

SCREENPLAY COVERAGE

Soul

Disney/Pixar · Academy draft, July 17, 2020

WRITERS

Pete Docter, Mike Jones
& Kemp Powers

GENRE

Animated Philosophical
Drama / Fantasy

FORMAT

Animated feature

LANGUAGE

English

LOGLINE

A middle-school jazz teacher in New York finally lands the gig of his dreams, only to fall into a manhole and have his soul rerouted to a pre-life cosmic bureaucracy. Desperate to return before the show, he partners with a cynical ancient soul who refuses to be born, and discovers that the purpose he has spent his whole life chasing may have been blinding him to the life he was already living.

FINAL SCORE

8.60/10

RECOMMEND

PASS · CONSIDER ·
RECOMMEND

SCORECARD

CATEGORY		SCORE	WEIGHT	WEIGHTED
Concept & Premise		9/10	20%	1.80
Structure		8/10	20%	1.60
Characters		9/10	40%	3.60
Dialogue		8/10	20%	1.60
Final score			100%	8.60/10

SYNOPSIS

Joe Gardner, a passionate but professionally stagnant middle school band teacher in Queens, New York, receives the long-awaited call: jazz legend Dorothea Williams needs a pianist for her quartet that same evening. Moments after his jubilant audition, Joe falls into a manhole. His soul, rerouted toward

the Great Beyond, escapes into the Great Before, a metaphysical "You Seminar" where unborn souls are developed before birth.

Mistaken for an assigned mentor, Joe is paired with 22, an ancient, obstinate soul who has resisted every mentor in recorded history and refuses to find her "Spark," the life passion that will grant her an Earth Pass. The two strike a deal: Joe will help 22 find her Spark in exchange for her Pass, which he intends to use to return to his body.

An accident sends 22 into Joe's comatose body while Joe ends up inside the hospital therapy cat. Together they navigate New York City (eating pizza, getting haircuts, watching the world) until 22 begins genuinely responding to life's small sensory details. When a miscommunication causes Joe to imply that none of 22's experiences count as a real Spark, the soul spirals into self-doubt and transforms into a Lost Soul. Joe, having finally played his triumphant gig, realizes that his own obsessive pursuit of a singular purpose nearly prevented him from inhabiting his own life. He sacrifices his Earth Pass to rescue 22, sending her on to live. Moved by the act, the Counselors grant Joe an unexpected second chance.

ANALYSIS

Concept & Premise

9/10

Soul passes the elevator test with authority: "A jazz teacher dies on the best day of his life and must help an unborn soul find her reason to live, only to discover he is the one who doesn't know how." The premise is original in the precise sense the word demands: not "never done before" but "executed with a perspective no one else would have brought." The decision to root the metaphysical architecture of the Great Before in jazz culture, New York geography, and Black working-class American experience gives the concept an authentic center of gravity that prevents it from becoming abstract whimsy.

The screenplay's central irony, that a man so passionate about music has missed the jazz of his own life, is elegant without being schematic. The writers understand that a good premise is not a clever inversion but a question with emotional stakes on both sides: Joe wanting desperately to live, and 22 wanting desperately not to. These desires genuinely collide rather than conveniently align, and the resolution does not give either character exactly what they thought they wanted, which is the mark of a concept working at full depth.

The "Spark versus living" distinction is the screenplay's most ambitious conceptual risk. It reframes the premise late in Act Two: Sparks are not purposes but ignition points; the meaning of life is not a singular destination but the act of inhabiting each moment. This reconfiguration earns its place because the script has spent 90 pages dramatizing the cost of confusing the two. Comparable in ambition to *Inside Out* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* in its willingness to use speculative architecture to excavate a psychological truth, *Soul* operates at the ceiling for animated drama. The slight commercial risk, that the philosophical content may disengage younger audiences, is a calculated and defensible artistic choice, not a structural flaw.

Structure

8/10

The three-act architecture is causally clean. The status quo (pages 1-10) establishes Joe's world with economy and precision: the chaotic band class, the unwanted permanent job offer, the resistant mother, the life waiting to happen. The inciting incident (page 11) is correctly abrupt: the manhole fall arrives at the peak of Joe's elation, maximizing ironic impact and establishing the stakes before the protagonist

has any defense against them. The escape into the Great Before (page 14) cleanly ends Act One without overstaying.

Act Two runs on two parallel pressure systems: the 7 PM deadline for the Dorothea Williams show and the evolving relationship between Joe and 22. The body-swap complication (pages 50-60) functions as a strong midpoint escalation; rather than a comic detour, it forces character revelation by putting 22, who has always resisted human experience, inside a human body with no choice but to feel. The Terry subplot maintains jeopardy without dominating, correctly calibrated as a background clock rather than a competing storyline.

The climax at the Earth Portal (pages 118-123), where Joe must enter 22's inner darkness and confront personified versions of her self-doubt, including a nightmare version of himself, is causally earned. The script has established that 22's resistance to life is rooted in accumulated institutional rejection, making this internal landscape feel discovered rather than invented. The structure's one genuine vulnerability is the denouement: the Counselors' decision to grant Joe a second life (pages 124-125) is not actively earned; it is institutional grace extended from above. A single scene in Act Two or Three establishing the Counselors as capable of being moved, rather than purely administrative, would transform this resolution from a gift into a consequence. This is a targeted, addressable problem rather than a structural failure.

Characters

9/10

Joe Gardner is among the most fully realized animated protagonists in recent memory precisely because his flaw is not a moral failing but a perceptual one. He is not selfish in the conventional sense; he is a gifted and generous teacher, a devoted son, a man who genuinely loves what he loves. His problem is that he has mistaken a passion for an identity to the point where the passion has crowded out the life surrounding it. The audience can see that Joe is already living a meaningful life while he cannot, and the script earns the revelation without condescension.

His agency is consistent throughout. He refuses the Great Beyond, constructs and executes the mentor scheme, orchestrates the body-return plan, and ultimately makes the unsolicited sacrificial choice to give 22 his Earth Pass. He resists every obstacle not through passive reaction but through conflicted decision-making with emotional cost on both options. The moment at page 113, Joe alone at the piano working through 22's mementos and accessing memories he had stopped noticing, is dramatic writing of the highest order, showing rather than declaring the internal shift that constitutes his arc.

22 is equally sophisticated. Her resistance to Earth is not generic cynicism but accumulated institutional trauma. The sequence at pages 120-121, where the inner darkness manifests as a parade of personified mentors voicing her deepest self-doubts in her own voice ("The world is better off without you in it"), is dramatically superb, earning its payoff through specificity. The secondary cast is sharply functional: Dorothea's fish parable (page 112) reveals character through subtext, an instruction about jazz that is also a diagnosis of Joe's entire adult life, and Libba provides grounding without being reduced to a nagging archetype. The only underdeveloped area is Libba herself: her perspective on Joe's choices is legitimate and worth exploring, but the script keeps her at narrative arm's length.

Dialogue

8/10

The screenplay operates in the superior register for dramatic animation: most of what matters is carried through behavior, image, and silence rather than speech. The opening 10 pages establish Joe's character, his world, his frustration, and the central dramatic question without a single piece of

explanatory dialogue. The pizza sequence (pages 57-59), where 22 encounters taste for the first time, conveys the film's central argument about embodied experience entirely through physical reaction and a few lines of understatement.

Dorothea's fish parable (page 112) is the script's finest piece of dialogue precisely because it refuses to announce itself as the film's thematic statement. She offers it as a musician's observation and walks away, leaving the audience to apply it. 22's voice is sharply distinctive throughout; the blend of cosmic weariness and childlike ignorance of Earth convention ("I can feel myself feeling myself") achieves genuine personality without becoming a running gag. The gyro flashback (pages 59-60) is funny, reveals 22's attachment to human knowledge she claims to disdain, and quietly sets up the emotional memory that reappears in Act Three.

On-the-nose moments are few and largely functional. Joe's declaration to Dorothea, "My only purpose on this planet is to play," is direct statement rather than subtext, but it works as a character reveal in a high-stakes moment. The Terry running gag ("the count is off") is deliberately cartoonish and serves its structural purpose, though Terry remains the one character whose dialogue has personality without psychological depth. Overall the dialogue serves the story with economy and wit.

COMPARABLE FILMS

Inside Out

Pete Docter, 2015

Speculative inner architecture used to dramatize an emotional truth; Soul applies it to the search for meaning.

About Schmidt

Alexander Payne, 2002

Shares the thematic DNA of late-arriving self-recognition.

Beetlejuice

Tim Burton, 1988

Metaphysical comedy built on a bureaucratic afterlife.

Round Midnight

Bertrand Tavernier, 1986

An honest portrait of the costs of the jazz artist's life.

Soul is an exceptional screenplay and a legitimate achievement within its genre. It asks a genuine philosophical question, what is a life well lived?, and pursues it with enough rigor and emotional honesty to produce an answer that neither simplifies nor moralizes. The concept is original, the characters are three-dimensional and causally active, the structure holds, and the dialogue trusts its audience. None of its closest comparables are animated, which underscores its novelty: an adult philosophical drama that happens to be told through animation.

The script's single addressable weakness, the slightly deus ex machina quality of the Counselors' decision to return Joe to life, is the only element that prevents a Recommend Highly rating. A single beat establishing that the Counselors can be genuinely moved by human behavior would turn the climactic grace into a prepared consequence.

Beyond that, the screenplay accomplishes what very few animated scripts do: it earns its emotional payoff through accumulated dramatic work rather than through the genre's permission to demand tears. The image of Joe alone at the piano, re-encountering his own life through someone else's first experience of it, is the kind of scene that stays with a reader. This is a script that warrants every resource invested in bringing it to screen.

DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

1-2 weeks of targeted structural revision.

GENRE WEIGHTING

Drama / Character Study: Concept 20%, Structure 20%, Characters 40%, Dialogue 20%.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

All rights to the analyzed screenplay remain exclusively with the author. Roast My Script claims no ownership, license or rights of any kind over the submitted material. This script has not been used to train any AI model and never will be.

Get yours from \$9 at roastmyscript.com