need fresh ears like blood so people will listen. It doesn't matter what their response is, really — it's something about the accountability of new ears hearing the story."

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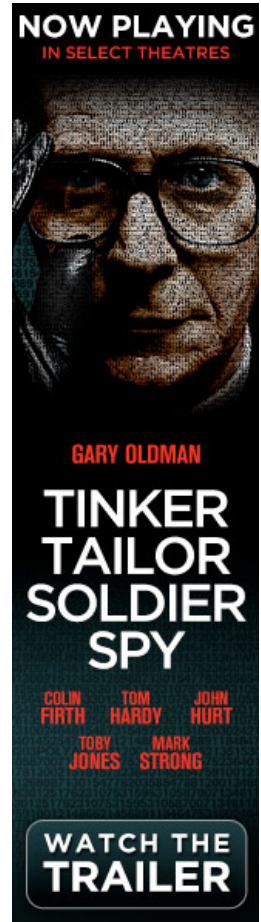
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