

ERIN BROCKOVICH (2000): NARRATIVE OUTLINE

Screenwriter: Susannah Grant

Screenplay: http://dailyscript.com/scripts/erin-brockovich_shooting.html

Based on: An original screenplay based on the life of Erin Brockovich.

ACT ONE (PAGES 1 TO 32)

In 1990s California, former beauty queen Erin Brockovich interviews for a job. It's clear that she's smart and good with people.

We find out that Erin has a useless ex-husband and three young kids.

None of this impresses the interviewer and she doesn't get the job.

She leaves and is involved in a car accident.

Erin hires the law firm of Masry & Vititoe for her personal injury case.

We meet gruff but 'avuncular' managing partner Ed Masry.

In court, Erin gives evidence about the accident. We learn that she has two ex-husbands and doesn't have health insurance, so is thousands of dollars in debt.

She is up against a defendant who's a model family man with a 'Norman Rockwell' family, and a similarly conservative jury. She loses her temper and the case.

We see Erin's homelife, a rundown house in a bad part of town.

Erin's neighbour, who takes care of Erin's kids, tells her that she's moving away. No more free childcare.

In the next scenes, we see Erin's struggles and sacrifices, as she takes care of her family.

Erin returns to Masry & Vititoe, where she finagles a job from a reluctant Ed.

Commentary: *On page 16, we finally get to the real start of the story, as Erin goes to work for Ed.*

We meet Erin's uptight colleagues, one of whom makes a catty comment about her appearance, setting up the work obstacles she's going to face in being taken seriously.

The next scenes introduce George, a jobless biker with a heart, who Erin meets when he and his buddies are revving their engines outside her house, while her kids are sleeping outside. Erin is angry, but George is smitten and perseverant.

Commentary: *The meeting between Erin and George is clever and unexpected at this point in the story. Meetings between film love interests are quite tricky to pull off, with lots of potential for cliché. In this case, Erin's burgeoning love life will come into conflict with her commitment to the investigation she will shortly be drawn into.*

Back in the office, Ed tasks Erin with opening a file on a real estate case, something about which she has no clue but takes on with enthusiasm.

Erin's colleague refuses to help her with the real estate file. A little reminder that she's on her own and must use her own initiative.

Commentary: *These scenes in the office serve as reminders that Erin's on her own and must use her own initiative, a key element of the story. Erin and Ed also have an exchange about her wardrobe, which provides some trailer-ready dialogue. Memorable films often come down to memorable moments. The 'trailer' and 'award show clip' moments. So, keep this in mind, in particular, when writing dialogue. (Let's call this the 'You can't handle the truth' principle!)*

George helps out with Erin's kids without her knowledge, but her anger gives way to appreciation. He's around during the day and is good with children.

Commentary: *This is the 'getting to know each other' part of the story, that develops the relationship. It's interesting to note the differences between Erin Brockovich and the other two whistleblower/investigator scripts in this ebook. In The Insider and The Report, the issues (Big Tobacco secrets and torture, respectively) were explicitly introduced relatively early on. However, here, we have scene after scene of Erin's life. By page 28, the groundwork has been laid but the 'social issues' of contamination and public health have yet to be introduced.*

Erin reads documents related to the real estate file. The documents discuss property values but also, curiously, they reference medical examinations of a couple, the Irvings.

The next day, Erin asks Ed if she can investigate it further. He agrees.

Erin drives out to Hinkley, California to meet with the Irvings. The 'town' is described as a 'tract of arid farmland'. Crucially, there's a utility plant, with pipes and cooling towers.

At Donna Irving's house, Erin uses her people skills to find out that utility company PG&E offered to buy the Irvings' house, but they didn't want to sell. She also discovers that the Irvings have suffered serious ill-health.

Donna reveals that PG&E paid for the family's visits to the doctor. When Erin asks why, Donna simply says it's because of the chromium.

Erin is now hooked into the investigation.

<p>Overview: <i>Act One sets up the story effectively. We learn much about Erin and her life that make her engagement with the chromium case understandable. She could come across simply as a cash-strapped single mother with her hands full, who just puts her head down, does her job and earns her paycheque. However,</i></p>
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the writer ensures we know she's more than that. Given her circumstances, she has empathy with those who are likewise down on their luck. She's close with her kids and very protective of them, so, again, can relate to families whose health is impacted by PG&E's actions. She's also good with people and at building rapport on a human level. However, the main thing is that we see she's a proactive character who doesn't hesitate in calling out things she sees as unfair. This makes her the perfect, if unlikely, protagonist to seek out justice for the Hinkley residents. This act has also introduced her helpers – buttoned-down Ed and freewheeling biker George – and developed two distinct relationships that impact her life in very different ways. Additionally, we have conflicts in place, including the unhelpful office staff, who react to her as much of the world does, as a trashy beauty queen with a big mouth. This allows her to play against type, confounding expectations and using her 'outsider' status to drive the narrative, while alluding to an inner vulnerability.

Act One highlights how 'seeding' character actions early on helps to build an organic, rising narrative in which the protagonist's actions stem from what we've seen before. Compare Erin's actions to those of Bergman in [The Insider](#). From the moment we meet these characters, we get a sense that they have what it takes to get the job done.

ACT TWO PART 1 (PAGES 32 TO 71)

Erin proactively visits the UCLA library, where's she's put in touch with a toxicology expert to find out about chromium, specifically toxic chrom 6, an anti-corrosive PG&E puts in the water used to cool its engines.

It is revealed that chrom 6 exposure can lead to respiratory disease, liver failure, heart failure, reproductive failure, bone or organ deterioration, and cancers.

Erin is warned that incriminating records may 'disappear' if she starts snooping.

Erin secures access to the water records and finds a file on Hinkley.

Erin finds out that 0.58 parts per million (ppm) of chromium was found in Hinkley's water.

At the office, Erin finds all her personal stuff has been removed from her desk. She finds out she's been fired for missing work.

At home, Erin takes her frustrations out on George, but the sequence ends with them in bed.

Commentary: *The scenes from pages 39 to 47 are a good example of how to give your protagonist victories and setbacks along the way. From Erin confirming the presence of chrom 6 in Hinkley's water to getting fired to starting a romantic relationship with George.*

Ed arrives at Erin's home. He tells her that he got a call from the UCLA expert confirming that the legal limit for chromium is 0.05ppm and that the Hinckley levels could be responsible for the Irvings' illnesses.

Ed rehires Erin. She tells him that the company held a seminar to tell residents about harmless chrom 3, when in fact they were using toxic chrom 6.

Erin heads out to the PG&E site to take pictures of the plant. She notices the dirt has a green hue.

Ed faxes documents to PG&E's claims department.

Erin tells the Irvings about chrom 6.

Commentary: *In the scene with the Irvings, note the parallel between how Erin takes care of her kids and how Donna takes care of hers. Empathy is one of Erin's key traits and it's on full display here. Additionally, this is a great example of 'show, don't tell, as Donna frantically gets her kids out of the pool. An alternative approach could have been to have Donna simply say something to Erin, such as 'you mean our water's contaminated with this toxic stuff?'. Using the kids is a more emotionally compelling method, as well as highlighting our protagonist's compassion.*

Ed meets with a young an inexperienced PG&E's claims department representative who has been dispatched to offer the Irving's \$250,000, while denying any link between their illnesses and PG&E's actions. The offer is rejected.

Ed wants to fight but raises the issue of PG&E's deep pockets and his firm's lack of resources.

One evening, Erin is working late when the Browns, neighbours of the Irvings, arrive. They reveal that some of their chickens were born deformed and that the wife had had nine miscarriages. They believe chromium may have something to do with their problems.

One of Erin's kids gets upset because she worked late and missed dinner.

Commentary: *Heading towards the end of Act Two Part 1, a new source of conflict is introduced, as Erin's commitment to investigating the chromium in Hinkley takes her attention away from the kids who, up until now, she has put above everything else in her life.*

Ed and Erin head to Hinkley.

Ed clinically lays out his plan to the townsfolk to get them extra money from PG&E, while Erin adopts a more homely approach that gets the residents to sign up.

Erin is upset at what she's seen. George tells her that maybe she should quit the investigation.

On page 71, at midpoint, Erin persuades a reluctant Ed to launch a case against PG&E. Ed agrees on the condition that she can gather enough evidence.

Overview: *This section of the story is all about raising the stakes, in terms of the Hinkley investigation and Erin's personal life, with the addition of love-interest George. As a struggling single mother, she finds herself emotionally engaged with the residents of Hinkley, especially the kids, whose lives have been impacted by PG&E. She also has rising anger at the utility's wilful negligence. Erin's character traits of tenacity, confidence and down-to-earth relatability help her to uncover incriminating evidence and to get Hinkley's residents to co-operate. However, this all comes at a personal price, as her professional success leads to problems at home with George and the kids, who resent her spending so much time at work.*

This all sets up Act Two Part 2, in which Ed and Erin go after PG&E in a class action suit, David & Goliath-style, which means more of a commitment, in terms of their time and the firm's resources, and the risk of Ed's firm going bankrupt.

ACT TWO PART 2 (PAGES 76 TO 115)

Erin takes her kids to a toy store and lets them pick out some things. George points out that buying them toys won't make up for all the hours she'll need to put in at work, escalating the tension between the couple.

Erin trespasses on PG&E's land to collect dirt and water samples. She gets chased off the property by security guards.

Commentary: *This 'collecting evidence' sequence is a good example of 'show, don't tell', offering a chance to see beauty queen Erin covered in mud, while highlighting just how engaged she is in the case. It also sets up something that will pay off later (in the script but not the produced film).*

At home, Erin gets an anonymous phone call warning her off the case. It sparks a row between Erin and George. She's determined to continue and to not be intimidated, while he doesn't think any job is worth putting herself and her family in danger.

Erin returns to the water board and leaves with a box of papers.

During the car ride home, she calls George, who tells her that her youngest child said her first word. Erin is visibly upset that she missed this landmark moment.

Commentary: *This is the starkest example yet of the personal cost of Erin's commitment to the Hinkley case.*

At a community barbecue in Hinkley, Ed and Erin hand out leaflets, while George keeps her kids entertained.

A group of George's biker friends rides by, eliciting feelings of regret that he's stuck minding the kids.

Commentary: *On the whole, George is quite an under-developed character, but this is a rare moment in which we are encouraged to see things from his perspective.*

He drives off with the kids, leaving her behind.

Erin visits with the Ambrosio family from Hinckley. Laura Ambrosio, stricken with cancer, has come close to attempting suicide. Erin talks with her. Later, Erin is taken on a tour of the PG&E compressor station.

Erin lays out all of her evidence to Ed. She tells Ed that PG&E dumped excess water containing chrom 6 into unlined, covered ponds that allowed the groundwater to become contaminated over the course of 14 years.

Ed's not sure the firm can pull off a case of this magnitude. He is being forced to take out a second mortgage to cover the expenses, while no other firm will share the case as all the evidence relates to Hinckley. There is nothing to tie the case to PG&E corporate, which is where the real settlement money would be made.

Erin has no evidence to support that corporate knew what was going on at Hinckley.

Ed proposes that the firm files a cause of action, detailing the health impacts on the 400 Hinckley plaintiffs and setting out all Erin's evidence. PG&E would file a demur, a rebuttal of the complaint, leaving it up to a judge to decide if the case can proceed.

Commentary: *This scene is important, as it not only tells us in simple terms what Erin has found but it moves the story forward at a point in the narrative where things were in danger of getting slightly bogged down, as Erin moves between collecting evidence, facing conflict at home and empathising with the townsfolk to hear (and see) ever-more harrowing tales of lives derailed by ill-health. Speaking of which...*

Erin returns to the Irvings, where she finds out that Donna has a malignant breast tumour. Donna asks Erin to promise that PG&E will be held to account.

The judge rules in Ed and Erin's favour.

Ed and Erin meet with PG&E's team of corporate lawyers. PG&E is offering \$20m as a total settlement, which Erin angrily dismisses.

Commentary: *Note the addition of extra (trailer-ready) dialogue in the finished film, which is missing from this draft of the script. Towards the end of the meeting, one of the PG&E lawyers picks up a glass of water to take a drink. Erin tells him it was especially shipped in from Hinkley, making him think twice.*

At home, Erin and George fight about the time she's spending at work. The scene ends with George packing a bag and leaving.

Overview: *Act Two Part 2 includes both victory and defeat. PG&E, threatened with a lawsuit, is talking about a multi-million-dollar settlement, which Erin believes is too low. Further, there is a sense of urgency hanging over the investigation, as the law firm is being emotionally crippled and some of the Hinkley residents are running out of time. This section of the story has further escalated the conflict between Erin, George and her kids, all of whom are resentful of the amount of time she's spending on the case. So, Erin's success at work stands in contrast to 'failure' at home.*

We are therefore launched into Act Three with several questions to resolve:

- Can Erin see the case through to the end?*
- Will Erin and Ed secure justice for the Hinkley plaintiffs?*
- If so, what will that 'justice' look like?*
- Will Ed be able to see the case through to the end, financially?*
- Will Erin mend the divisions between herself, George and the kids?*
- Can Erin reconcile her family life with the demands of her job?*

ACT THREE (PAGES 115 TO 139)

The final act begins with Erin and her kids divided, with her son Matthew taking her constant absence particularly hard.

Erin visits with Pamela, a Hinckley resident who has, until now, been reluctant to get involved with the case, even though she and her kids have been ill. The women talk and Erin persuades her to engage with the lawsuit.

Ed introduces Erin to Potter, a tough lawyer who he has hired as a partner to take over the Hinckley case.

Erin takes the news badly, as if she is being pushed out.

At home, Ed surprises her with the delivery of a new car and a \$5,000 cheque.

Ed and Erin visit Potter's imposing law firm. They find out that PG&E wants to go to arbitration, wherein a settlement figure (of between \$50m and \$400m) will be decided by a judge in a case-by-case basis, meaning the process could be stretched out for several years.

Erin's angry attitude annoys Ed. He drives off, leaving Erin there.

The lawyers at Potter's firm fail to connect with the Hinckley residents, who get increasingly angry at how they are being treated and unhappy about the proposed arbitration. Pamela has advised the residents to get new lawyers. Erin, stuck at home, sick with fever, is angered.

Erin drags herself into the office, where Ed is meeting with the Potter lawyers. Erin takes this as further evidence that she's been pushed off the case.

Ed tells her that the case is falling apart. Arbitration won't happen without the approval of 90% of the plaintiffs.

Erin's sickness catches up to her and she ends up in the emergency room.

George arrives at the hospital to learn that Erin has developed meningitis. The doctor tells him it could have been caused by exposure to bacteria.

Commentary: *Note the payoff from the earlier set up of Erin poking about in the dirty water collecting evidence.*

George offers to take the kids while she recovers. He is angry and honest with her. They come close to a moment of reconciliation, but this is interrupted by Ed, who is also upset by how Erin embarrasses him with the Potter lawyers. She is contrite.

Ed tells her that PG&E is likely to settle at around \$50m, which Erin thinks is too low. With no evidence linking what went on at the Hinckley plant to PG&E corporate, there is no reason for the company to offer a higher level of compensation. There is also the problem of getting enough residents on board.

Commentary: *There is a distinct escalation in Act Three, with the case falling apart, the protagonist stuck in hospital with meningitis, and no resolution in sight for Erin's*

fractured relationship with George or the kids. (Again, the finished film omits the 'Erin in hospital' development, one of several changes from this draft of the script).

A meeting is called for the townsfolk. Erin is determined to attend, warning Ed to keep the Potter lawyers away.

At the meeting, Ed describes the arbitration process. The residents bicker over the apportionment of any settlement and about how long they're prepared to stretch out the process.

Only around half of the residents are prepared to go ahead. Erin tells him that they must go door-to-door to sign up the rest.

Erin calls George to help out. She then apologises for how she has treated him. George is non-committal.

Erin hits the road with a box of unsigned release forms. She visits with Pamela, telling her that while PG&E won't be held accountable through the arbitration process, the residents will get money that can take care of them and their kids for a long time.

Early the next morning, Erin's son Matthew picks up one of the forms and notices that he is the same age as one of the Hinckley kids. Matthew realises his mother's been away helping sick kids. Erin is moved by his understanding of what she's been doing. The division between them has started healing.

At a bar, a man, Charles, tells Erin he used to work at the Hinckley plant and was told to destroy records, including those relating to the ponds in which the tainted water was stored.

Charles tells Erin that he kept hold of some of the incriminating documents.

Commentary: *With the end rapidly approaching, the emergence of the very evidence that can secure a much larger settlement for the Hinkley residents does seem quite – maybe overly – convenient, especially as it is dropped in Erin's lap. Also note another set up / pay off, with Erin's two encounters with Charles (pages 82 and 129).*

Ed and Erin march triumphantly into a meeting with the Potter lawyers, where they reveal their box of signed forms from all the town's residents, as well as Charles' incriminating evidence.

Time moves on a little. George, Erin and the kids are at the beach.

They meet with the Irvings.

Erin introduces George, clearly all is well between them. Erin then tells Donna that the judge has come up with a settlement figure, \$400m, of which the Irvings get \$5m.

Ed's firm moves into a swanky new building.

When Ed goes to present Erin with a bonus cheque for \$2m, she's not in her office. Instead, she's out ringing doorbells to ask other families about problems with their water supply.

Title cards reveal that the PG&E settlement was the largest direct-action lawsuit in US history and that Ed and Erin have further cases pending, including one against PG&E.

Final comments: *Erin Brockovich is a classic Hollywood awards- and box office-friendly movie, with a strong female protagonist and a neat, upbeat ending that ties everything up in a satisfying way. While PG&E has not had to face liability, the company has paid enough to ensure financial security for the Hinkley residents. Erin's financial problems have also been resolved.*

Meanwhile, the protagonist has gone through some changes. She has used her physical and character traits to her advantage but has learned to temper her natural instincts to be a force for good. She has stuck to her task throughout amid increasing setbacks, both personal and professional, coming out stronger and even more committed to getting justice for people whose lives have been impacted by tainted water supplies. We also leave her in a good place personally, playing happy families, having mended the rifts with George and her kids.

However, to a certain extent, the strength of, and focus on, Erin works to the detriment of the wider story, with the supporting characters becoming archetypes: the gruff boss with a heart of gold; the tough biker who is great with kids (and has a heart of gold); sickly townsfolk with pitiful kids; stiff humourless corporate types; and unappealing uptight female office workers who eye up Erin's inappropriate outfits with envy and react to her salty language like old maiden aunts. The main supporting characters, Ed and George, have little to do, other than act exasperated at Erin's forthright behaviour, then forgive her and acknowledge the error of their ways for ever having doubted her.

This is an investigative biopic, with the emphasis on the biopic and we certainly get plenty of Erin for our money. Whether this is a wholly good thing is subjective, but it does draw a nice contrast with the other screenplays in this collection, The

Insider and The Report, where the emphasis is more on the investigation and outcome.

Each of these scripts takes a differing approach to the 'investigator/whistleblower' model of social screen stories, hopefully highlighting just what is possible creatively within this framework.

***For more, take a look at our [free ebook](#),
Uncovering the Truth: Whistleblowers and Investigators.***