FADE IN: Before You Put Digits to Keyboard

Whoa – whoa there. Slow down, pal. Before you start, there are a few things you need to do.

This chapter is all about preparation. I'm not talking about brewing coffee, sitting down at your chair, opening your screenwriting software, and whipping up a nice mp3 playlist. I'm talking about training your mind for the big prize fight that is writing a hundred-page screenplay.

We'll start out with the absolute basics: the prerequisites for learning how to think like a screenwriter. Then we'll move on to talk about having ideas (good ones, specifically), planning for the future, and researching your script.

Think of this chapter as being like the opening moments of a film. We're fading in on an unknown world, about to enter a whole new fictional realm. In those first few minutes, as we get our bearings, it seems like anything's possible. Maybe it is.

Screenwriting Tips, You Hack

> **Screenwriting Tip #1:**
>
> Don't be boring. *For the love of god, don't be boring.* Tape it to your laptop. Tape it to your eyeballs. *Don't be boring.*

Matt Fraction – a fantastic Marvel comics writer; maybe you've heard of him – actually does tape it to his laptop. Literally. He has a sticky note on his laptop with "DON'T BE BORING" written on it. I can think of worse motivational phrases.

In a way, this is the only screenwriting tip that you absolutely *must* follow. Everything else is negotiable; every other rule can be bent or broken, but not this one. If it helps, you can think of writing a screenplay as a hundred-page-long game of "keep it up," with the ball being how much the reader gives a damn. If you drop that ball even once, you lose. The game's over. No other rule matters because you've just lost the one thing that really counts.

Unfortunately, "boring" is in the eye of the beholder. One woman's page-turner is another woman's insomnia cure. So I recommend using this tip less as a barometer and more as a litmus test – something you periodically apply to yourself as you're writing.

When your protagonist begins spouting off about her backstory, her difficult childhood in Colombia, and her family's genetic history of high blood pressure, stop and ask yourself: is this boring?

When you find your two leads standing in a small room doing nothing but talking about the status of their relationship, stop and think: am I bored to tears at the *thought* of having to write this scene?

When your bad guy explains the master plan to his underlings in exhaustive detail; when the setup for a simple, pointless joke runs for two pages; when everybody talks about a character we haven't seen yet because it's "foreshadowing"; when two characters banter back and forth without actually saying anything because you wanted them to interact but couldn't figure out how to tie it into the plot; or when the main character spends an entire scene feeling sorry for herself – that's when your Boredom Detector should start beeping loudly.

Of course, you might have particularly good reasons for including one of these typically yawn-inducing scenes. That doesn't mean you can just give up and let it be boring! There's always something you can do to patch up a dry scene.

You can add background action – enemies sneaking up on the characters while they're talking, or a character pretending to carry on a boring conversation while attempting to accomplish something else. You can intercut to other pertinent scenes that are taking place at the same time, or even to flashbacks, or you can interrupt the current scene by having a more interesting character or scenario crash the party.

Or, best of all, you can layer meaning into everything like some deranged, subtext-wielding bricklayer. When your characters don't quite say what they mean, and everything in your story has possible subtext attached to it, even the most superficially dull conversations can spring to life (for the actors as much as for the reader).

When writing a screenplay, you must train yourself to be many things. You must be brave. You must be bull-headed. And you must be brilliant. But you should never, ever be boring.

> **Screenwriting Tip #2:**
> Actually read scripts.

This is a big one. This may even be *the biggest* one.

Before you can learn to drive, you need to have at least seen a car. Before you can cook, you need to have tasted food cooked by other human beings. And before you can write a screenplay, you need to have read a screenplay. And not just one or two screenplays. Try ten, at the bare minimum.

Now, this may not be news to you. You're probably a sensible, intelligent, reasonably attractive person who understands that one does not embark on a complex technical task without some basic understanding of what the hell one is doing. But not everybody is like you – not by a distressingly long shot. There are screenwriters out there who, for whatever reason, feel like they are entitled to skip ahead.

They could be a student in film school ("I'm just writing it for myself and my friends"), a devoted fan of a certain franchise ("I've read transcripts and fan-fic. I know what I'm doing!"), the owner of multiple screenwriting advice books ("I've absorbed it all by osmosis"), or a writer in some other field involving the written word ("If I can write a play, I can write a dumb Hollywood movie"). Then there's the great granddaddy of anti-reading excuses: "A screenplay is just the blueprint for the movie. I've seen hundreds of movies. Therefore, I know all about screenplays."

You hear that a lot: "A screenplay is a blueprint." This – like so many popular, bite-sized definitions – is crap.

Unless you're a professional architect, a blueprint carries no emotional weight. We do not look at blueprints and see the shape of the whole house – we don't get inspired or enlightened or entertained. A blueprint is just an arrangement of lines and marks that show how long a wall is, or how many square feet is taken up by a particular room. In the world of scriptwriting, the closest thing to a blueprint is probably an outline: just a simple map of what goes where, conveying a vague idea of the overall shape but none of its nuance or soul.

A screenplay is different. A screenplay is the entire experience of a movie or a TV episode – all the sights and sounds, all the emotion and character – summed up on paper. This is a storytelling medium, but crucially, it's a different storytelling medium from film and television. Screenplays are an artform in and of themselves, and the only way to learn their rules is by walking in their world. Which means reading a lot of screenplays.

Here's the good news: scripts are everywhere. If you've heard of Google, you know how to find scripts for thousands of films and TV shows. You can read them printed out or on your computer or phone. You can touch

them on your tablet or project them onto your living room wall. At no time in history has it ever been this easy to find and read scripts. So there's no excuse not to read them.

What are you looking for when you do read screenplays? Well, you could just read and enjoy them (or not, as the case may be), but you're probably looking for something a bit deeper. Try reading dialog aloud – roll the words around on the tongue and see how they feel. If the dialog evokes a certain speech idiom, try to figure out how it does that. If the words feel unnatural to say, try to think about why, and how they could be improved.

When you read action lines, pay attention to the way your mind conjures detailed images … or doesn't, in the case of a bad script. Learn the difference between boring, lifeless action scenes and blazing fast, balls-to-the-wall, I-can't-turn-the-pages-fast-enough action scenes. Make note of the points where you lose interest and want to stop reading. Push yourself to keep reading anyway, because if you can figure out *why* that particular bit sucked, you can stop yourself from repeating it in your own work.

That's why I advocate reading bad scripts as well as good scripts: bad scripts are easier to critique. It's much, much easier (and sometimes more fun) to figure out why something sucks than why it works. Bad scripts are educational – good scripts are inspirational. Good writing just motivates – bad writing motivates you to do better than *that* idiot.

If you feel like going above and beyond, you might even try your hand at writing coverage. Sure, you're not getting paid to do it, but neither are half the interns in Hollywood. Pretend you're a cantankerous Hollywood script reader and read the script with a critical eye; then reread it, summarize it, and write out its strengths and weaknesses as if you were describing it to an overworked executive. Give it a PASS or a CONSIDER, and be brutally honest in your assessment. And why not? Somebody's going to do the same thing to one of your scripts one day.

So read screenplays. If you've already read some in the past, read more. The more you read, the more you start to see the patterns behind good structure and good dialog. You'll also be able to spot weaknesses and see the places where the writer has set herself up for a fall. You'll become a doctor, able to quickly diagnose script problems and prescribe cures. And if you can do that for other people's screenwriting, you can do it for your own.

> **Screenwriting Tip #3:**
> Get away from the computer and spend some time with your loved ones. Then steal their dialog and mannerisms for your characters.

Technically, you're not supposed to borrow directly from other writers. The academic world calls it "plagiarism," the fiction world considers it poor sportsmanship, and your high school English teacher wasn't too fond of it, either.

So you work around it. You read a wonderful line in a book or script, and you file it away in the memory banks. Of course you'll never be able to use that line verbatim, but maybe one day the memory of that great line will inspire your own writing to new heights. You'll use the spirit, if not the letter, of that first work to enhance the creation of a new, original piece of writing.

Or you could just plunder the crap out of your own life.

It sounds easy, and that's because it is. That's the wonderful thing about real life: people say funny, weird, and amazing things *all the damn time*, and it's all free for you to use. There's no copyright on the conversation you overheard on the bus. Your family isn't going to sue for losses due to your use of dialog from Disastrous Christmas Dinner Argument 2009. And the crazy person sitting next to you on the overnight from JFK to LAX will never, ever know how much they inspired the funniest set-piece in your comedy spec.

This is just one in a whole sackful of reasons why you should always carry a notepad – or, more likely, a smartphone. Download Evernote or another cloud-based note-taking app and never forget awesome lines of dialog again.

So there you are, eavesdropping on people and surreptitiously tran-scribing their words while trying to look like you're actually just texting a friend – nothing weird at all, I'm definitely not writing down everything you say, Mr. Crazy Bus Passenger. You're having fun, taking jokes and turns of phrase and using them wholesale in your scripts. But pretty soon, you're going to start noticing a few things about the way people talk.

Just the act of listening carefully and writing down what you've heard can be an incredible learning experience. You'll learn the cadence and the word choice, the class markers, and the idiosyncrasies that usually register only on a subconscious level. In no time at all, you'll be tweaking and changing your dialog to make it sound more like the way people actually talk. You won't have to take a wild guess at how a fifteen-year-old surfer or a forty-five year-old stockbroker might speak – you'll just know.

Remember: if you suck at dialog, the only way to get better is to stop talking (through your characters) and start listening. If you want to hear how real people speak, all you have to do is go outside. In time, plundering will give way to creation, and you'll be a true dialog master.

Of course, that takes a lot of work. If you don't like going outside – and let's not kid ourselves, you *are* a writer – there's always the cheat's way: do a search for the word "overheard" on Twitter, then marvel at the bizarre, free-range dialog that pops up.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #4:
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> If you have a friend who is a doctor, cop, or lawyer, for god's sake use them for research. Don't just watch *CSI* and take notes.

People who truly know what they're talking about are fascinating.

Well, not geeks. Nobody wants to listen to you talk about the chronology of the Legend of Zelda games for thirty straight minutes. Believe me, I've tried.

I'm talking about people who are well-versed in legitimately interesting, specialized topics, the kind you have to go to school for a significant amount of time to learn. I'm talking about surgeons, nurses, criminal lawyers, nuclear scientists, homicide detectives, forensics techs, and all the other interesting professions. Why are they interesting? Because they involve life-and-death decisions, which makes them inherently dramatic. Remember, drama is how you make something interesting, and interesting is what you want your writing to be, 100 percent of the time.

Chances are good that you know an interesting person or someone who knows someone who knows one. *Talk to them*. They won't tell you to get lost – quite the opposite. Believe me, they will be flattered that you want to know all about their life and work. You see, although the phrase "I'm a writer" may conjure images of filth, poverty, and malnutrition among the normally employed, it also carries with it a certain cultural cachet. For some reason – and personally, I blame the Romantic poets – society still regards the act of fiction writing as a noble, inherently worthy pursuit. You can use this to your advantage.

Call up your doctor or lawyer friend. Better yet, offer to take them out for coffee. Then ask them questions, and actually listen as they talk. Eventually bring the subject of conversation around to your screenplay ("So … in a real zombie apocalypse, how many days until their flesh would start to rot? Assuming a typical Californian summer?"). But here's the thing – if they give an answer you don't like, or that doesn't fit perfectly with your concept, *don't freak out*. Keep an open mind.

Assume the answer you got for the zombie apocalypse question was: "Three days, tops, then the muscle would start to fall off and inhibit movement." There goes the entire premise of your script, dropped away like so many zombie limbs. Unless …

What if you could use that information to enhance your story? Perhaps the protagonist's boyfriend has been zombified, and if they don't find the cure within three days he'll be too decayed to save? Or maybe the realities of zombie putrefaction necessitates a change of setting to a different time of year, or even a different state? Maybe Minnesota *is* a better locale for the story after all?

In this way, the act of researching and thinking about the technical realities of your setting can help you to reexamine a lot of your own choices. Maybe you had no idea why you were setting the story in California in the first place. If you don't understand why you made your choices, you can't defend them. And if you can't defend them, no producer or executive is going to take your choices seriously. That's why you research – not just for backstory, but to better understand the entire world of your story.

Of course, you're not an idiot. You're not going to write a courtroom drama without having any idea what a bailiff or a jury is. But there's a danger in assuming that we know enough to get by, just because we've all seen the same 17,000 episodes of *Law & Order*, *House*, and *ER*. "Objection, Your Honor." "Give me fifty cc's of saline solution." "You're going away for a long time, pal," and so on. We think we know it all.

The problem is that bad research always shows through. You can't rely on secondhand knowledge forever. In real life, police don't always read the Miranda rights to suspects as they cuff them, trials don't always have juries, and doctors rarely get a good opportunity to yell "Stat!" Readers can tell when you've rushed something or half-assed a technicality. Even the greatest writer in the world can't hide a lack of research forever. Eventually, the absence of any kind of verisimilitude becomes apparent, and once you see the cardboard buildings for what they are, no amount of squinting can turn them back into brick and mortar.

So talk to the professionals in your life. Don't be afraid to phone a friend and ask about serial killer profiling, or the odds of surviving a gunshot to the spleen. You're a writer – they should be used to your bizarre behavior by now.

As a special note: deep research can be particularly useful to those of us who were born and raised outside the United States of America. We most likely grew up on an entertainment diet consisting of American movies and TV shows, so naturally we want to set our stories there. New York's just that little bit more alluring than Melbourne, you know? The problem is that our views of what constitutes life in the United States can be slightly skewed by what we've seen on screen. We think we know our setting, but if we know it only through fiction, we're bound to get the fine details wrong. Research is there to correct that problem so we don't look like idiots by writing scenes in which lawyers wear wigs, cars drive on the left, and writers have government-funded health care.

> **Screenwriting Tip #5:**
> Have a lot of hobbies. Being a writer means being professionally interested in, well, everything.

The saying goes: "How do you come up with good ideas? By having a lot of ideas."

Sounds silly, but it's 100 percent true. Unless you're thinking, you can't think outside the box. Stimulating the mind through fiction, nonfiction, and various hobbies is the best way to keep your mind in a constant state of churning, whirring activity. Keep your mind active and you'll start to make more of those instant, flashbulb connections – the kind where two separate elements or ideas come together to form one brilliant spark. That's where good ideas come from.

Obviously, you're going to want to watch a ton of movies and television shows. I know it's hard, but we've all got to make sacrifices. The next time your friends or loved ones ask why you've been sitting on the couch all day mainlining *Dexter* DVDs, tell them you're mentally preparing for your next million-dollar idea. They'll understand.

Seriously, though, don't just be a passive observer. Plenty of people watch film and television for fun and escapism, but you're not plenty of people. You're a writer, and you need to cast a more critical eye over what you're watching. You need to tailor your viewing habits to your career. For example, if you want to write low-budget horror, you better get out there and watch every single indie gorefest you can get your hands on. Buy the DVDs and study them. Follow the creators' careers. Watch the new ones in the cinema just so you can observe the audience's reactions. This is your hobby, but it's also your job, so approach it with passion and intensity.

If you want to be a television writer, keep up with the latest network season. Watch every new show if you can, and try to predict which ones will tank and which ones will run for seven years and on into syndication. Trust me, it can be an eye-opening process. Even if you only want to write films (although why would you, when television writers have all the power?), you should still stay plugged into the world of TV. Television is currently undergoing something of a glorious renaissance, with channels like HBO and AMC leading the charge toward serialization, deep characterization, and character-driven storytelling. By following a single character for fifty or a hundred episodes, television can pull off narrative and emotional tricks that film can only dream of. And that's something every writer should be interested in.

Or how about comic books? Comics are one of the great American artforms, standing alongside Hollywood cinema as one of the country's major cultural exports to the world. As Grant Morrison is fond of saying, "Superman was around long before you were born, and he'll be around long after you die." Comics are powerful, emotional, interesting, and

insanely imaginative, something that Hollywood has only started to learn over the course of the last decade. I'm sure you already know about major comic book adaptations like *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, *Watchmen*, and *300*. But did you know that *Road to Perdition*, *A History of Violence*, *Scott Pilgrim*, *30 Days of Night*, *Men in Black*, *The Crow*, *Kick-Ass*, and *Hellboy* all had their origins on the printed page?

So what do most comic book movies have in common? They're all wildly imaginative concepts. Just look at this stuff: a genius dresses up as a bat to fight crime. A Torontonian slacker must defeat his new girlfriend's seven evil exes in single combat. A cigar-smoking demon beats the crap out of Nazis. These ideas are original and interesting – exactly the kind of thing Hollywood is looking for. If you want to see what truly original ideas look like, you should be interested in comics.

You should also play videogames. No, wait – come back. Put down the Xbox controller. I'm not talking about slumping in front of the couch until 3:00 a.m. playing *Call of Duty*. I'm talking about playing games in order to appreciate them as art. Play smart, narrative-driven games like *Heavy Rain* or the *Mass Effect* series. Better yet, seek out weird little gems like *Infinite Ocean*, *Every Day the Same Dream*, or *Digital: A Love Story*. These sorts of games tend to be gold mines of originality, and they'll help you think in new and interesting ways. Plus, it doesn't hurt to further your knowledge of a young, vast, and quickly growing entertainment industry that is currently doing the mega-blockbuster thing much better than Hollywood.

(Pro tip: Whatever you do, do not start playing *World of Warcraft*. First you'll play it on the weekend, then every night of the week. Pretty soon you'll find yourself skipping work. Screenwriting will become a half-remembered dream. The next thing you know, it's five years later, your spouse and kids have left you and you're living in a shack made of rats. Or so I've heard.)

Finally, be into something that's *not* fiction. Have a special subject. Mine's history, but yours might be sports, cooking, or stand-up comedians. Engage with the topic – teach and learn from others. This is the best way to keep your mind ticking along constantly. Believe me, some day, that knowledge is going to feed into a script and inform one of your best story ideas.

Screenwriting Tip #6:

Why not read an Oscar-nominated script? They're all available online. That's decades worth of quality instruction all by itself.

Screenwriting Tip #7:

If you're friends with an actor, write the perfect part for that actor; if you're friends with a director, write something that suits that director's style and strengths.

Screenwriting Tip #8:

We all have that one friend who creates drama everywhere. Hint: put that friend in your script. What may be annoying in real life is gold on the page.

Screenwriting Tip #9:

If you've got more than one good idea, choose the concept with the higher degree of difficulty. If you succeed, you'll have created something unique and interesting. If you fail, at least you didn't write something that everybody's already seen a thousand times.

Screenwriting Tip #10:

Watch old movies. They have the best dialog.

No Idea: Concept Is King

"What's it about?"

You're going to hear that question a lot. You'll hear it from agents, managers, producers, other writers, and even just your friends and family. You'll also hear it from yourself – first muttered in quiet contemplation, later shouted through a haze of confusion and tears as you struggle through the long, dark night of Act 2.

You must have a good answer for all of those people. And the path to that answer begins with the most important step: choosing the right concept.

> **Screenwriting Tip #11:**
> Before you devote the next three months of your life to an idea, make sure it's a good one.

I know exactly how you feel. All you want right now, more than anything else in the world, is to write a screenplay.

Well, that's not quite right. All you want is to *have written* a screenplay – to have it sitting there, your name emblazoned on the cover, all polished and sharp and ready to go.

Actually, even that's not right. You want to have written the *perfect* screenplay. A great idea executed to perfection. The kind of thing that people talk about, that agents want to read, and that production companies want to buy.

The problem is that you want it too much. As with dating, desperation ain't sexy, and it won't help your chances. Wanting it too much will cause you to rush, to cut corners, and to work too fast. You'll get the first thing you wanted (a finished screenplay), but it won't be the perfect script you envisioned. To get as close as possible to your perfect script, you have to go all the way back to the very first screenplay decision you ever made.

You have to go back to the original idea.

Choosing the right idea is like buying a house. You have to spend weeks, or more likely months, doing your research and due diligence. You must be skittish and wary, always asking questions – does the roof leak? Are we right underneath an international flight path? Is this story actually sustainable for a hundred pages? Does my protagonist truly fit the concept?

You need to find answers to the questions the real estate agents won't talk about, such as whether the house next door is a notorious drug drop, or whether the walls are, in fact, filled with snakes. This is the kind of stuff you normally wouldn't find out until a month after you move in. In screenplay terms, I call this the Seventy-five Percent Curse. That's when you get 75 percent of the way into your first draft and realize that you hate your protagonist, you don't know what the theme is, and you have no idea how the story ends. Sometimes this is just writer's doubt – all part of the horrible beast we call the "creative process" – but sometimes it happens because there was always something fundamentally wrong with your concept. Like a genetic disease, it's been lurking there the whole time, waiting for its moment to strike you down and invalidate months of work.

So how do you know you've chosen the right idea?

The exciting answer is that you just know it when you see it. It's the idea that, when you tell it to friends, they say "I'd pay to watch that." It's the idea that you can't stop thinking about, dreaming about, singing about in the shower. It's the idea that you love so much you could see yourself

working on it for a year or more, if that's what it takes to get it perfect. But we don't all get those ideas, and if we do, they might come only once or twice in a career.

So here's the boring answer: the right idea is the one that's easiest to outline. If you can approximate the beginning, middle, and end of the story without too much puzzling, brain-straining work, then you have a winner on your hands, because if you can already see the structure, it follows that you already understand your protagonist. If you know where she's going to be at the end of the story, then you must know how she changes. Structure *is* character. (More on this later.)

Always remember: screenplays are about people. Not settings, fight scenes, love stories, explosions, or jokes – people. And chances are very good that you're writing a traditional western screenplay, which means that the story is about one person (the protagonist) and how that person changes, usually for the better. Ergo, your idea must be one that allows the protagonist to change.

This sounds so simple and obvious, but you'd be amazed how often writers do it in reverse. They come up with a cool setting or a neat set-piece and try to tack a protagonist on later. That way lies ruin. If you're trying to choose from among five different screenplay ideas, always choose the one where the protagonist's arc is clear to you – where you can imagine how she transforms from a flawed person into a better person over the course of the story. That's your winning idea. I don't care how flashy or unique your other ideas are – if you don't understand the protagonists and can't see their arcs, then those ideas will be dead on arrival.

If you're lucky enough to come up with an idea that truly matters to you, that moves others *and* features a strong narrative arc for the protagonist … well, what the hell are you waiting for? Time to go to work.

> **Screenwriting Tip #12:**
> If you don't know your own logline, you probably don't know what your script is about.

Some writers will tell you they don't have a logline. Their screenplay is "too complex" or "too character-driven," or they just didn't bother to think of one before they started writing. These writers are either idiots or geniuses – and somehow I don't think there are that many geniuses running around.

You need a logline. After the concept and possibly the title, it's the first thing you should come up with for your screenplay. The logline is the first bit of real writing you will do for a project – it marks the point where you start translating the wonders and marvels in your head into mundane words on a page. The logline is where you stop dreaming and start working.

What's a logline, you ask? It's two sentences that sum up the entire essence of your story, from protagonist to setting to plot. Here's one I prepared earlier:

> Dorothy, a naïve farm girl from Kansas, is carried away by a tornado to the mystical land of Oz. With the help of her new friends, she must defeat the Wicked Witch of the West and find her way back home.

Those two sentences describe the protagonist, her motivations and goal, her allies, the inciting incident, the stakes, the setting, and the antagonist. You could probably cram in more, but keeping the two sentences short and readable helps with clarity and impact. Of course, two sentences is an arbitrary limitation, but like so many good arbitrary limitations (the sonnet, the tweet, etc.), it encourages ruthless creativity. It forces you to think about what really matters – what's the core of the story and what's just decoration?

Notice what's *not* in the example: anything about Dorothy's backstory, her life in Kansas before Oz, or the framing narrative of the whole thing being a dream. Anything about the Wizard, Toto, the Munchkins, or other incidental characters she meets along the way. Any mention of plot devices or MacGuffins, like the fact that the Wicked Witch is angry because Dorothy accidentally killed her sister, or the ruby slippers being the key to getting Dorothy home.

You don't need that stuff in a logline, because you wouldn't open with that stuff if you were explaining the concept to someone. You know it'll be there in your outline and screenplay, but for now your job is to focus on the heart of the story.

From the logline, I tend to expand into a complete short pitch. I'll write it out as if I'm trying to sell the story to someone, starting with an explanatory paragraph ("*The Wizard of Oz* is a coming-of-age adventure story set in

a fantastical world called Oz," and so on). Then I'll write a quick summary of what happens in Acts 1, 2, and 3. I might follow this up with a short section on characters, or at the very least the protagonist and antagonist – who they are, what they want, where they're coming from.

Finally, I'll cap it off with what might boringly be called a "mission statement" paragraph, but that I prefer to think of as "Why This Is Cool." It's literally an explanation of what I think is cool about the story, why I love it, and why it deserves to be a screenplay. This could be about how unique and interesting the protagonist is, how the concept has never been done before, or just a description of the visuals or a spectacular set-piece that I can see happening in the script.

Eventually, the whole thing will probably take up only one or two pages. The point of this exercise is to sell *yourself* on the concept – to set out, carefully and rationally, the details of the screenplay you're about to write. By doing this, you *will* think of new directions you hadn't considered before, you *will* find problems that weren't immediately obvious, and you *will* be better equipped to decide if this is the project you want to devote the next few months of your life to.

If you hadn't written a logline and a pitch document, you'd never have discovered those things. And the next time someone asks you what your script's about, you'll have a killer logline to give them in response.

> **Screenwriting Tip #13:**
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> Your screenplay is not about what happens. It's about who it happens to.

A good film isn't about setting, set-pieces, issues, or themes. It's about people.

Human beings like watching other human beings. It's a primate thing. We also enjoy imagining what fictional people are thinking and feeling – and in the very best cases, not just imagining but *experiencing* their emotions as our own. We want to feel brave, scared, heroic, confident, triumphant, in love. Basically, we want to inhabit somebody else's life for a little while.

There are movies that are more about plot and setting than character. *Avatar*'s biggest asset is its luscious wonderland of floating islands and alien animals. But still, our emotional connection to that film comes from imagining what it would be like to live there like Jake Sully, to integrate with the alien land and people like he does. Films with Jason Bourne and James Bond are heavy on plotting and light on characterization, but still we imagine: what would it be like to be that tough, that cunning, that cool? We put ourselves in the characters' shoes because, well, that's what humans do. To us, everything is filtered through the lens of other people. In a way, film and television are the ultimate vicarious experience.

That's why it's so important that your script be about people, not the events that happen to them. If you want audiences to admire your setting, write a character who admires it. If you want readers to be moved by a plot twist, make sure it moves your protagonist first.

Your protagonist is the engine of your script, the key part that drives everything else. The protagonist's goals and motivations must be clear at the outset or your script isn't going to make sense. At every point in the script, the reader should be able to look at a scene and understand exactly what the protagonist stands to gain or lose from that scene.

So if that's what you want to present to the reader, why not make that your writing method, too? Approach your outline from the perspective of "How is this scene going to affect the protagonist?" Instead of putting plot first – "Okay, so first there's a bank robbery, then a car chase, then a conversation, then a shoot-out in the warehouse, then …" – put your protagonist first. Work out what she's trying to do in every scene, and you'll find that the plot grows organically from her decisions.

As Elbert Hubbard said (yes, I had to look him up, and no, I hadn't heard of him either), "Life is just one damn thing after another." That's basically all plot is. Without the protagonist, plot has no context. Remember this when you outline, and try to look at everything in your script from the perspective of what it means to your protagonist.

> **Screenwriting Tip #14:**
>
> Here's a pop quiz for you. Which of the following are things that you probably shouldn't tackle in your very first spec script? (A) nonlinear narrative, (B) multiple protagonists, (C) aliens, (D) time travel, (E) all of the above.

It's important to make the distinction here between your first screenplay and your first spec. Your first *screenplay* can be written in crayon on the wall of an Arby's restroom and nobody will care. That's just you, alone, playing with the form. Hey, you've never done this before – it's fun! You're discovering what it feels like to type dialog after character names, learning what a logline looks like, and testing the capabilities of your new screenwriting software/restroom wall.

You don't even need to finish that first screenplay. It doesn't even have to make sense. There are no rules at all, save one: you can never, under any circumstances, show that script to anyone else … unless you want them to think that you're a subliterate ape-person. It's a practice run and nothing more.

So that's your first screenplay. No big deal. But your first *spec*? Now we're talking.

Your first spec is business time. When you finish this script, you will want to show it to other human beings. You're aiming to write something that might actually sell (hence the word "spec"). With that in mind, you need to get a few things straight before you start typing. Obviously, you need to set aside time in which to write it. Certainly you should come up with an interesting protagonist, and maybe a catchy title. And yes, you do need to write an outline. But before you do all of that, you have to choose a killer concept.

I don't quite know why newbie writers always choose ambitious, extravagant, nigh impossible concepts for their first spec, but I have a theory. If you want to be a screenwriter, you're probably a film and/or television geek, right? And we film and TV geeks, we like stuff that normal people don't. We pride ourselves on being the first to discover a new indie film or cable show, and we love recommending them to our friends and family.

So chances are, your favorite film or show is pretty damn weird. Maybe it's *Brazil*, or *Inception*, or *Twin Peaks*, or *Carnivale*? How about *Pulp Fiction*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Prisoner*, or *Donnie Darko*? All of those are weird, rule-breaking, and wildly ambitious, and that's why we love them.

But they're not good choices for your first spec. Much as you may want to emulate your idols, a time-lost emotional parable is a horrible choice for your first serious screenplay. That sort of script is based on breaking the rules, and the fact is that you and the rules have only just met. You've barely had time to get acquainted with screenplay structure, so you'll have

to buy it a few more drinks before it hops into bed with you and starts getting down with the weird stuff. Here's what to avoid:

Nonlinear narrative: Yeah, I've seen *Memento*, *Rashomon*, and *Pulp Fiction*. Unless you have something to add to what those films accomplished, I'd avoid making nonlinearity the entire focus of your script. Don't get me wrong – it's an excellent seasoning when used in moderation. A dash of "open at the end then flash back to the start" can spice up most dishes. Just don't dump the entire shaker on top of your first spec.

Multiple protagonists: Yikes. This one is hard. I can count on one hand the number of recent films that actually accomplish this. But then, it's my opinion that most films that people think of as having multiple protagonists really have only one, plus a strong focus on the antagonist or supporting characters. It's just not a popular format, and to embark on this course for your first spec is to invite confusion, heartache, and a major case of Second Act Blues. Even if you're writing a romantic comedy (or, for the truly old-school, a romance), I'd still recommend focusing on one protagonist at this stage in your writing journey.

Aliens: I don't mean in a horror movie. If they're just there to be mouths-on-legs and devour the extras, I say go for it. The problem comes when new writers decide to develop an entire ecology, language, technology, and home world for their wondrous new species. The key problem here is that people tend to relate to, well, people. The emotions and thought processes of an alien race can often come across as a mildly interesting thought experiment – something much more intellectual than cinematic. Save it for when you're co-writing *Avatar 3* with James Cameron.

Time travel: It's a wonderful plot device, but the potential to massively confuse has always slightly outweighed its value as a storytelling tool. That's why it works best in comedy (*Back to the Future*, *Groundhog Day*), where the inevitable questions can be waved away or glossed over with an attitude of "it's just for fun." It's a tough tightrope to walk, and coupled with the fact that your structure is virtually guaranteed to be all over the place, this is one to avoid for a first spec.

Of course, if your brilliant billion-dollar concept relies on one of these tropes, then who am I to stop you from writing it as your first spec? All I'm saying is you know those carnival games with the fluffy toy prizes? Nobody ever wins the big giant bear on their first throw. They rig it so you *can't* win the big giant bear on your first throw. Start small, win some other prizes, and get your throwing arm in. When you're ready, the big giant bear will still be there, waiting for you.

Screenwriting Tip #15:

If your first spec is a historically accurate period piece about, say, nineteenth-century Venetian circus performers, don't expect it to sell for money. Hollywood? Not so hot for historical accuracy.

Screenwriting Tip #16:

Don't pick a title that is impossible to Google, or has already been used for seven other movies dating back to the 1930s. (IMDb.com is your friend!)

Screenwriting Tip #17:

Christmas episodes make good TV specs, even if the show in question doesn't normally do special episodes. It allows you to start with a nice thematic framework already in place.

Screenwriting Tip #18:

You have 100 pages in which to tell any story in the world. Don't waste them by aping a story that's already been told a hundred times. Give the world something new.

Screenwriting Tip #19:

You know that one dream concept you've had for years, but you've been putting off writing it until you're good enough to "do it justice"? Make that your next project.

Screenwriting Tip #20:

Your concept is not a state secret. You don't need to be paranoid about someone stealing it – Hollywood doesn't work that way.

Rebel without a Plan: Outlining Is the Best Present You Can Give Your Future Self

Nobody ever achieved anything by running off ill-equipped and half-cocked. (Well, nobody except Columbus, but screw that guy. He was basically the Chauncey Gardiner of explorers.)

It's all very romantic (not to mention Romantic) to imagine the noble writer embarking on a creative struggle against the blank page armed with nothing but her wits, emotions, raw talent, and the radiant favor of the Muses. This idea of writing-as-grail-quest is, of course, nothing but fantastical nonsense… but that doesn't mean that nonwriters don't believe it. That dim glow of respect that our ancestors held for bards, poets, and storytellers has never quite worn off.

Look, don't tell the nonwriters this, but the truth is *way* less glamorous. The truth is that we sit down at a computer and we think until our thoughts get tangled and our foreheads bleed. We plot and plan and outline, testing to see what works and what doesn't. We're not Muse-driven vessels – we're scientists searching for a working theory through trial and error. And the more rigorously we test and plan, the closer we can get to that perfect unifying theory that is a killer screenplay.

23

> **Screenwriting Tip #21:**
>
> Don't start writing until you've finished outlining.

No plan survives contact with the enemy.

– Helmuth von Moltke the Elder

First: how cool is that guy's name? That's exactly the sort of weird and wonderful name you should be giving your characters. Second, our friend Helmuth is absolutely right about no plan surviving contact with the enemy. But do note Helmuth's implication that you should *actually have a plan in the first place*.

That plan is your outline. Know what an outline is? An outline is the difference between a professional writer and a hopeless amateur.

Yeah, that's right. I'm *that* guy. I'm that strict, writing-is-a-science jerk who wants to quash your creative energy by channeling it into a boring, bone-dry template instead of a beautiful, free-flowing script. I'm the outline jerk. And I'm going to save you from months of unnecessary pain and heartache.

Your script is not an improv play, a jazz saxophone performance, or a stream-of-consciousness poetry jam. Your script is more like a space shuttle launch. No word should be out of place, no character arc less than fully realized. Every single thing in your script has to go exactly right, and for that you need a plan. Luckily, you're probably writing this thing on spec, which means you have a large amount of time in which to make sure your plan is completely foolproof.

I know what you're thinking: "But my favorite writer doesn't outline! He uses the first draft to 'discover his characters' and 'find out what the story is really about'!" Here's the thing: your favorite writer may not know it, but he's lying to you.

Take David Milch, creator of *Deadwood* and *NYPD Blue*. David Milch claims he doesn't outline – he simply dives in and decides what happens as he writes. But this is highly misleading for two reasons:

- David Milch is most likely a *freaking genius* who works on a different plane from you and me.
- David Milch has internalized story structure over the course of thousands upon thousands of hours of screenwriting, to the point where the "outline" emerges fully formed and glittering in his mind like Athena from the brow of Zeus.

The man's been doing this for decades – he hears the music in his head now. We don't, and we won't…not until we spend a few thousand hours writing detailed outlines followed by space-shuttle-quality screenplays.

So why do you need an outline? Let me count the ways:

You need an outline to tell you what happens and when.

This might seem obvious, but believe me, I've seen plenty of screenplays in which the authors clearly had no idea where their own stories were going. And if you ask me, it's all the fault of that pesky Act 2.

Beginnings are easy. Any idiot can write a beginning. You simply set the heroine up with a goal, a villain, and a portfolio of interesting character flaws and turn her loose on the world you've created. The story drives itself forward…right up until, oh, page 30 or so.

Endings are pretty easy, too. The heroine defeats the monster/gets the boy/cleans up the Louisiana coastline while learning and changing and growing into a better person and so on. All the minor characters get something cool to do, and all the characters we hate get what they deserve.

So what happens in the middle? Ah. There's that pesky Act 2.

Act 2 is vast – sometimes up to fifty pages long – and very poorly signposted. If you follow the traditional method of screenplay structure, there are only two big signposts along the way: the midpoint and the Dark Point. Trouble is, the midpoint is separated from the start of Act 2 by a staggering twenty pages, and the dark point is separated from the midpoint by an even bigger gulf of twenty-five pages. If you start writing into Act 2 without an outline, you're walking out onto a tightrope without a safety net. So write the damn outline, already.

> If you're still struggling to understand Act 2, it can be useful to think in terms of the "sequence approach" as set out in Paul Gulino's book *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach* (Continuum, 2004). This slightly different approach to screenplay structure is notable for dividing Act 2 into four manageable chunks. Don't forget to actually outline the chunks, though!

You need an outline to find out what your story's about.

Writing a script without a theme, an ending, and a goal for the protagonist is like attempting to fly by jumping off a cliff and flapping your arms really fast. So how do you acquire these things?

Well, you could just let your characters chat to each other for twenty pages until a story emerges. There's a chance this approach will work. There's a much, much bigger chance that it won't, and you'll be left with pages upon pages of aimless, meaningless drivel.

"But wait!" you cry. "My story is about love and heroism in the face of overwhelming evil, or whatever. I have a protagonist, a setting and some totally sweet action sequences that'll make for nice trailer moments. Why can't I just go from there?" Because, as every good screenwriter knows, structure is character and character is story. If you don't know the structure – if you don't know what drives your heroine at the Act 1 turning point, what turns her around at the midpoint, and what tears her down at the dark point – then you don't know jack about your protagonist *or* your story.

You need an outline so you can deviate from it.

And here we have the – Wait, what? Doesn't this contradict everything I just said?

Not really. There is no rule that says you can't change your outline on the fly. In fact, I can almost guarantee that you'll have to at some point. There are some things you simply cannot account for at the outlining stage – this part might not make sense without a bridging scene; this scene has more emotional impact if it's moved back a few pages; and so on.

So – to return to Helmuth's military metaphor for a moment – you may have to alter your battle plans on the fly. But at least you'll know the strengths and weaknesses of your troops. You'll know where to redirect them when the time comes to change the plan. That's what a good outline is for.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #22:
>
> Say it with me: you are allowed to deviate from your outline. Just make sure it's rock-solid before you start moving away from it – that way you can see exactly how those changes affect the whole.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," remember? You're allowed to deviate from your outline if it's clear that things aren't going according to plan. There are three basic ways to do so, and they all have their benefits and pitfalls.

Just remember: *don't panic*. We'll get through this, soldier.

The stop-everything method. So you've found a problem with the outline. This scene clearly isn't going to work as written. This character obviously needs a bigger arc over the next few scenes, which is going to affect what happens in Act 3.

Well, drop everything. Stop the presses. Pull this freaking car over to the side of the road. You can't possibly write another word until you go back to your original outline and fix it by changing that scene or adding that character in where he's needed. Then you can examine the structural integrity of the new outline and make sure everything's holding together. Once that's done, *then* you can go back to writing, secure in the knowledge that your safety net is hanging where it's supposed to.

The **pros** of this method are that you'll be damn sure of fixing every single problem the second it occurs. You'll be thorough and rigorous. Good for you. The **cons** are that you'll be stopping and starting more often than a Pinto on a steep incline, and there's a chance that could kill your momentum and suck your creative juices dry.

The back-and-forth method. Hmm. Well, this bit isn't working. So what if you write it like this? Let's give that a go – maybe change the character's motivation back in Act 1, alter that dialog here…hey, that seems to work. Guess you can always change the outline to reflect what you just wrote in the script.

The back-and-forth writer tends to change things on the fly, but also keeps one eye on how those changes affect the rest of the script. Every dozen or so pages, or whenever she goes too far off the reservation, she'll go back to the outline and rewrite it to match the changes she's been making in the script.

If you're this kind of the writer, the **pros** of this approach are that your writing flow will rarely be interrupted. If you think of a better scene than the one you've got in the outline, you can go ahead and change it to that. The **cons** are that if you're not careful about keeping track of changes, your outline will resemble a patchwork quilt of differing versions. You could very easily end up with characters talking about events that never happened, or a character's name changing from scene to scene as if by magic.

The fix-it-later method. Full steam ahead, no time to stop, fix it later, pass the caffeine please. You are going off the outline and you *just don't care*. All that matters is finishing that first draft.

A character's name, job, and style of speaking might be completely different in Act 3 from what it was back in Act 1. The plot might reflect foreshadowing that doesn't actually exist, but you're totally planning to go back and put it in later. The protagonist's arc might not make a whole lot of sense, but hey, that's what rewrites are for.

The **pros** of this method are that you'll finish that first draft way quicker than usual. The **cons** are that your fresh new draft may wind up resembling a dog's breakfast. You'll have written something, but it might not be something *good*, and you'll probably have your work cut out for you when it comes time for rewrites.

Those are the three methods for deviating from your outline, on a sliding scale from careful to crazy. You know what kind of writer you are, so you probably have some idea which method will work best for you. Respect the outline but follow your instincts, and you'll have a draft you can be proud of.

Screenwriting Tip #23:

Know how it ends before you start writing a single page.

As we learned back in Tip #11, the best concepts are the ones that already suggest their own ending. If you're writing a biopic, no problem – the protagonist dies at the end. Easy. For the rest of us, we have to figure out the ending before we can have a hope of writing the beginning.

Everything stems from Act 1. *Everything.* It's where all your characters are introduced and all the dramatic questions of your story are raised. If screenwriting is about how characters go through drama and come out the other end changed (and 99.9 percent of screenplays fit this description), then you need to know where your characters are going before you give them their marching orders.

It also gives you a target to aim for. If you know that a certain character is going to let down their defenses and apologize to the protagonist in Act 3, you'll want to make her struggles with the protagonist in Act 2 as brutal, personal, and emotional as you possibly can. If you know that a character is going to end up sacrificing her life in Act 3, you can start foreshadowing that event as early as you want.

Ever heard of *thematic bookending*? It's when the last scenes of a script mirror the first scene in order to demonstrate how much the protagonist has changed. You know the kind of thing – if the first scene of a romantic comedy is the protagonist waking up in bed alone and unloved, the last scene is her waking up next to the person of her dreams. It's incredibly effective and a satisfying way to write an ending. So how the hell can you pull this off if you write the beginning without having any idea how it's going to end?

You can't. In fact, you'll probably find you have to go back and change the first scene…and then the second, and then the third, and so forth until you find you've torn down most of the first act. Don't be that writer. Be the smart writer instead – the one who plans. If you know the ending first, you can build a strong, stable Act 1 that serves as a foundation for your entire script.

> **Screenwriting Tip #24:**
> Like titles, character names matter. Get them right and the characters seem to breathe and speak for themselves. Get them wrong and you'll never figure out who the hell they are.

Ever finished watching a movie and realized you have no idea what any of the characters' names were? Or maybe you've been writing a script and found yourself mixing up the names of the protagonist and her best friend – every time you go to type one, you type the other.

Look, names are hard. Just ask the creators of therapistfinder.com (spoiler: it's for finding therapists, not rapists). But if you get them wrong, your characters aren't going to feel entirely right. It may sound odd, but you're about to spend months of your life living in close proximity to these fictional people, so you want to make sure they're as richly realized as you can make them.

Don't just steal your friends' names or trawl through those time-wasting "baby name" websites. Actually take the time to research the perfect names for your story. If it's a period piece, study literature and historical documents from the time and note down any great names that you come across. For a sci-fi or fantasy setting, exotic names work best if they're grounded in some kind of reality. For example, you might decide that your made-up culture has a language that sounds somewhat like Korean – you'd then select some Korean names and alter them in interesting ways to come up with a set of coherent names for your characters. (Cordwainer Smith, a writer of far-future science fiction, named most of his characters by slightly altering the words for numbers in Mandarin, Hindi, and Russian.)

Contemporary names are a little trickier. The best thing to do is keep a notepad with a list of cool and interesting names. But if you don't already have one of these, a good cheater's technique is to look at your bookshelf – you're a writer, so I know you have one – and pick out interesting author names. Along the same lines, searching IMDb.com for lesser-known actor's names can sometimes yield quality results.

Remember, the best character names are:

Memorable but not bizarre. A name with six syllables and three apostrophes might make a character stand out, but nobody is going to remember it. Readers tend to blank on difficult or very long names, so try to stick to weird-but-short: Neo, Cyrus, Gaston, Scarlet, Ash, Deckard, Ferris, and the like.

Cute but not too cute. Bad writers are forever giving their characters cute pun names that somehow relate to the character's personality or to the theme of the film. They think the audience doesn't notice, but we do. Oh, we do. On-the-nose names like "Eric Draven" from *The Crow* (because he's "Eric da Raven" – get it?) or "Parker Selfridge" (because he's a mean, selfridge guy) are a huge gamble – if the readers don't appreciate the joke,

they're going to be constantly distracted by the character's silly name instead of getting immersed in the read. See also: Trinity, Martin Blank, Castor Pollux, and – *shudder* – General Grievous.

Age-appropriate. You don't see a whole lot of eighty year-old women called Amber or Chloe. Why? Because those names weren't popular eighty years ago. You can actually go online and look up what baby names were most popular the year your character was born. This is a subtle but incredibly effective way of making sure your names feel right for the characters they're attached to.

Meaningful to you. I know I said not to steal your friend's names. But sometimes there's just nothing for it – a character you've created is so closely modeled on somebody you know in real life that you can't help but think of them as having the same name. The character and the name already carry emotional meaning for you, so you should try to nurture that connection. "Ricky" becomes "Nicky" without too much trouble, just as "Alicia" can be transformed into "Alyssa." Just remember to change the name, for god's sake – it's not worth losing a friend over some unflattering description or dialog.

Screenwriting Tip #25:

Starting a thriller script *in media res* and then flashing back to a few days earlier is overdone. If you're going to do it, figure out a way to subvert the cliché.

Screenwriting Tip #26:

It pays to do some kind of research into mental illnesses before you decide to give your main character one.

Screenwriting Tip #27:

How to approach an adaptation: write down every great moment, every emotional beat, every scene that works, and lay them out in order. Then take them away, one by one, until you have a screenplay structure.

Screenwriting Tip #28:

TV scripts might be shorter, but TV characters need to have even bigger problems than those in a feature film – huge, deep problems that can't be entirely solved in two hours.

Screenwriting Tip #29:

Cutting away from a scene *just* before a character reveals some vital piece of information is a great trick…the first time. If you use it five times in a row, the audience will realize that you're screwing with them.

Chapter | four

Inciting Incident:
Away We Go

There's a reason movies (usually) don't open with the main character being born. One, birth is bloody and horrifying and they'd have to slap an R rating on every film, and two, movies aren't supposed to be about the protagonist's entire life. They're about the most important, transformative, and screenplay-worthy event that happens in that person's life.

The inciting incident isn't necessarily the start of your script, but it's definitely the start of your story. It's the event that pushes your protagonist inexorably toward their destiny. If we think of a screenplay as one long answer to a question about your protagonist (i.e., "How far would she go for love?" or "What does she believe in so much that she'd be willing to die for it?"), then the inciting incident *is* that question.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #30:
> Nobody likes a mopey protagonist. Moping is backstory. Start your script at the exact point when the protagonist snaps out of it and decides to improve her life.

If newbie writers know one thing, it's that protagonists have to be sad.

Because protagonists have to be flawed, right? Well, having a shitty life is a flaw. And of course, characters must have horrible things happen to them so they can be pushed into action, that is, the story. That's what all the screenwriting books say – to pile crap and misfortune on your main character, thus making their inevitable triumph all the sweeter. So of course the protagonist must spend all of Act 1 moping and complaining about this misfortune so that we can see how much it's affecting her.

Yeah, no. Please don't do this, newbie writers. *There is a better way*.

I'll grant you that a good protagonist needs personal, emotional problems to overcome, and generally, the bigger the problem (subjective to the protagonist herself), the higher the stakes and the stronger the drama. But sorrow – or worse, boredom – is a very difficult choice of "starting position" for your protagonist.

This is because audiences enjoy watching (and readers enjoy reading about) active characters. For one thing, action is infinitely more cinematic than inaction – you can't film thoughts, remember? Another factor is that we tend to identify more with people who help themselves and less with people who mope and complain about their problems … *no matter who those people are or the nature of their problems*. Seriously, would you rather watch a film about a Nobel laureate orphan-rescuer who does nothing but lie in bed all day struggling with depression, or an amoral, asshole mercenary who spends every waking second hunting for the man who killed her father?

This is why characters like Wolverine, James Bond, and Indiana Jones work. We don't have time to stop and think about what horrible people they are because they never stop to mope – they're constantly moving, constantly acting. (Okay, sometimes Wolverine goes to Japan to mope, but he doesn't do it very often.)

At its most basic, a story is a series of things happening – specifically, things happening to, around, and because of your protagonist. Hopefully, more of the "because of." That's why moping is backstory. It literally has no place in the main story of your screenplay. Your script begins with some immense, catalytic force in the protagonist's life being set into motion (the inciting incident), and by page 25 or 30, that event will have metastasized into a course of action that your protagonist has no choice but to follow (the "no turning back" point or Act 1 out).

If they're still moping after the inciting incident, they're just avoiding the inevitable forward momentum of events. They're holding up the plot. Do that too much and it becomes annoying for the audience. Reluctant protagonists who resist the call to action are interesting to a point, but if they're still moping beyond the end of Act 1, something has gone terribly wrong.

Better yet, give your protagonist a positive motivation that propels her forward through the plot (an active want or desire). Keep the moping where it belongs: in your backstory notes.

> **Screenwriting Tip #31:**
> Nobody's first spec is any good. Enjoy the accomplishment, show it to your friends and family …
> and then bury it and write a better one.

Hold onto your hats and your sanity, folks, because we're about to take a trip to Extended Metaphor Land. Here goes:

Writing is like cooking.

No, wait, hear me out. Learning to write screenplays is like learning to cook. At first, you have no freaking idea what you're doing. The kitchen is an alien place full of things that can burn you or remove your fingers. But you've eaten a lot of food before – a *lot* – so you figure, what the hell. Maybe you could take a shot at this. Hey, you might be a natural. In a few years' time, it could be you up there on the silver screen, challenging the Iron Chef to a grand slam sashimi battle.

So you start small. You read a recipe book or two (i.e., a screenplay), and it doesn't sound all that hard. You cook a few simple meals, like scrambled eggs or toasted sandwiches (short film scripts, student scripts, etc.). Maybe you make them for yourself, but you're more likely to inflict them on a loved one. They're polite and encouraging, of course, but they kind of have to be.

After a bit more practice, you feel like you're ready for the big one: hosting a dinner party (writing a real goddamn screenplay). You plan for weeks. You do the research and you buy the right kitchen tools. You decide on the courses, change your mind, decide again, then fret over the decision.

Finally, the big night comes. You spend all day in the kitchen wrestling with sticky pastry, sharp blades, and hot liquids. And finally, after all that effort, you serve up a nice little four-course meal for your friends. And they like it. They chew politely and make those appreciative groaning noises that people do. Everybody loves the dessert, and everybody goes home happy.

But do you know why they enjoyed the meal and made polite noises at you? Because they're your friends, and they care about your feelings. Ask yourself honestly: if an international food critic had walked off the street and into your dinner party, would she have raved about your cooking … or spat it into a napkin?

If you're being honest with yourself, it didn't turn out as well as you'd hoped. The balance of sweet and savory wasn't quite right. You forgot to add a few ingredients. The pasta was gluey, and the meringue melted into an unidentifiable lump. Sure, it all tasted good. But it wasn't quite right. It wasn't *perfect*.

Aaand we're back from Extended Metaphor Land. I hope the journey wasn't too painful.

Obviously, the dinner party is your first ever spec screenplay. It's probably a feature, and it's probably either: (a) full of angst, (b) unfilmable, or (c) both of the above. But here's the thing: that's okay. There will be other dinner parties/screenplays. You will cook again, and next time you'll remember what you did wrong, and you will *fix it*. You still have the opportunity to one day become a pro chef – but nobody ever became a pro chef without making a ton of average food.

And that's what your first draft is: a wonderful place to make mistakes. Write in the wrong font, have three protagonists, fill it with licensed music, make it a Victorian period drama set on Mars – when it comes to your first draft and mistakes, the sky's the limit. It won't match the perfect idea that you had in your head, just like the food at your dinner party won't look as good as it does in the glossy recipe book photos. But that's absolutely fine, as long as you learn from your mistakes.

What you should *not* do under any circumstances is expect to go directly from your first dinner party to head chef at a Michelin three-star restaurant. That's obviously a terrible idea. So why do new writers insist on sending out their first screenplay to managers, agents, or even competitions? Your first screenplay is simply not going to be of the caliber required for those people. And that's not your fault. *Nobody's* first screenplay is.

So treat it like the exciting learning experience that it is. Enjoy writing it, enjoy showing it to your friends … then put it away and start the next one.

By the way, that doesn't mean you shouldn't rewrite your first script at least a few times. Never, ever show someone a first draft of anything – not even your friends and loved ones. To go back to the food metaphor: you wouldn't serve up a recipe you've never cooked before at your dinner party. That way lies disaster and exploding ovens. You'd give the recipe a trial run first, so you can see what needs to be improved or changed. In the same way, you should never email anybody a first draft. I don't care if they're your identical twin who shares 90 percent of all thoughts and emotions with you – it's still bad, lazy practice.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, in this metaphor, script readers aren't food critics. They're the king's royal tasters, checking every bite for deadly poison.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #32:
> The setting is like another character. So try to make it as three-dimensional and interesting as all your other characters.

Where the hell are we? It sounds like an easy question, but sometimes it's really not.

A sense of place is one of the most important things a screenplay can possess. Scripts that have it feel real and grounded – every scene forms itself complete in the reader's mind. On the other hand, scripts that don't have it feel like nothing more than talking heads and words on a page. Like talent, you knows it when you sees it.

So how do you create a sense of place? I can tell you how *not* to do it: by globbing down enormous chunks of descriptive text all over your lovely screenplay. By describing the protagonist's face, eyes, clothes, shoes, hat, cat, bedroom, workplace, wallpaper, make of computer, make of phone, make of car, makeup, the lighting in the room, the wind blowing in the trees, the wind tousling the protagonist's hair, the color and cut of said hair, etc., etc., ad nauseam.

If you find yourself writing like this, for god's sake put the screenwriting software down and go write a boring short story. Get it all out of your system. Then come back and write like a screenwriter: with the bare minimum of descriptive prose.

You see, descriptive prose is incredibly hard to write interestingly – just ask any struggling novelist. (Remember what Elmore Leonard said: "Never open a book with weather, because nobody buys a book to read about the freaking weather." At least I think that's what he said. I may have added that last bit.) And it's doubly hard for you because you're stuck with the firmly ingrained "rules" of screenplay style: third-person active voice, minimal adjectives, don't describe anything we can't see on the screen, and so on.

So you need to create a sense of place, but straight-up descriptive prose sucks and is boring. That means your job is to do the impossible: evoke place without actually describing the place. Sounds like some kind of lame Zen koan, right?

Here's how you do it (hint: it's also the solution to nearly every other screenwriting problem) – *use character*. Write your characters so that they feel like residents of a place, not actors who wandered onto a set. Have them using, moving, interacting, and reacting within the space of your setting. You know how talking heads are boring? The solution is to have one, two, or all of the characters in a scene *doing something else* while the scene takes place.

The classic example is Aaron Sorkin's "walk-and-talks" from *The West Wing* – as his characters nattered to each other about policy options, they'd be walking through the halls and rooms of the show's setting, while behind

and around them all sorts of miniature dramas played out. From the walk-and-talks and the incidental dialog of the main characters, you got the sense that there were other people, other lives, happening in that world – all because the writer knew his setting inside-out and was able to evoke a sense of place.

So how do you get to know your setting like that? There's only one way I know, and that's to sit down and do the hard work of really, truly thinking it through. If you're working on your first or second screenplay, and if you've taken my advice, you'll have picked an idea with a fairly simple, contemporary setting. But just because it's set on present-day planet Earth doesn't mean you can slack off in your setting-evoking duties. In fact, the smaller your setting, the more detailed and evocative you have to be. If most of your film takes place in one room (e.g., *Panic Room*, *Cube*, or *Buried*), you better damn well know what objects are in that room and where they are in relation to each other. Whether it's a kitchen or a bed-room or an underground nuclear bunker, you need to know everything there is to know about that space.

This rule scales up. Take the typical small-town horror movie setting. It's likely that most of the action is going to take place in this one small location. So what do you actually *know* about this town? What's the population? Do they have a sheriff's department? A fire department? Do children go to school right here, or two towns over? What's the primary industry of this town? Why do people live here and not somewhere else?

(That last question is especially pertinent for small-town horror films. If it's a ski town, chances are good that Act 3 is going to take place on a mountain. If it's a coal-mining town, expect dark and spooky tunnels. But ski towns and coal towns are very different places, with very different residents, local businesses, and attitudes. So your first two acts will be hugely affected by your choice of finale: yet another reason to know how it's going to end before you begin writing.)

But let's say you didn't pick a relatively normal, contemporary setting. Let's say you've chosen to set your script inside the digital brain of a rogue artificial intelligence, or 10,000 years ago on the lost continent of Lemuria. Congratulations – I have good and bad news.

Here's the bad news: you've just alienated a large portion of script readers, agents, managers, and execs. Not everybody likes "genre" – that is, weird and wacky – settings. It's nothing personal, it's just that self-contained thrillers and low-budget comedies are a lot more enticing because … well, because they're low-budget. In the current economic climate, Hollywood's not big on risk. And then there's the sad fact that some people are just turned off by swords and spaceships.

But here's the good news: you've got originality on your side, and Hollywood is drawn to original ideas like teenage girls are drawn to moody, nonthreatening vampires. A brilliantly original setting will get you noticed. It could sell for a bundle and make your reputation around town, even if

it never gets made (see huge spec sales like *Galahad*, *The Brigands of Rattleborge*, or *Killing on Carnival Row*). Even if it gets made and tanks harder than the Battle of Kursk, it could make your reputation as a writer of big worlds and big ideas (see Alex Proyas and David Goyer after *Dark City*, Brad Bird after *The Iron Giant*, or Terry Gilliam's entire career).

It stands to reason that in order to play in a big, brilliant setting like that, you need to understand that setting. But that doesn't necessarily mean wasting months of your life on useless world-building, like a Dungeons & Dragons player mapping out every single hex on the map of his homemade fictional kingdom. All you really need to know are the parts of the world that your characters will come into contact with. That's it. The rest you can fake.

Think about *Doctor Who*. Each episode starts with the TARDIS crashing into some alien planet, or underground volcano base, or gigantic space-faring creature, or what have you. Very quickly, the script shades in the background of this new world so that we get a sense of where we are, what the people are like, the local customs, and so on, and we go from there. The script gets on about its business and the crazy background setting stays in, well, the background.

Or think about *Avatar* – we don't see Earth, or space stations, or other colonies, or even parts of the planet Pandora outside of the Na'vi's jungle home. And *we don't need to*. Many other things in the script – from incidental dialog to backstory to the technology used by the characters – indicates that those other elements of the setting exist. They're just not pertinent to the story being told. So the story feels huge and detailed without losing its focus and going off on an unnecessary tangent.

Here's another tip for creating good "genre" settings: don't play double jeopardy. What does that mean? It means your setting is allowed to have one huge difference from our reality and audiences will accept it. But when your world has two or more deviations from the norm, disbelief gets harder and harder to suspend.

What the hell am I talking about? Try this pitching exercise: in the future, everybody has telepathic powers. Okay, here's another one: imagine a world where ghosts exist, and we can talk to them. And now the last one: imagine a future world in which everybody talks to ghosts telepathically.

See how you reflexively rolled your eyes at the last one? That's because it's an example of double jeopardy – two outlandish setting elements combined. For whatever reason, it's easier for audiences to accept ghosts *or* telepathy than to embrace the idea of a world in which the protagonist always knows what Princess Di's ghost is thinking.

For some reason, supernatural films are the worst offenders of double jeopardy. Audiences went to see *Underworld* for Kate Beckinsale in leather pants, not for the ridiculous vampires-and-werewolves setting. The Spierig brothers have made a career out of this – *Undead* was about

a zombie outbreak … which was caused by aliens. *Daybreakers* was about … well, let's just say I don't recommend you watch *Daybreakers*. And those are only the mildly successful ones – there are plenty of other double jeopardy supernatural films that failed abysmally.

Newbie writers always go for the gold with their first script, and they often end up with a muddled mess of setting that would most likely cost three hundred bajillion dollars to faithfully film. This is very embarrassing to admit, but the first spec script I ever wrote involved both aliens *and* superheroes. It was unmitigated garbage, but that's okay – so is everybody's first script. In time, I learned to tone it down, pick one weird setting element, and focus on the important details and incidental quirks that really make a place come to life in the reader's mind. That's how you give your script a sense of place.

> **Screenwriting Tip #33:**
> Don't overdescribe. You can do massive crowd scenes, parties, elaborate locations, and the like all in a few simple lines. Save those lashings of descriptive prose for spaces that reveal character, such as your protagonist's bedroom.

Here's the "special snowflake" exception to everything I just said in the last tip: when the setting is intimately tied to, and evocative of, the protagonist, then you're allowed to go nuts on the descriptive text. Go ahead, describe the crap out of that location. Bust out all your fiction-writing skills. Take all your best adjectives down from the top shelf and throw 'em into the mix.

The example in the tip is that of the protagonist's bedroom, probably the most intimate and revealing space for any character. Let's consider the possibilities there. Bed sheets tangled or immaculately made? TV in the room or a huge stack of books? Light streaming in the open window or blocked out by tightly drawn shades? Every one of these choices reveals something new about the character, something that would have taken line after line of dialog to convey.

This technique is easier, more economical, and more effective than just handing us backstory. That's because backstory is *boring* when it's handed to you. If your protagonist sits down with her brother and reminisces about the traumatic childhood event – a botched home invasion, let's say – that led to them both becoming police officers, that's boring. The audience will feel like that scene existed only to catch them up to speed on something that will turn out to be important later.

But if you *hint* at that traumatic event through setting – photos on the mantle, half a dozen locks on the door, reinforced windows, a big old German shepherd for a pet, and so on – then the audience will feel like geniuses when their instincts and hunches later turn out to be correct. Trust me, the audience likes feeling like geniuses. And sometimes it's your job to make them feel that way.

This sort of description usually appears in the first act, and for good reason – it's a great shorthand for setting up characters and foreshadowing plot. But there are times when you'll want to pull out the lashings of description later in the script. For example, consider the moment in Act 3 when your protagonist stumbles upon the serial killer's lair. The way you describe that scene is obviously going to have a huge effect on how much the audience gets creeped out by (or perhaps empathizes with?) the killer.

Description: most of the time, you'll want to keep it in your pants. But very occasionally, you get to cut loose – namely, when it serves the character or fills in for dialog.

But here's the caveat (there's always a caveat, isn't there?): always remember the "one page per minute" rule, that is, a single page of screenplay should equal roughly a minute of screen time. Okay, so it's not a hard-and-fast *rule*, but readers know it, executives understand it, and assistant directors/script editors use it to break down scripts for production. It's part of the industry. By all means, break it when the situation calls for more description – just keep that little guideline in the back of your mind when you do.

Screenwriting Tip #34:

Let your voice into the script. Have fun writing it, and chances are someone will have fun reading it.

Screenwriting Tip #35:

There should be dialog on Page One (or, failing that, explosions). If your Page One is mostly setup and description, skip it and start the script on Page Two instead.

Screenwriting Tip #36:

If you must pretend you're a novelist and open your script with a quote, make sure it's not a really lame one.

Screenwriting Tip #37:

If something pisses you off, write about it. Passion is interesting.

Screenwriting Tip #38:

The best ideas always come in the last thirty seconds before you fall asleep at night. The trick is to stay awake long enough to write them down.

Structure: Learn the Rules or Get Off the Field

If there's a secret to screenwriting – a magic key that unlocks the vault of good writing and awesome screenplays – then structure is it. Understanding structure is like understanding the code behind the program, and once you lock it into your brain, it's there for life.

Structure isn't just a set of boring, unsexy "rules." It's your battle plan, your narrative compass, and your moral code. It'll be there for you from the start of the outlining process, through the hair-tearing drama of the first draft, all the way to the final polish. Genres will evolve and dialog will go in and out of fashion, but structure will never let you down.

> **Screenwriting Tip #39:**
> Study structure until it becomes a part of you. Then apply it.

Gather round, screenwriters. It's time we talked about structure. Because god knows that's the one thing nobody ever talks about.

Just kidding. Everybody talks about structure, all the time. There are entire books – nay, entire *libraries* – devoted to the topic of screenwriting structure … so many that the beginning writer might start to get the impression that structure is the only thing that matters.

And they'd be wrong. Structure isn't the only thing that matters in screenwriting. It just matters a whole lot more than anything else.

You see, structure is everything. Structure is character, plot, pacing, and theme. Most of all, structure is the protagonist. Western, Hollywood-style films (the dominant form of film storytelling on the planet) are about one person going on a journey that changes them deeply and irrevocably. Structure isn't the outline of a plot – it's the emotional map of how that character, the protagonist, changes.

Some say structure is reductive, that it simplifies and codifies the wondrous, free-flowing nature of narrative, and anyway, there are other forms of narrative structure out there. And that's okay. If you want to write a one-act play, a French-style film with no ending or a Chinese puzzle box/Arabian Nights–style experimental narrative-within-a-narrative, then by all means go ahead. But you might as well learn the three-act structure first, given that it's overwhelmingly the dominant form of narrative on the planet, as well as the one best suited to carrying an emotional payload.

Remember that the ultimate goal of a writer is to move people, to make them feel something. Nothing does that better than the three-act structure. Once you learn it, it's like being handed the keys to the emotional Ferrari. Please don't think of it as a straitjacket or a checklist – it's more like a mathematical formula, a fundamental truth of the universe. You know, one of the really important ones that makes quantum physics work. Three-act structure's not reductive. It's beautiful. And here it is:

ACT 1

It starts with the **setup** – a few scenes to establish the baseline of the world and the protagonist's place within it.

Then somewhere between pages 10 and 18, or possibly even earlier, we get the **inciting incident** (some people call it the "call to action"). This is not a drill – it's the actual, for-real start of the story. If the previous scenes were setting up the pitch, this is the kickoff. This is Liam Neeson's daughter getting kidnapped in *Taken* – the moment that galvanizes the protagonist into action.

Note that the inciting incident may not literally take place at this point. What matters is when the protagonist perceives it. We're mapping out the protagonist's emotional arc, remember? For example, in *Aliens*, the colony has already been attacked and overrun, but the inciting incident is when Ripley is told about it. She realizes that there's more than one alien, they're still alive, and she has to go out there with the Marines to help stop them. It's not really a physical "incident" because it's completely emotional, but it's Ripley's inciting incident nonetheless.

Next up is **accepting the call**. This is when the protagonist resists change, rejecting the inciting incident and trying to walk away from the plot, only to eventually come back and decide she's on board after all. You know the drill: the agency wants their best man to come out of retirement for one last job, because they can't possibly do it without him. But he says, "No thanks" – he doesn't do that work any more. But wait, what's that? His old partner's been kidnapped by the terrorists? Then I guess the answer is … (sunglasses on) … "Let's roll."

Well, that's the clichéd version. For the subtler version, see Bruce Wayne wondering whether he should stop being Batman in Act 1 of *The Dark Knight*. This one's a bit iffy, because not all films actually have it. It can also fall early or late in Act 1, and might be rolled into the inciting incident or, later, into the point of no return. That sounds vague, but hey, I didn't say this was rocket science.

Which brings us to the **point of no return**. It hits somewhere around page 30, and it marks the end of Act 1 and the beginning of Act 2. Some people call this the "Act 1 turning point" or "Act 1 out," but I prefer the point of no return – it's got a nice Dante's *Inferno* vibe to it.

They call it the point of no return because it's exactly that. The protagonist has made a decision, and there's no easy way to unmake it. Often it literally involves going somewhere else, like the doomed teenagers arriving at the cabin in the woods, or the spy behind enemy lines ending up, well, behind enemy lines. It's Frodo leaving the Shire behind. It's Superman putting on the costume. It's starting the fight club in *Fight Club*. For the protagonist, it's often bittersweet, thrilling, and hopeful. It's the end of the beginning and the beginning of the middle.

ACT 2

Act 2 kicks off with something I like to call the **opening up**. This is when the protagonist's world expands, she meets a lot of new people, good and bad, and everything generally becomes a lot more complicated. To continue with the three examples mentioned earlier, it's Frodo and Sam meeting Aragorn, hanging out in town and nearly getting murdered by ring-wraiths; it's Clark Kent adapting from life on the farm to life in the big city; and it's Tyler Durden making a whole bunch of violent new friends.

So the protagonist struggles on, makes friends, maybe clashes with the antagonist a few times. She feels like she might be getting somewhere. Maybe this isn't so hard after all? That's when the **midpoint** – so named because it falls somewhere between pages 50 to 60, right around dead center of the script – comes along to ruin everything.

The midpoint is Ashton Kutcher popping out of the bushes to punk your protagonist. It's a moment of revelation or change that tilts the plot on its ear. It could also be a massive raising of the stakes or a broadening of the setting's horizons. I'll let Elrond in *The Fellowship of the Ring* explain: "Oh, look, a hobbit. What's that, hobbit? You thought you were just going to be able to hand the One Ring off to the elves, wash your hands of it and go home? Well, surprise – you're walking to Mordor, sucker! Meet your eight new best friends." That's the midpoint.

The protagonist struggles on for twenty-five more pages, and things are looking better. She's learning and changing. Her goal is getting closer every minute. And then the **Dark Point** happens. The goal slips away, or is destroyed, or turns out never to have existed in the first place. The Dark Point is the bad bit, the vicious gut-punch, the part where the protagonist is at her absolute lowest point. She's never been further away from her goal than this, not even in Act 1 when she didn't even know what her goal was.

This is your protagonist's long, dark night of the soul. She may fall into depression and inertia at this point, leaving the audience wiping away tears and wondering if they just paid fifteen bucks to watch a story with a miserable ending. It's Juno breaking down in tears after finding out that not only has she broken up the marriage of the people who were going to adopt her baby, but the baby's father apparently doesn't want anything to do with her. She's more alone than she's ever been, her defenses are gone, and everything she'd been working towards lies in wreckage. It really sucks. Honest to blog.

But never fear, because here comes the **recovery**. The protagonist pulls herself out of the hellish slump of the Dark Point, or more commonly, she gets pulled out by the relationship character (or someone acting on behalf of the relationship character, or even just a reminder of the relationship subplot). Suddenly, she's back in the game. And she's changed. She's been tempered by her dark experience, transformed into the person she needs to be to face ….

ACT 3

The **final battle**. Good versus evil. Hope versus despair. Love versus death. Or just the protagonist facing down a manifestation of her ultimate fear. The final battle could be as literal and explicit as a blue avatar alien fighting a giant battle-mech, or it could be as intimate and internal as a time-trapped weatherman letting go of selfishness and learning how to live for today.

As with everything else in the script, it's the protagonist's emotional state that matters – even if the protagonist appears to lose the physical version of the final battle, she might still win the emotional version, and

that's what really counts. (Darren Aronofsky is addicted to this trope; see for example *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*. Ridley Scott likes it too, as evidenced by *Thelma & Louise* and *Gladiator*.)

What's left to do after the protagonist wins the final battle? Nothing but the **wind-down** – a few short scenes showing how the protagonist and the other characters have changed, how their world has been forever altered, and maybe a little hint of what the future will hold.

Fade to black. Roll credits.

And that's it – the hidden structure behind every virtually every movie. And now ….

Oh, what's this? Yes, I see a few raised hands up the back. Come up here and share with the class. What's that you say? You can think of plenty of great movies that don't follow the three-act structure?

Oh look, you've even made a list. Hmm. "*Forrest Gump, The Breakfast Club, Annie Hall.*" Okay, I can see what you're trying to say. They're all successful, well-regarded films. Let's have a look at them, shall we?

Forrest Gump is a prime example of a script with a few extra turning points tacked on. Some people will tell you this kind of film has four acts, or five acts, or even more. But really, all the writer has done is throw in an extra midpoint, an extra Dark Point, and perhaps an extra-long winddown sequence to pad out Act 3. Personally, I think *Forrest Gump* could have ended thirty minutes earlier, or at least excised major sections of the plot without affecting the arc of the protagonist in any way. (See also *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, by the same writer. Or don't, because if you've seen one of his films, you've seen them all.)

The Breakfast Club is easy. It's a play. No, really – go watch that film and try to tell me it's not a two-act play masquerading as a movie. I've no idea why it was written that way, but there it is. This is probably why the film feels slightly inaccessible to modern audiences – it's a great movie, but they can sense that the pacing is just a bit off somehow.

And *Annie Hall*? *Annie Hall* **does** have a three-act structure. Watch it again – I'm sure you'll spot it. This is a classic example of films that seem to have unusual structures but are clearly three-act pieces once you look a little closer. Other good examples include *Memento* and *500 Days of Summer*. Buy me a beer some day and I'll tell you my theory about how Spock is the protagonist of J. J. Abrams's *Star Trek*, because it sure as hell isn't Kirk.

So yes, there are films – great films, even – that don't adhere to three-act structure. Often they feel oddly paced, dated, saggy in the middle, or interminably long. That's because, for good or ill, audiences are conditioned to understand and expect a three-act structure. It may not be the ultimate structural form for every possible kind of film, but it's the most common, the most well-loved, and the best at delivering an emotional arc involving a single protagonist character. I suggest you learn it, love it, and use it wisely.

And once you've learned that, I've got some bad news for you: television structure is *completely* different. Your film-writing tricks won't work for TV. Sorry.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #40:
> Television structure is completely different. Your film-writing tricks won't work for TV. Sorry.

If you try to close your eyes and jump straight into the deep, dark pool of television structure, you're liable to end up impaled on rocks. Structural rocks.

The first thing you should know is that a TV episode doesn't have three acts. It has anywhere between two and six acts, depending on the show. Don't worry – it's much easier than it sounds. Take a deep breath. We'll tackle this together.

Comedy shows (or "half-hours" in the industry, despite the fact that they're only twenty-two minutes long) have a very simple structure based around the concept of the **A, B, and C story**. Basically, each episode has three different stories of varying "weight" or importance, with each story (usually) involving different characters. The A story is the main plot, and the B and C stories are more minor plots involving the secondary characters. Sometimes, on particularly ambitious or fast-paced shows (rest in peace, *Arrested Development*), there's even a D plot.

Half-hours have a two-act structure. This is very simple. All it means is this: Act 1 raises a dramatic question and Act 2 answers it. So all three plots reach their apex (i.e., everything goes wrong) at the end of Act 1, and Act 2 is spent solving the problem or working through the fallout, with a final solution arriving at the very end. Traditionally, all three plots wind up converging or crossing over at the end; either that or the outcomes all thematically mirror each other.

If this sounds stupidly complicated and algebraic, believe me, it's not. Take your typical episode of *30 Rock*: the A plot usually involves Liz and Jack dealing with some outlandish problem – a difficult actor, say, or one of their inevitably star-crossed relationships. The B plot typically features secondary characters like Kenneth, Tracy, and Jenna. This plot has measurably less screen time than the A plot, and may be played less seriously. Finally, the C plot involves minor characters like the writer's room geeks or Pete Hornberger, and may feature in only three or four scenes. All three plots will come to a head just before a commercial break near the exact middle of the episode. This is the break between Act 1 and Act 2. After that break, the show will spend the rest of the episode wrapping up and resolving those plots.

And there you go: the secret of writing half-hours. If you ever wondered why your favorite show tends to suck whenever they do "very special episodes," guest star–driven episodes, or episodes where the whole cast goes to Hawaii, now you know. It's because those episodes break from the ABC formula that you love, and which the writers and cast have become accustomed to.

If you're writing a spec for an existing television show but you can't find any copies of the scripts, here's what you do: sit down with your DVDs (or digital video files), a notebook, and a pen. Now watch the show and write down the scene letters in the order they occur, like A, B, C, B, A, B, and so on. Note down where the act break occurs. Do this for a few episodes and you'll soon have a very good grasp on how the show is structured and how much weight it gives to different storylines.

So that's half-hour. What about the dreaded drama pilot, or "one-hour"?

(I say drama *pilot* because, at time of writing, there is very little call in Hollywood for spec scripts of existing one-hour shows. I know a lot of screenwriting books from a few years ago suggest that you need them, but the sad truth is that few people want to read them. Well, they do, but they'd much prefer to read an original pilot by you instead. It makes sense when you think about it: why put yourself through all the suffering and pain of writing a sixty-page script when all you'll have at the end of it is the world's 5,000th *Mad Men* spec? You can't use it to get a job on *Mad Men*, because nobody on that show is legally allowed to read it. So why not write a pilot of your own that you might actually be able to sell? One time when you *will* need a spec episode of an existing show is when you're applying for fellowships run by the American networks. Obviously, these aren't available to international writers.

Half-hours suffer from this problem, too, but it's somewhat mitigated by the fact that half-hour specs are more useful as a sample – they show that you can do funny – and they're easier and quicker to write.)

So here's the deal with one-hours: they have five acts. Or six acts. Or five-and-a-half acts, depending on whom you talk to. That nebulous extra act is actually the **teaser** (the bit before the titles – or sometimes just the title card, ever since *LOST* made it trendy). The reason for the disagreement is that teasers used to be very short, but now they're quite long – in many cases, just as long as the other acts. Ever found yourself surprised when, after watching a show for a good fifteen minutes, the titles start rolling? It's weird, but it seems like long teasers are here to stay.

So the teaser is anywhere from eight to twelve pages long. The rest is easy. It's just five acts, each of roughly the same length: between ten and thirteen pages. Why are they the same length? Because the act breaks are the commercial breaks.

You didn't forget about those, did you? Sure, you and I may use DVRs or watch everything on Hulu, but for the vast majority of the viewing audience, television is built around commercial breaks. The people who produce and air television have a vested interest in making sure the audience doesn't get up, change the channel, or turn off the TV during those breaks. So one-hour act breaks always end on an exciting bit of "rising action" – some threat, revelation, twist, or character breakthrough. The sort of

dramatic event that might take place in the middle of a film scene or sequence takes place at the end of a television scene, simply because it provides a nice moment to cut to commercial.

It could be a cryptic message on *LOST*, the discovery of a dead body on *Law & Order*, or Dexter Morgan stabbing somebody in the neck and dragging them into the dark. It could also be more emotional, like the end of a heartfelt song on *Glee* or a brutally honest conversation on *Breaking Bad*. When it was on the air, *Scrubs* used to be able pull off act outs based entirely on tonal shifts, when the grim reality of the hospital would suddenly interrupt the characters' usual wacky antics.

So a one-hour television script is structured around four key act outs – the ends of Act 1, Act 2, Act 3, and Act 4 (with Act 5 featuring the climax in the middle and finishing with a wind-down). When structuring a one-hour episode, you simply plan these four moments in advance and then make sure everything builds towards them. If film structure is climbing up a mountain, television structure is riding a series of waves. It's all peaks and troughs, peaks and troughs.

The thing is, you can actually wrangle those peaks and troughs into something roughly resembling three-act structure. Often a single episode will deal with one character tackling and overcoming a particular flaw or problem in a manner that looks very much like the three-act format. Obviously, these will be minor character flaws compared to those tackled in a feature – they're more likely to be something like "Dexter's inability to share with others about his problems" – but they do trace a character arc. In these cases, the teaser and Act 1 are roughly analogous to "film Act 1'; Acts 2, 3, and 4 map to "film Act 2"; and finally Act 5 corresponds to "film Act 3."

(This trick doesn't work for every kind of show, however. Heavily serialized shows – such as *Deadwood*, *The Wire*, and other cable series – don't work this way because the characters may not go through a full arc in each and every episode. Rather, each episode shows a small slice of that character's life. Character change, if it comes at all, takes place over an entire season.)

And that's television screenplay structure in a nutshell. It is its own medium, very different from film. I suggest you double down and learn both skills. Hey, you never know when you might get that call from Matthew Weiner or Joss Whedon!

> ### Screenwriting Tip #41:
>
> Stop treating your characters like precious, precious snowflakes. If something horrible doesn't happen to them at the end of Act 2, why should I care about Act 3?

Now, I know you know about the Dark Point. It's the horrible moment that always seems to occur somewhere around pages 75 to 85, when it looks like all hope is lost and the protagonist's journey has ended in failure. It's that bit in the action film when the hero gets captured and tortured by the villain. In horror, it's when the town's defenses fail and the monsters take over. In a romantic comedy, it's the unfortunate coincidence that causes the two lovers to learn all the nasty secrets they've been keeping from each other.

It's Gandalf being dragged into darkness by the Balrog. It's Obi-Wan's death at the hands of Darth Vader. It's Rocky Balboa standing in an empty arena and realizing that he can't beat Apollo Creed. If screenwriters were jugglers, the Dark Point would be that moment near the end of their act where they pretend to almost drop the ball, just to hear the audience gasp.

I know you know what the Dark Point is. So why do so many amateur writers hold back on the Dark Point? Why do they write weak, contrived situations that have little effect on the protagonist and don't fool the reader for a second?

Because we love our characters, that's why. We've just spent seventy-five pages – not to mention countless weeks and months of outlining and backstory – trying to put ourselves in their shoes. We created them. They're a part of us. And now you expect us to bash them over the head with tragedy and failure?

It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it – and it might as well be us, the ones who gave birth to these fictional characters in the first place. Because if we don't put them through the emotional wringer, if we don't truly challenge the core of who they are and what they stand for, they'll never grow into the person they need to be in Act 3. Think of the Dark Point as a painful but necessary transformation. Don't think, "What's the crappiest thing that could happen?" Think, "How do I give my protagonist the skills she needs to survive Act 3?" You'll quickly realize that the best way to force that change is to destroy the things she relies on – the mental and emotional crutches she's been using for the entire script.

A lot of amateur writers make a hash of the Dark Point by writing situations that either don't affect the protagonist emotionally or don't stem from the protagonist's actions. The classic action film Dark Point is when the heroine gets captured by the villain. On the one hand, this scene sucks because we all know the protagonist's not going to die here – it would be a pretty stupid movie if it ended with the heroine getting shot in the head or cut in half by a death laser.

On the other hand, it doubly sucks because it doesn't change anything about the protagonist's emotional state. She hasn't given up; her mission isn't over – it's just on hold until she can bust out of her cell and resume kicking ass again. Zero emotional impact on the protagonist equals a crappy Dark Point.

The other kind of bad Dark Point is the *non sequitur* Dark Point, one that doesn't logically follow from the plot or grow out of the protagonist's actions. For some reason, a lot of amateur scripts kill off the protagonist's mother. She'll just get hit by a car, or keel over from an undiagnosed brain tumor or something. Not for any good reason, not because of anything the protagonist did, but because the writer knew that somehow, something bad was supposed to happen at this point in the script.

Obviously, this is sad and affecting for the protagonist, but because it wasn't her fault and usually doesn't have any bearing on her emotional journey, it comes across as more of a speed bump than a turning point. The protagonist hasn't been transformed into a different person through the random death of her loved one, so she doesn't have the necessary skills to tackle Act 3.

Don't think of the Dark Point as a way to inconvenience your protagonist or create sympathy for her. Think of it as a final emotional push – a way to transform her into the person she needs to be to make it through the ultimate test of Act 3. If that requires hurting her in unspeakable ways, then I'm sorry, but that's the job you signed up for.

They say it's always darkest before the dawn. You have to make sure the darkness is compelling enough to make the dawn worth watching.

> **Screenwriting Tip #42:**
>
> Find the "watershed" line of dialog in every scene. You know — that one line that twists the situation and turns the conflict in a different direction. If you can't find one, maybe there's something wrong with the scene.

When we watch movies and television shows, we experience them as a whole, taking in entire character arcs over the course of an hour or two. When we think about screenplays, we think in terms of acts and turning points. But when we actually sit down to write, it's all about scenes.

The scene is the smallest dramatic "unit" in a screenplay. When we outline in detail we do it scene by scene. But very rarely do our outlines go into fine detail on the scenes themselves. How many times has your outline said something like, "Act 2 – Scene 13: Natalie confronts Ricardo, makes him reveal the location of the diamonds," but when you come to actually write that scene, you find you have no idea how it's supposed to play out?

Well, here's the shortcut – the trick that will make scenes easy: scenes, like screenplays, also have three acts. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. And crucially, like screenplays, they have to transform the active characters in them from one state to another. What the hell does that mean? It means that your character should come out of a scene in a different state than she went in.

That's what people mean when they say a scene sucked because it "didn't advance the plot." What they're really saying is that the scene didn't affect the characters in it – didn't take them from one place to another. If you have a scene in which the protagonist and her partner talk about their relationship, both agree that it sucks, the scene ends, and they go back to doing what they were doing, you've written only half a scene. If instead they sit down to talk about their relationship, argue about it, and break up with each other, that's a scene. The protagonist went into the scene in one state (frustrated with her relationship) and came out of it in an entirely different state (single and, most likely, sad).

By the way, this is why writers will tell you, "Don't let characters agree with each other." Arguments are good because they bring out emotions, force changes in characters, and galvanize action. Scenes are unlikely to have much effect on the state of the characters if everyone is sitting around politely chatting with each other.

So if scenes follow a miniature three-act structure of their own, then that implies that they must have a midpoint. You know what a midpoint is in terms of screenplay structure – it's the turning point at the dead center (between pages 50–55) of the script in which everything gets flipped around. The protagonist's goal changes, or the stakes get raised exponentially, or a key element of the story turns out to be something else entirely.

Here's the cool part: *scenes have midpoints, too*. In action-based scenes, these are usually blatantly obvious. An alarm goes off, turning a stealthy mission into a run-and-gun. A firefight attracts the cops, forcing all the crooks to work together. A hunted victim turns the tables on the hunter.

(Television is a little different. In TV, the action turn will often come at the *end* of a major scene, as an act out to coincide with the commercial break. Think "He's crashing!" on *House* … cut to a cartoon animal selling insurance. But I digress.)

In dialog-based scenes, the midpoint can be a little harder to, er, pin-point. It might be when one party reveals hidden strengths that the other party never knew about. It could be the moment when somebody wins an argument, even if the other person doesn't realize it yet. Or it could be when characters realize they're saying one thing but meaning something entirely different (that hoary old scene in which two characters stop in the middle of a heated argument, then jump at each other and start ripping clothes off). I call it the "watershed" line of dialog because it's a peak point – the first half of the scene consisted of climbing uphill to get here, and the second half will consist of sliding inevitably down the other side.

Let's illustrate with the scene mentioned earlier, with the protagonist and her partner sitting down to have the Relationship Talk. Imagine that the protagonist initiated the talk, so she has the power to begin with. She starts laying down all the things that she thinks are going wrong with the relationship – he never washes the dishes, he drinks too much, he runs an illegal dog-fighting ring, and so on. He sits there and accepts it all, barely saying a word.

Frustrated, she asks him to come back at her with problems of his own. Is there anything he wishes she didn't do? (She's still treating this like a negotiation, you see.) But he keeps quiet, dodges the question. Finally, he plays his hand: "I don't know what we're doing any more. Where is this relationship going?"

She's taken aback by this. Of course they can still salvage it, she tells him. It'll just take a bit of work. He'll change, she'll change – it'll all work out in the end. Then he comes out with the clincher, the watershed line of dialog that flips the entire scene around: "I still want to be friends."

Bam. You don't go back from a line like that – it's all downhill from there. This just went from a "relationship in trouble" scene to a break-up scene. The protagonist just went from actively problem solving to back-pedaling and defending. These two characters just went from lovers to exes. All in one scene, and all because of one line of dialog. (But hey, at least she won't have to worry about those dog fights in the basement any more.)

That's the power of the watershed line. Find it, use it, love it. Like so many things in writing, scenes become a lot easier to tackle if you just apply a little structure.

Screenwriting Tip #43:

Give your romantic leads a reason to fall in love. "They're the only two unattached characters and I keep putting them in scenes together" is not a good enough reason.

Screenwriting Tip #44:

"Raising the stakes" works only if we understand exactly what the stakes mean to the protagonist, and exactly what she stands to lose.

Screenwriting Tip #45:

If a scene exists just so you can introduce a new character, it's probably a bad scene. Every scene must move the plot forward in some way.

Screenwriting Tip #46:

If a scene runs for six pages and involves characters wandering in and out of buildings, apartments, and cars, it should probably be more than one scene.

Screenwriting Tip #47:

Allowing the audience to know more than the protagonist is best used in Act 1 – it's good for dramatic irony, setting up, and building empathy. Allowing the protagonist to know more than the audience is best used in Act 3 to facilitate the final twist or reversal.

Screenwriting Tip #48:

The best plot twists are the ones that make a shocking amount of sense.

Screenwriting Tip #49:

Endings are hard, especially for character-driven scripts. Bottom line: don't settle for neat-and-convenient when you could have messy-and-emotional.

Description and Word Choice: Say What You Mean

Mark Twain, that quotable old bastard, once said that "the difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter —'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." Screenplays might live and die by their dialog, but those little action paragraphs in between need love, too.

Nothing's sadder than watching a writer use a word they don't fully understand to convey a meaning they don't really intend. When the close-enough-is-good-enough instinct takes over, script readers find themselves dealing with descriptions of "five-star hovels," and "star-crossed lovers" who are apparently destined to be together. Poor word choice and bad description stick out like sore thumbs, but when an action paragraph gets everything right, it becomes invisible. When the reader forgets that they're reading because they're so caught up in the vivid action of the scene, you'll know your description's done its job.

> **Screenwriting Tip #50:**
>
> Set every scene. Don't make me wonder what room of the house they're in, or why somebody just started talking when you didn't even tell me they were present.

When you're reading fast, sometimes those scene headings just disappear. The reader's brain just skips right over them, especially very short or non-descript ones like "INT. KITCHEN," or "EXT. BAR." Often this leads to an awkward reader double-take, with a reader not realizing that the action has skipped to the other side of the continent, or wondering how a character has seemingly teleported in from somewhere else.

Make sure this problem never comes up by setting every single scene quickly and clearly. Remember that *who* is there is more important than *what* is there. This example is confusing and overwritten:

EXT. BUS SHELTER – NIGHT

The building is dark, lit only occasionally by the headlights of passing cars. Waiting by the bus schedule board is Rob. Tina lights a cigarette and hands it to Jimmy. Natalie is also here.

This is better:

EXT. BUS SHELTER – NIGHT

Rob, Tina, Jimmy, and Natalie wait at the bus shelter.

See the difference? After you've said who is actually present in the scene, *then* you can go nuts on the description. (Although I'd argue that we all know what a damn bus shelter looks like already, so why not jump straight to some action or dialog?) In the first example, details get lost. The reader starts to subconsciously jump ahead. If that first example were how you chose to open this scene, I can almost guarantee that the reader would be surprised when Jimmy started talking, as his name is the most heavily concealed by the action writing.

Note that I intentionally made the writing in the first example feel passive and muddy through the use of crappy writing like "is dark," "waiting by the bus schedule board is Rob," and "Natalie is." More on this later, but for now it's enough to say that most writers who write like this also have a problem with setting scenes and burying character names.

So what about when you do have to describe? Everybody knows what a bus shelter is, but what does an alien spacecraft or a Lebanese street festival look like?

The perfect descriptive writing is succinct and generalized but also evocative. What I mean is that it's short and to the point, it doesn't go into specifics, yet at the same time it deftly conjures an image in the reader's mind.

So how *would* you describe that alien spacecraft? The crappy version would go into detail about how it's forty feet long, made from a highly reflective crystalline and steel alloy, astronautically streamlined and engineered to travel in a variety of atmospheric conditions, blah, blah, blah. The better version might be: "The ship hangs in the sky, jagged and gleaming." "Jagged" covers the engineering and the shape; "gleaming" suggests the material it's made from. That's what I mean by generalized but evocative.

Even better, compare it to something. Metaphor and analogy are like shortcuts straight to the reader's brain – they'll do all the work for you if you let them. You could say the ship was "jagged and gleaming, like a glass sculpture frozen mid-explosion," or "jagged and gleaming, like a dagger carved out of a glacier." Those are two very different kinds of jagged gleaminess (not actually a word), but they both describe a very complex cinematic visual in one short, economical sentence.

Set your scenes fast and set them well. Give a sense of where we are in every scene, and for god's sake, tell me who's there. Film's a visual medium: readers don't just read – they visualize. Help them to see what you see when you close your eyes.

> **Screenwriting Tip #51:**
> Description isn't just setting a scene – it's also about building character.

Continuing our theme of "what's with all the overdescribing, Sparky?" we come now to the question of when to describe a scene and when to leave it all in the reader's head. I mean, everyone knows what a bathroom looks like, right? A cubicle farm, a dive bar, a boxing gym – we all have vivid images that spring to mind when we hear about those places. So when would you bother describing them in a script at all?

When it reveals character, that's when.

If it's a space the character spends a lot of time in – her bedroom, her desk at work, her car – and we're seeing this space for the first time in Act 1, then you have license to go nuts on that description. Well, not completely nuts – try to keep it to three or four lines – but a little bit more nuts than normal. You might describe her wallpaper, her coffee cup, her dog, the computer she uses, her bedspread, or any of a hundred potentially revealing setting elements.

But you can go deeper than that. It's often much more effective to hint at how she lives through description. For example, one side of her computer desk might be covered in coffee rings and unwashed mugs, her bed might be perpetually unmade, her door scratched and marked where the dog always tries to get in.

This kind of description does double the work for you – not only does it set the scene, it also reveals backstory. The more backstory you can reveal in the description, the less your characters will have to reveal through dialog. The audience will be able to infer what has happened from the combination of setting and casual dialog. This is what's known as "elegant," and elegant is what you want to be.

A great example – to continue with the "boxing gym" suggestion from a few paragraphs ago – is the gym in the television show LIGHTS OUT. The main character, a former heavyweight champion fallen on hard times, bought the gym for his father with the money from his title winnings. The gym is set up like a shrine to the champ; photos of him and articles about him are everywhere. There's a banner hanging over the ring that reads "Pain Is Temporary, Pride Lasts Forever."

But as we learn more about this guy, we come to realize that the message on that banner is ironic – he lost his pride when he lost the heavyweight title. He feels like he gave in to the pain and quit boxing because his family couldn't take it any more, and now all those triumphant articles are just salt in the wound. Even more ironic is the fact that not only does he not have the pride, but the pain wasn't so temporary after all. You see,

all those years of getting punched in the head have left him with pugilistic dementia, which will eventually kill him. How's that for backstory and character from a single setting detail?

You can pull off this trick, too. Just figure out what you want to communicate about your character's backstory or emotional state, then find the best location to send that message. Then all you have to do is choose the right words.

> **Screenwriting Tip #52:**
>
> Go easy on the caps-lock in those action scenes. There's a fine line between capitalization for emphasis and sounding like the Unabomber.

I understand, I really do. You want your screenplay to be a gripping read that hooks in the readers and leads them inexorably through page after page of tense, exciting story. But there are ways to do this that don't involve taping down the Caps Lock key and digitally shouting your head off like a drive-by Internet forum poster.

Too much caps can kill a script for the same reason overcapitalized You Tube comments hurt our brains: it sounds like the writer is yelling at you. Everything written in all-caps takes on a desperate, urgent tone. You might think this is perfect for fast-paced, action-heavy scripts, but sometimes it can overwhelm the reader.

The confusion seems to have arisen because many style guides will tell you to use caps for sounds, while many professionally written scripts available on the Internet instead use caps for emphasis. This has led to many amateurs writers attempting the unpleasant combination of caps for sound *and* caps for emphasis, resulting in more caps than the time the Avengers cloned Steve Rogers. Look, I like caps as much as the next guy, but *that is too much caps*.

Nowhere is it written in stone that you must always use caps for sounds. In fact, if your script is gripping and well-written, most script readers won't notice if you're not doing it. There's also no law that you can't use **bold**, *italic*, or <u>underlining</u> to emphasize certain parts of your script.

Personally, I use caps for all sounds (MURMUR, CLAP, SHRIEK, WHISTLE, BANG, etc.), italic in dialog, and underlining for major action, or to emphasize certain important details that the reader really shouldn't miss. I don't use bold because I think it looks weird on-screen in my choice of screenwriting software, but you may very well decide you want to use it. The key here is that you choose a system and then *stick to it* slavishly throughout the entire script. You can't start off using underlining for key action and italic for key dialog, only to switch them around halfway through the script. That's liable to confuse and piss off your script reader.

Finally, one sneaky use of caps is as a lure to lead the reader's internal camera around. What do I mean by that? I mean that by capitalizing key words in an action paragraph you can force the viewer to imagine the shots in the order that you imagine them. Check it out:

INT. RESTAURANT

The bell in the doorway jangles as –

The FRONT DOOR swings open.

Two men. Italian leather SHOES. Nice suits, dark ties. Hair slicked back. They wheel their SUITCASES inside – dark leather Louis Vuittons.

Behind the counter, Tony looks up from his newspaper. Checks his WATCH –

It's a shade after five thirty.

Tony SMIRKS.

TONY

                              Yer late.

Aaand scene. It ain't Shane Black, but it'll do.

What did you imagine when reading that scene? It's likely you heard the jangling bell, then saw a medium shot of the door opening. Then you saw the camera pan up from the two men's shoes, up to their suits and ties, and finally to their faces and hair. Next you saw a close-up on their luggage being wheeled in. Then you saw Tony appearing from behind his newspaper, followed by an extreme close-up on his watch as he checks the time, and finally a close-up on Tony's face as he smirks.

This is how you lead the viewer around a scene, by using capitalized words as the landmarks. Be careful with this trick – it really only works with fast-paced, thrilleresque scripts, as it imparts a certain urgency to everything. Also, if used poorly or too often, it'll end up fatiguing and annoying the reader.

Screenwriting Tip #53:

Don't refer to someone as a "dark shadow" or a "mysterious figure" if we already know exactly who it is. This is directing the script through description.

Screenwriting Tip #54:

Don't get too caught up in describing the special effects unless they're important to the plot. The director, the editor, and the CG folks will do their own thing with it anyway.

Screenwriting Tip #55:

'Wise beyond his years" is a character description cliché – and not even a very useful or informative one.

Screenwriting Tip #56:

Your characters should never "start" to do anything, like "He starts running," "She starts to LAUGH," and so on. Action is immediate; they either do something or they don't.

Screenwriting Tip #57:

Don't kill the story with detail. When it comes to your most emotional scenes, description needs to get the hell out of the way and let the dialog do its job.

Chapter | seven

Your Protagonist: The Most Interesting Girl in the Room

Your protagonist is special. She must be, otherwise you wouldn't be writing an entire screenplay about her. You dreamed her up, and now you have a certain responsibility to chronicle her struggles, wreck her life and then rebuild her from the wreckage, stronger and tougher.

You better believe that your protagonist is the most interesting person in the story. Her hilarious friend might steal a scene every now and then, and the antagonist sure is a textured and compelling bad guy, but if you had to choose between them and her? There'd be no question. Your protagonist is special – you know this in your heart – and it's your job to make the reader believe it, too.

Screenwriting Tips, You Hack

> **Screenwriting Tip #58:**
>
> The easiest way to write kick-ass protagonists is to make them incredibly good at what they do.

A writer is a person for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

– Thomas Mann

No kidding, Mr. Mann.

If you're anything like me, you put a lot of pressure on yourself as a writer. With every new screenplay, your hopes and expectations are sky-high. You want your finished script to crackle with wit, thrill with energy and sparkle with originality. Most of all, you just hope it doesn't suck.

Well, don't sweat it. Because the truth is, you don't need flashy prose and elaborate set-pieces to craft a good screenplay. What you need is a **kick-ass protagonist**.

I've read a lot of not-so-good screenplays, and I'll let you in on a little secret: they all fail in exactly the same way. "The hero's emotional journey didn't map to her external journey through the plot." "The minor characters were more interesting than the lead." "The protagonist's goals and motivations were unclear." There are a hundred ways to say it, but they all boil down to this: *your main character did not kick enough ass*. Here are three ways to ensure that she does.

MAKE HER WANT SOMETHING

This is the big one. Ever watched a movie and thought, "Wait, why are they looking for this Crystal Skull thingy again? What happens if they all just turn around and go home?" That's what happens when the protagonist of a movie doesn't want something in a vital, all-consuming way.

Here's what you do: give your protagonist a desire so powerful, it turns her life upside-down. It doesn't even matter *what* she wants – love, fame, fortune, the attention of that boy she sits next to in history class – as long as the desire for it is strong enough to drive your story.

The most amazing thing about this trick? A powerful want can turn an average character into something sublime. Liam Neeson's character in *Taken* is the kind of guy you wouldn't even notice if he passed you on the street … until his daughter gets kidnapped, whereupon he transforms into a human hurricane of pain and destruction. For the next ninety minutes, we're glued to the screen. Rocky Balboa is a loser and a has-been … until he becomes obsessed with "going the distance" against Apollo Creed. That's what happens when you give your protagonist a want so big that it changes them completely.

One of my favorite protagonists of all time appears in the novel *The Stars My Destination* by Alfred Bester (Vintage, 1996). The hero of that book starts out a dim-witted thug devoid of ambition, a nobody with no

heart and no future. But when a rescue craft leaves him to die in deep space, something in him snaps, and he dedicates the rest of his life to elaborate schemes of revenge. His overwhelming want is visible in every action he takes, every word he speaks. It's even (in a particularly clever plot element) literally tattooed across his face.

When a character wants something – really wants it, beyond all reason – the audience will happily watch her do anything. Walk the dog, make a cup of tea, do her taxes, *anything*, because every little thing she does will be informed by that passion, that need, that's burning inside of her.

Make your protagonist want something, and you've got us hooked.

MAKE HER INCREDIBLY GOOD AT WHAT SHE DOES

Dear comic book fans: I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Wolverine is a very boring character. He's a short Canadian with a murky past and really good bone structure, and that's about the extent of his character development. So why is Wolverine one of the most popular and recognizable characters on the planet? Because he's "the best there is at what he does." And sometimes that's enough to power an entire plot. Just ask James Bond.

Believe me, if you're writing a simple or even unlikable protagonist, nothing endears them to an audience faster than sheer competence. Maverick in *Top Gun* is inexperienced, cocksure, and – as everybody repeatedly complains – dangerous to fly with … but he's just so darned *good!* And so we follow his story with rapt attention, suspicious volleyball scenes and all.

Take Mickey Rourke's character in *The Wrestler*. At the beginning of the film, we're introduced to a man who can't pay the rent on his trailer, works a dead-end job, and treats his family like dirt. Why are we watching this again? Then he steps into the ring, and our eyes are opened. We see his grace, his skill and his bloody-minded dedication to his artform – and we're hooked. Remember: kick-ass protagonists are really, really good at what they do.

HAVE HER CHANGE ENORMOUSLY

Some of the most satisfying stories are the ones in which the protagonist in Act 3 is barely recognizable as the same person who set out on the journey in Act 1. Remember *Groundhog Day*? Phil Connors's transformation from boorish jerk to bodhisattva isn't amazing by itself. What's amazing is how far he had to come. His character arc was so unbelievably vast that the universe had to refashion the laws of time just to accommodate it!

But how to make a character change that much? Unless you're writing *Groundhog Day 2*, you probably don't have the luxury of watching them grow over a hundred years. So here's what you do: give them a fantastic catalyst for change. In *Braveheart*, the catalyst for William Wallace's transformation is his wife's murder at the hands of the

English. In every romantic comedy ever, it's the other person – you know, the cute boy or girl who walks into the protagonist's life and messes everything up.

In the case of romances and rom-coms, the trick is to make sure that other person is custom-built to trigger every one of your protagonist's big changes. If your protagonist is shy, make her love interest brash and loud – all the better to force those changes in her. In *When Harry Met Sally*, every little facet of Sally's personality was there to challenge Harry, infuriate him, and ultimately to transform him into a better person and vice versa.

If you really want your protagonist to change, make sure to send them to hell and back. In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone loses everything that matters to him – his wife, his family, his own morality – and winds up transforming into the complete opposite of what he once stood for. The further your protagonist falls, the more amazing their eventual transformation.

Nobody ever said writing was easy. But if you can write a great protagonist, you're halfway there.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #59:
>
> Steal a trick from video games: Halfway through the story, take your protagonist's best weapons away from her and see how she does without them.

You know that one level in action games where you get captured by the enemy (in an unavoidable cutscene, of course), imprisoned (so you can listen to the Big Bad blab about his plans, of course), and separated from all your hard-earned, carefully chosen weapons and teammates?

That level is instant, easy drama. It's a calculated attack on the player's psyche, injecting uncertainty and apprehension into their playing style. It's the developer saying, "You may be an interstellar marine with arms bigger than cars, but let's see how you do without all your toys."

But this trick is older than games. In fact, they stole it from cinema. Spider-man's powers disappear right when he needs them to fight Doc Octopus in *Spider-Man 2*. In *Ghostbusters*, the ghostbusters' weapons, lab, and headquarters are literally taken away from them by agents of the city. These days you can even see it in television, in the form of the episode in which everybody gets amnesia, or – in a genre show – everybody losing their supernatural powers (see *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Doctor Who*, *Smallville*, *Star Trek*, and many others).

This trick works well at just about any point in Act 2, but it's particularly effective at the midpoint and, obviously, the Dark Point. It's all about stripping away your protagonist's defenses in order to find out who she really is underneath. We all come into this world with nothing and leave with nothing – certainly not with superpowers or a General Electric minigun. So why not show us who your protagonist is underneath all her bluster and bravado? You might be surprised at what you find.

This tip is flexible. You don't actually have to be writing about physical weapons and abilities to use this. It applies to emotional and intellectual weaponry as well – basically, anything the protagonist relies upon heavily. There are a million interesting ways to kick the emotional crutches out from under your protagonist, but one of the classics is by killing off or otherwise removing her "mentor" character, that is, the Obi-wan character. Another option is to have one of her trusted allies and friends go over to the antagonist's side.

It's good to get into the habit of thinking about what will really hurt your protagonist, emotionally speaking. And if you're having trouble coming up with a strong enough Dark Point, thinking about your protagonist's emotional "weapons" and how to take them away can be a good way of looking at it.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #60:
>
> The protagonist doesn't get to be happy between pages 15 and 95. And if she is, the source of that happiness better be a dream, a trick, or the calm before the storm.

You can't ever let your protagonist be happy. At least, not after the initial setup or before the final conclusion. The story is about the protagonist wanting something and not being able to get it, remember? It's something that she can't be happy without, and once she's passed the point of no return, there's no going back to the normal life she had before.

That's why you can't let her be happy during most of the script. If she's happy, we'll start questioning why she's going on this journey anyway – couldn't she just settle for second best? Suddenly the stakes won't seem so high any more.

Even if the protagonist seems to be avoiding the story or making an attempt to be happy, it's usually just an act to cover up for their fear. Steve Carell's character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* keeps trying to convince himself that he's happy alone and doesn't actually need someone in his life. And hey, it would seem that his attempts to meet women are doomed to failure anyway, if his initial misadventures are anything to go by.

But when he tries to go back to being alone, we see that he can't do it. Since the start of the story, he's learned a lot and has realized that he's actually missing out on life. He's not happy anymore doing the lonely things he did in the first few scenes, and he won't be that happy again until the very end of the film, when he finally becomes a better person and achieves his goal (in an unexpected way). Forced happiness can't cover up deep-seated flaws or longings, no matter how hard the protagonist tries to pretend. There is no going back to the bliss of ignorance.

However, there's one point at which it's a good idea to let your protagonist be happy, if only for a brief moment. I call it the "yoink moment," and it comes before a major reversal or turning point – most commonly just before the Dark Point. It's a one-two punch, where you offer happiness to your protagonist and then yoink it away at the last second, thus magnifying her misery. It's an iron fist inside a velvet glove. It's a birthday cake full of rabid voles.

The classic romantic comedy example is when the two leads finally kiss and everything looks bright and glorious … until she finds a letter on the table that reveals that he actually hates her. Of course, he wrote it back in Act 1, and his feelings have changed completely since then. But there's no time for calm explanations now! It's time for anger, sorrow, hurt feelings, and all the other miseries that a good script likes to inflict on the protagonist during the Dark Point. And the beauty of it is that these things are so much more painful – they cut so much deeper – because the protagonist

had that one, brief moment of happiness just before the breaking of the storm. That's the yoink moment.

If you're reading this and wondering if all writers are really perverted, sadistic monsters that live to inflict harm on fictional characters, then the answer is no. Only the good ones.

If, on the other hand, you're reading this and cackling with glee over the prospect of finding new ways to make your characters unhappy, well, then I think you're going to do just fine.

> **Screenwriting Tip #61:**
> Give the protagonist what she wants … right after she's realized she doesn't want it any more.

This is the equally devious cousin to the yoink moment mentioned earlier. You give the protagonist what they've been searching for, what they want, what they've always wanted … immediately after they figure out they don't need it any more. This is a special kind of cruel and unusual punishment, because they're often confused and upset by their own rejection of the prize, not to mention secondary characters who just don't understand why the protagonist isn't happy.

The rom-com (and straight-up drama) example is the girl who ends up with the guy of her dreams, except that her dreams have changed, and he no longer seems so alluring any more. The thriller example might be the agent, soldier, or cop who gets that big promotion or reassignment she'd always wanted, except that over the course of the story she's woken up to the corruption within her organization, and now there's no way she'd work for them, not for any amount of money.

A great example of this is when Harry and Sally sleep together in *When Harry Met Sally*. Harry had sworn off serious relationships after his wife left him, and he treats sex with women very casually. It's no big deal to him. Obviously, he and Sally are attracted to each other, they want each other, but neither of them wants another serious relationship. So what's the big deal?

Oops. Turns out they *do* care about each other, they do want to be more than just friends, and casual sex isn't what they wanted at all. Even worse, they're both certain the other person doesn't feel the same way. So by getting what they thought they wanted, Harry and Sally end up mired in misery. (Don't worry, they work it out in the end.)

So why not give your protagonist what she thinks she wants? It's a great catalyst for character change when she realizes she doesn't want it at all.

Screenwriting Tip #62:

Scenes sagging? Lacking drama and conflict? Do the Worst Possible Outcome Test. It's easy: find the last time your protagonist made a major decision. Ask yourself what the worst possible outcome is of that decision. Then write that.

God, I love this tip. If I could legally marry this tip, I would – in Vermont, say, or some other progressive state not afraid to publicly recognize a loving union between man and advice. When you get into a bind, this tip will pull your sorry ass right out again.

The formula really is that simple: protagonist makes a decision + decision backfires in the worst possible way = DRAMA.

Take *The Descent*, Neil Marshall's terrifying spelunking-with-monsters horror movie. In Act 1 of that film, a group of women descend into a cave system in the Appalachian Mountains. Not such a bad decision … except that they're at the wrong caves. You see, one of their number wanted to traverse a new, unexplored cave system, but knew the others wouldn't agree to it, so she threw away the map and took them to the unexplored caves anyway. Small decision, worst possible outcome: it turns out the unexplored caves are full of flesh-eating bat monsters. Oops.

The brilliant television show *Breaking Bad* is built almost entirely on this premise, masterfully spinning out terrible consequences from the tiniest of choices made by Walter White, the protagonist. Almost before we know it, Walter's not just in over his head – he's a wanted criminal and his family life is in tatters. And it all stems from one little decision made in the first episode.

Now, you don't need to go absolutely nuts with this tip ("The protagonist didn't go to church today, so now I'll blow up her mother! Mwa ha ha!"). You don't want to mess up your lovely outline by derailing the story completely every time your protagonist makes a choice. Just remember what this tip is really about: keeping the protagonist under pressure. This – and by "this," I mean your screenplay – is the most dramatic and interesting moment of your protagonist's life, remember? That's why you're writing about it. So it makes sense to keep her on her toes as much as possible. Never let her get away with a single happy scene, a single moment in which she's not in turmoil, externally or internally. Push, push, push her emotionally, and see what happens when she finally cracks.

However, if you *do* happen to apply this tip and it provides you with a fantastically good plot twist that you didn't plan for, don't be afraid to leave the outline behind. Follow the lead and see where it takes you. If it takes you to a place that's worse for the protagonist, it's probably better for your script.

By the way, there's a scaled-up, macro version of this tip that you can apply to your protagonist's entire emotional arc. It's simply this: show us what makes the protagonist who they are, then *take it all away*. This idea is handled magnificently in the Song of Ice and Fire series of novels by George R. R. Martin, a series that was adapted into the HBO show *Game of Thrones*. In those books (and that show), we're constantly shown what makes the main characters who they are – their sources of light and joy in the world, their very reasons for living. Then we watch those things get ripped away from them in the most brutal manner imaginable.

But instead of being reduced to gibbering wrecks, the characters struggle on, reforge themselves, and find new strength where they can. It's fascinating, emotional and dramatic – exactly the qualities you want in a screenplay. So do like George does: show us who your protagonist truly is, then crush her spirit as thoroughly as you can. It might feel cruel, but the audience will thank you.

Screenwriting Tip #63:

Character growth is organic. When your protagonist looks out the window and notices something that reminds her of her childhood, causing her to start blurting out her backstory to whoever's standing nearby, that's *not* organic.

Screenwriting Tip #64:

Yes, character should dictate plot. But sometimes your characters get swept up in events they can't control. Let them rage and struggle against their fate, even if it's futile – your audience will love them for it, and the plot won't feel quite so preordained.

Screenwriting Tip #65:

The fastest shortcut to emotion (of both the protagonist and the audience) is family.

Screenwriting Tip #66:

Are you as sick of the meet-cute as I am? Try the meet-horrible, the meet-embarrassing, or the meet-awkward. They're a lot more fun to write.

Screenwriting Tip #67:

A protagonist who succeeds because of her wits is always more likable than one who succeeds through brute force, good looks, or dumb luck.

Screenwriting Tip #68:

Heart-on-sleeve, character-defining monologues are like voiceover – they're kind of a cheat and not much fun to read. You can get away with one per script, *maybe* two.

Showing Character: Surprises, Sock Puppets, and Bad, Bad Men

A screenplay is only as good as the characters in it. The world doesn't need any more moustache-twirling villains, comic-relief friends, and one-use characters. The outrageously gay best friend, the wise old man dispensing wisdom, the tragically single and tragically uncool middle-aged woman – we've seen them a thousand times, and we'd be happy to never see them again.

But here's the thing: these characters were cool, once. We believed in Ben Kenobi as the wise old master; we loved James Callis as Bridget Jones's fantastically gay pal. The archetypes become stereotypes only when screenwriters get lazy, cut corners, and forget to approach them with the humanity, depth, and respect that all your characters deserve.

> **Screenwriting Tip #69:**
>
> When designing your antagonist, remember: evil doesn't know it's evil. Evil gets out of bed in the morning and goes to work with a song in its heart, knowing that what it's doing is right.

Is there anything cooler than a really *nasty* villain?

There are the skin-crawling monsters in human form – Noah Cross in *Chinatown*, Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*, and Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*. There are the manipulators – Al Swearengen in *Deadwood*, Hannibal Lecter, and Gordon Gekko. And there are the ones that overwhelm with sheer power, charisma, and force of personality – Count Dracula, Lex Luthor, Darth Vader, and the Joker.

All brilliantly written and brilliantly acted – screen legends. They couldn't be more different from each other … yet they all have one thing in common.

They think they're the good guy.

There's a saying that "everybody is the hero of their own story," meaning that everybody places themselves at the center of their own life's narrative. If that's true, then it goes double for villains. They're not just the center of the narrative; they're the center of the goddamn universe. For whatever reason – probably due to an unbelievably overdeveloped ego – these villains place their own narrative importance above the lives of virtually everyone else. They're so absolutely sure that their worldview is correct that they're willing to kill, torture, or otherwise inflict suffering in the service of that worldview.

Remember how the protagonist has to want something so badly they can't live without it? The villain is the dark mirror of that. They want it just as badly as the protagonist, if not more so. The key difference is that they'll never accept or understand the fact that they're emotionally flawed.

(Let's make a distinction here between "villain" and "antagonist": antagonists are active forces who directly oppose the protagonist. They could be anything from romantic rivals to callous bosses to forces of nature. They may not even be acting deliberately against the protagonist – they just somehow happen to make her life harder. Villains, on the other hand, are almost always people. They know exactly what they're doing and why. They're often dark reflections of the protagonist who represent the twisted, evil or perverted reflection of the protagonist's own values or goals.)

So what would drive someone to become a villain – a driven, active "hero" of their own sick narrative?

Unbelievable greed. Money and power, baby. These villains are convinced that there's nothing more important in the world than money and/or power, and once they've got it all under their control, they'll be able to forget all the horrible things they had to do to get there. "The end justifies the means" is

their narrative arc, and if the protagonist gets in the way, then she'll become just another unfortunate but necessary casualty along the road to the villain's ultimate goal. Naturally, the best way to harm this villain is to convince them that there's something more important than their mad goal.

Who cares? These villains are either brutal nihilists, mentally ill solipsists, or someone who's been screwed over by random chance one too many times. They know there's no god, no fate, and no order to the universe – just random, pitiless chaos. They can hurt others and take human lives because they're absolutely certain that it just *doesn't matter*. There are no rules, no taboos, and the only thing that matters is the story they make for themselves. These villains can be defeated only by convincing them that there really is a rhyme and reason to reality – that actions matter and that fate is watching out for us. (Easier said than done!)

Total lack of empathy/psychopaths. These villains just do not comprehend or care about the emotions of others. In the case of psychopaths, they may even enjoy manipulating and destroying other people with no qualms whatsoever. They're sickos – they actually get off on cruelty and destruction. They're distinct from the power/greed villains because their goals may be minor – still, they care far less about others and have no problems justifying their actions to themselves. However, they're more predictable than the "who cares?" villain, because they know that some things do matter. Namely, *they* matter, and everything and everyone else can jump off a cliff. Attacking their sense of self is a good way to harm these villains. Unfortunately, they're often masterminds with elaborate justifications and mental defenses.

A noble purpose gone dark. The opposite of the "who cares?" villain, this kind of villain cares way too much. Something happened to them, something awful and life-changing, and it caused some part of them to die. They pursue typically "good" goals – say, hunting criminals, uncovering secrets, or building a religious mission to save the world – but with a ruthless, amoral twist. They take everything too far because they're absolutely sure of their own purpose. Beware the zealot and the true believer, because those are the guys who will kill, maim, and torture you … and then sleep like a baby at night. They're often presented as the most evil and terrifying of all villains (not without historical precedent). The only way to combat this villain is to cast doubt on their mission.

Villains – they're not so cool when you have to think like them, but that's the price we pay for being writers. Always remember that no matter how menacing and charismatic the villain, behind the mask is a scared, confused, or mentally ill human being who wants to believe that they're the hero of their own story.

> **Screenwriting Tip #70:**
> Good writing is when a character does something that we weren't expecting but that makes perfect sense, given everything we know about that character.

People will surprise you. In real life, friends and family will occasionally do and say things that seem completely out of character. But when you really stop and think about it, those actions can be traced back to some deeper part of their character – something we, and even they, might have forgotten.

In screenplays, this tends to happen a lot, and these at-first puzzling character choices often turn out to be pivotal moments in the lives of the characters that make them.

In *Deadwood*, Al Swearengen reluctantly allows the whore Trixie to leave his service to go be with Sol Star. Because he's usually a ruthless and abusive employer, this choice is revealing. It shows us that Al has feelings for Trixie that he keeps secret. It also reminds us of the fact that Al grew up in a brothel under an abusive owner and shows that he perhaps has more love for his employees than he lets on.

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's entire motivation (at least, on the surface) is to make enough money for his family to survive after he dies from cancer. But when his former best friend offers him a large sum of money to pay for his cancer treatment – money that Walter richly deserves for helping formulate the chemical theories that made his friend wealthy – Walter turns him down. A confusing choice … until we learn that Walter and his friend's wife have a complicated and intimate history.

Actions like these are fundamental to good drama because they give depth to what might before have seemed like flat, two-dimensional characters. They allow characters to smash stereotypes by acting like, well, real people. Audiences and readers adore characters with depth because they're fascinating to watch. Will they kill the bad guys or pardon them? If someone insults them, will they go with the joke or fly into a rage? All it takes is one surprising choice or unexpected action from a character and the audience will start watching that character like a hawk, waiting for her to do something else interesting. Hint: you want the audience to be watching that intently. It means they're engaged in the story!

You can even pivot entire turning points around these unexpected character choices. In *Due Date*, Robert Downey, Jr.'s character Peter is a selfish, impatient jerk with no time for anybody else. He just doesn't give a damn about anybody else's problems. So of course he gets saddled with Ethan (Zach Galifianakis), the world's most annoying road-trip buddy, who is absolutely riddled with emotional problems, chief among them the fact that his beloved father just died. At the end of Act 1, Peter tries to ditch Ethan by stealing Ethan's car and driving away. What stops Peter is

that he learns that Ethan's father's ashes are still in the car. Peter briefly considers throwing the ashes off an overpass, but he just can't do it. He drives back and picks Ethan up again.

It's an interesting choice. Peter's an asshole who doesn't care about other people, he needs the car to get home, and he hates Ethan more than anything. So why does he come back? Because Peter has issues with his own father abandoning him, and he empathizes deeply with Ethan's loss. He may be a heartless asshole, but when it comes to father issues, he recognizes a kinship with Ethan. That surprising choice to return and pick up Ethan not only reveals a hidden side of the protagonist's character – it also acts as the Act 1 turning point, the "point of no return." Once Peter comes back with that car, he's in for good. He's no reluctant passenger any more – he's an active participant in this journey.

This is one of the most impressive and confidence-inspiring tricks a writer can pull off. If you can make a character appear to act out of character but then justify it with a brilliant reveal or a new, deeper, characterization, you'll have your audience hooked.

> **Screenwriting Tip #71:**
>
> You have to show us why we should love these characters. Sometimes that will involve hurting them badly. Call it the "Whedon Gambit."

They say screenwriting is about "killing your babies." They're usually talking about cutting your favorite scenes, not maiming and killing your favorite characters. But when the Whedon Gambit's done right, there's nothing so emotionally crippling in all of cinema.

It's called the Whedon Gambit because Joss Whedon is the master of this particular trick. If you've seen the first or last season of *Angel*, or if you've ever sat down to enjoy *Serenity* immediately after watching *Firefly*, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Hey, I still haven't forgiven that callous bastard for the ending of *Buffy*'s sixth season. It's gotten so bad that fans of Whedon's work now go into automatic paroxysms of fear if two of his characters start exhibiting signs of happiness together, or – worse still – profess love for each other. The fans know that means that the chances of horrible, horrible death or disfigurement for the characters just increased exponentially.

But this technique isn't unique to Whedon. Alfred Hitchcock designed the murder at the midpoint of *Psycho* to be a jarring, horrifying wake-up call that would throw the audience off balance. And if the books are anything to go by, HBO's *Game of Thrones* is going to be one long, bloody festival of beloved character deaths.

Why do this? What possible gain can there be in brutally removing the audience's favorite characters?

It wakes them up, for one thing. If someone pauses the DVD – or drops your script – because they're so shocked at what just happened …well, that's exactly the kind of visceral emotional response you're looking for. You got into this writing game so you could make audiences feel something, remember? Well, now they feel breathless and slightly sick. Congratulations (you monster).

Another reason is that it's an amazing cliffhanger, act out, or turning point. These kinds of pivotal events are probably just as emotionally scarring to the protagonist as they are to the audience, which makes them brilliant structural elements. In film, a Whedon Gambit makes for a great midpoint or Dark Point; in television, it makes a powerful act out for one of the later acts.

Finally, they get the story where it needs to go. Whedon famously says "give the audience what they need, not what they want." He's absolutely right. If you've ever seen a television show that panders to its audience's whims by spotlighting and idolizing the "fan favorite" characters, you know it's not a pretty sight. Drama should always come first, not the audience's feelings.

A good tragedy can imbue the plot with a whole new sense of peril. It can raise the stakes again, just as the audience is getting complacent. It reminds us that the antagonist is powerful and the protagonist might not make it through after all. Here's a good example: after three movies of inspiring comebacks and victories, the audience for *Rocky IV* needed to be convinced that the hero was actually in danger of losing. So how did the screenplay succeed in making a new villain scary? By having the villain kill Apollo Creed, Rocky's best friend and one of the most popular characters in the series.

How do you pull off a good Whedon Gambit? First, make it unexpected. This is the kind of death that should not be foreshadowed by talk of noble sacrifices or "one last week on the job." It has to feel like the tragedy could have happened to anybody, not just the most obvious or expendable character.

Make it hurt. It should be a character who is extremely dear to the hearts of the protagonist, or the audience, or ideally, both. It's often better if the tragedy was unfair – the character wasn't supposed to be there, or she was just an innocent bystander caught up in events beyond her control. Bonus points if the protagonist blames herself, rightly or wrongly.

If you look at Whedon's own use of the Gambit (the trope, not the X-man, although that would make for some interesting fan-fic), you'll notice that he most often chooses to inflict it upon women. This is probably because of the prevailing societal view that women are somehow more innocent and more worthy of protection – it just hurts more when tragedy happens to a woman. I urge you to be *very careful with this*. Using the tragic rape or death of a female character as motivation for a male protagonist borders on dark, unsavory territory.

Whedon himself has brushed up against this darkness, and he's a die-hard, old-school feminist. In fact, his last television show, *Dollhouse*, was a complex science-fiction allegory about the rape, objectification, and subjugation of women. As you can imagine, it was a critical and commercial success that ran for ten seasons. (No it was not.)

Finally, make it meaningful. The Gambit should affect your protagonist in a profound way, which is why I suggest tying it to a major emotional turning point in your script's structure. This a spoiler-free zone, but I urge you to check out the two uses of the Gambit in Whedon's film *Serenity* and see where they map onto the narrative structure and the protagonist's arc. If you've been paying attention, you won't be surprised to see where they turn up.

> **Screenwriting Tip #72:**
>
> How you treat your minor characters says a lot about the kind of person you are. I don't want to spend 110 pages inside your head if you're a jerk.

If your comic relief character is an annoying mouthpiece who lives only to spout punch lines, why do you expect us to buy his transformation into a brave friend in Act 3? If the antagonist's henchman is a thuggish brute with no discernible goals or motivation, why should we care whether the protagonist shows him mercy or not?

In short – if you don't have respect for your minor characters, why should the reader?

People are not props. In real life, everybody has layers. Nobody is a stereotype – or if they are, there's probably a good reason why they took up that mantle. Maybe they use it as a crutch, or maybe they desperately hope that if they live up to all of society's expectations, nothing more will be demanded of them.

In screenplays, damn near everybody is a stereotype. This isn't always the writer's fault. After all, there are only so many ways you can quickly and concisely convey an image into the reader's mind when introducing a character. It's just convenient to be able to write, "A well-dressed BUSINESSMAN talking loudly on his cell phone" and have the reader understand exactly what you mean.

The problem is that such a description could be applied to a thousand different characters. You probably imagined him wearing a suit, but he might just as easily be talking business on his way to a vacation in the Maldives, decked out in flip-flops and a pink shirt. He might be a total nineties flashback sporting a mullet, an out-of-date suit, and an enormous phone that he has to hold in two hands. Maybe he's talking loudly because he's seventy-six years old and deaf in one ear?

These are extreme examples, but you get the idea. Every minor character has a story, and it can't always be adequately conveyed in their initial character description. But if the character continues as a stereotype for the entire script, the reader will start to get worried.

If all you write is stereotypes, the reader's going to start believing that's *how you see the world*.

If you introduce a group of frat boys as homophobic, drunken, incurious morons, we'll buy it … at first. If it later turns out that every single frat boy in your film's universe acts that way, it's going to challenge our suspension of disbelief and make it look like you can't craft a coherent universe. It's okay for your protagonist to believe that every single politician in the world is a slimy, money-grubbing liar, but if it turns out that they actually *are*, your story's credibility collapses. And god help you if the

premise of your movie is that all teenagers want nothing more than to get wasted and flash their boobs at strangers. (In which case, congratulations – you've just written *Piranha 3D*.)

All of this is not to say that every single minor character in your screenplay requires a backstory and a character arc – just that they should *feel* like they do. Going back to Joss Whedon, he likes to say that everyone in your script – even "FAT BYSTANDER" and "SECURITY GUARD #2" – has a story. They have hopes, fears, a family, and a mind of their own. They're living their story right now within the larger setting of your script. Their story need never come out, of course – your job is to tell the protagonist's story, not theirs. But if the protagonist's story feels like it's overlapping with a dozen other life stories all around her, then your world will feel alive. It'll feel real.

So that's passive abuse of minor characters through laziness and neglect. What about *active* abuse of minor characters?

We can all think of movies, usually comedies, in which one character is treated as the punching bag and the butt of all jokes. It's usually the "nerd" or the "ugly girl" or the comically inept antagonist who stands in for some larger societal fear (*Sixteen Candles* is an infamous exemplar). It happens in other genres, too: everyone knows that in action films, the black guy or the blonde bimbo dies first. Michelle Rodriguez has made a career out of playing the aggressive Latina women who is so frightening to the audience that she must be sacrificed on the altar of the plot.

Look, this whole trope is unseemly. It reads like the writer is getting off on abusing one character, laughing right along with the thugs and bullies. This is lazy writing, especially as it would be so easy to make these characters work by giving them a tiny bit of heart and character development.

To be fair, some writers take this ball and run with it so far that it actually becomes part of the joke. Characters like Brick in *Anchorman*, Jerry in *Parks & Recreation*, and Brittany in *Glee* all subvert their "punching bag" status by force of personality, sheer absurdity, or by revealing flashes of characterization that hint at hidden depths (Brittany: "She's the one they made me talk to when they found out I was keeping that bird in my locker").

One of the hardest lessons to learn as a writer is that we have a responsibility to the characters we create. We can't let ourselves believe that they're just words on a page – if we believe that, then so will everybody else. We have to treat them like real people, with all the baggage and complexity that comes with being a real person. You can turn stereotypes into unique characters, and punching bags into human beings.

All it takes is a little respect.

Screenwriting Tip #73:

Don't make your villain an evil corporation instead of a real person. Nobody goes to the cinema to watch Jason Statham punch out a corporation.

Screenwriting Tip #74:

If a minor character has a unisex name, you better make it clear real fast whether they're supposed to be male or female.

Screenwriting Tip #75:

Every major character should have a backstory (in your notes, at least). Not every major character should have a backstory that conveniently ties into the main plot.

Screenwriting Tip #76:

Do give your minor characters names. I don't care what you call them, but anything's better than COWORKER #1 through COWORKER #7.

Screenwriting Tip #77:

Everybody lies – it's the bedrock of conversation. Consequently, characters who always tell the brutal truth are a great source of conflict. (Think Abed on *Community*.)

Chapter | nine

Dialog: We Need to Talk

Really, we *need* to talk, and by "we" I mean "human beings." We're one of the noisiest species on the planet, endlessly chattering away to each other, to our phones, or just to ourselves. The whole world runs on speech and human interaction. And so does your screenplay.

Screenplay dialog is a strange and special beast. It's just a little sharper, a little edgier, a little more to the point than the way people actually talk. Good dialog walks the razor's edge between cheesy and sincere, simple and clever, too little and too much. But when it works, you might end up creating iconic movie lines that live on in the memory of the audience. "Hasta la vista, baby." "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!" "Here's looking at you, kid."

That's worth a little struggle, don't you think?

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> **Screenwriting Tip #78:**
>
> Action before dialog. If there's a way for a character to act instead of talk, write it.

Actions speak louder than words. It's a cliché, but that doesn't make it any less true.

Remember Tip #Zero? The aim of the game is to *not be boring*, and that means being interesting. Action is just inherently more interesting than dialog.

Arguments are interesting, but fights are better. Sexy talk is interesting, but sex is better. Hearing about a fifty-foot-tall, man-eating dinosaur is interesting, but … well, you get the idea. Cinema is an active medium. When people say something was "cinematic," they mean things were moving, happening, possibly exploding. As much as dialog is integral to film and television, it's not the essence of cinema. Nobody ever called a televised debate "cinematic."

What this means for you: whenever you have a choice between making your characters act or talk, you should probably choose the action. Ever seen a "soft" act out on a TV show? I can almost guarantee that you have, and I can almost guarantee that it sucked. A **soft act out** is when the act break (which leads into the commercial break) ends on a line of dialog rather than a piece of action. It's called "soft" because it's weaker than a typical action-based act out.

What the hell am I talking about, you ask? Okay, try this: the act out in question is the revelation that the lead detective's partner has been killed. The strong version of this act out is that the detective finds her partner's body herself – we cut to black on her shock at seeing the body, no dialog necessary. The crappy, soft version is that the chief calls her into his office and says, "I'm sorry, but we found your partner's body" – then cut to black on a relatively weak line of dialog instead of a strong action. The *really* crappy version is when she gets the news via phone call.

This is why, if you can manage it, all the turning points in the structure of your narrative should be physical actions. What would *The Wizard of Oz*'s Act 1 turning point have looked like if the Yellow Brick Road hadn't existed? Instead of beginning her long walk down the fabled road, Dorothy would have had to shrug and say, "Well, I guess this is the start of our adventure, guys." If the main characters in *The Kids Are Alright* had stopped to chat about their blossoming lust for each other, it wouldn't have been a very good midpoint. Instead they jumped into bed together, and that hasty act flipped the entire narrative on its head. And what if ET had just *told* Elliot he wanted to go home instead of indicating it physically in the legendary "phone home" scene?

When it comes to major moments in your narrative, sometimes words just aren't enough. When the bad guy threatens the heroine, she spits in his face – an action that says more than any reply could. There comes a point in many screen arguments when a slap to the face speaks much louder than a verbal retort. And when the two leads finally kiss in a romantic scene, it's usually because there was nothing else left to say.

But more than just turning points can benefit from upping the action. There's a screenwriting rule, "Always have your characters doing something." This rule applies to any scene and any character, not just the protagonist in pivotal moments. Not only is minor action more cinematically interesting than static, talking heads, but it's also a free way to indicate character without having to resort to dialog.

I'm not just talking about nodding, pointing, smiling, or other physical punctuation. (In fact, unless it's vital to the story, or necessary for clarity, you probably don't need to be writing that stuff at all. Let the actors do their jobs.) I'm talking about incidental action – something that a character does *during* a conversation that adds an extra layer of meaning to her words.

Imagine a scene in a diner in which two characters sit and talk in a booth. Who eats and who doesn't, and *how* they eat, says a whole lot about the subtext of that conversation. What if one character spends the entire conversation playing with his food – building mashed potato houses, pulling the labels off of ketchup bottles, and so on? Depending on the situation, incidental actions like this might indicate that he's bored, anxious, scared, or horny.

How about a soldier who spends every spare moment loading and unloading his weapon (or shaving his face, à la *Predator*)? A stealthy alcoholic who always seems to be drinking faster than everyone else, pouring herself another glass whenever people aren't looking? The schoolgirl who texts so often it's as if her phone is glued to her hand? These incidental actions either reveal character or help enhance characterization without resorting to dialog.

Even the subtlest of actions can be vital to our understanding of a scene. What does it mean when a boss calls his secretary into a meeting … but just before she arrives, he takes the photo of his wife off his desk? What's implied when a mother lets her drunk ex-husband into her apartment … but quickly moves to physically position herself between her drunk ex and their young daughter?

Actions speak louder than words. It's not just a crappy greeting card slogan; it's also a powerful bit of screenwriting advice.

Screenwriting Tip #79:

You know that powerful, emotional moment when the character finally blurts out what she's been feeling all along? It's the linchpin of the whole scene, and you're just so proud of it. Cut it. Subtext beats text.

The protagonist relates a tragic story from her past, the words spilling out of her. The antagonist holds forth about the childhood accident that turned her into the bitter person she is today. The romantic interest confesses that he loves the protagonist, has always loved her, will always love her until the end of time.

Unless you're writing a school play, this kind of dialog sucks. It's boring, obvious, and trite.

In the business, they call this stuff "on-the-nose" dialog. As in punched you on the nose, because that's what bad, groan-worthy dialog does – it jumps out and assaults you. It drags you out of the read and forces you to think about the writing. It kills emotional involvement in the characters. It sucks, plain and simple.

But here's the thing: your first draft is going to be absolutely littered with this crap. On virtually every page, characters will be explaining their backstory, foregrounding the plot, and loudly declaiming their every thought and feeling.

It's important to know that this is not your fault. In screenwriting, as in most things, we try the easy way first, and if that doesn't work we move on to the hard way. Everyone writes lame dialog in the first draft. That's what the first draft is *for* – to get the crappy version of the dialog out there in plain sight. Seeing on-the-nose dialog for what it is – recognizing that it's obvious, bland, and perfunctory – is the first step in the process of brutally cutting it out.

Yes, cutting it. There's no careful rewriting that can save a truly obvious, unnecessary line. If you can say the same thing with subtext, use subtext instead. Better yet, see if you can achieve the same effect using action instead of dialog. Screenwriter Scott Myers likes to talk about the scene in *Sideways* where the protagonist and the romantic lead are talking about their favorite wines … except that, no, they're not. "Requires constant care and attention," "fragile and delicate," "constantly evolving" – they're actually spilling their guts about how they see *themselves*. It's a beautiful scene. But what if they had really been talking about themselves, without the "buffer zone" of wine to create some emotional distance? It would have been awkward, simplistic, and on-the-nose.

The hardest on-the-nose lines to change are those that you feel like the character has really earned it – really gotten to that point where they should be able to declare their feelings frankly. For example, in a romance

or romantic comedy, when the entire story has been leading up to some ultimate expression of love … well, then, you should probably let the characters express it. Right?

Or not. Check out the final scene of *When Harry Met Sally*. Harry sprints to the New Year's Eve party and gets there just in time to profess his love for Sally, but she rejects him. She doesn't believe a word he says. So Harry throws it back at her, angrily listing all the things he loves about her, as if trying to win a competition. The scene ends with Sally repeating, "I hate you, Harry; I hate you" and then they kiss. It's actually the triumphal moment of the film – the high point in their relationship!

The scene works because it's true to the nature of the characters and their relationship. To have them just blandly express their love, agree with each other, and ride off into the sunset would not only have been on-the-nose – it would have been out of character, given everything we know about these people.

Yet I can almost guarantee you that Nora Ephron's first draft of that scene was simpler, more traditional, and more on-the-nose. All screenwriters do it – we write the easy version first, then we work our asses off to find the good version. How do you know when you've found the good version? If you don't groan when you read it out loud, you're probably on the right track.

> **Screenwriting Tip #80:**
> You can make your characters' voices sound different by giving them less to say. Too much yakking tends to blend together into a big, mediocre soup.

Continuing the theme of "less dialog, please," we come now to everybody's (read: nobody's) favorite kind of scripts: blabby scripts. These are the scripts in which nobody speaks in less than three lines of dialog, everybody's quick with a joke or a weighty pronouncement, and the characters repeat lines and parrot each other over and over and over again.

Simply put, blabby scripts are hiding something:

They're hiding the fact that the characters all sound the same. The blabby scriptwriter might have designated one character as "the talkative one," another as "the dry, sarcastic one," and so on, but none of them actually comes across that way because *everyone talks in exactly the same manner*. They might all sound educated and breezy, or stilted and prosaic – it doesn't matter how they talk, but they all do it in the same voice. Often it's the screenwriter's own voice, or a self-congratulating version of the same. If you're a blogger, article writer, or journalist – basically, if you've trained yourself to write with a particular kind of authorial voice – then you may be especially prone to this problem.

They're hiding the fact that they're not funny. Blabby dialog crops up most often in comedies, which makes sense, as comedy tends to be the most "talky" of genres. Blabby comedy writers seem to think that by putting a bunch of vaguely humorous character archetypes (a sex-crazed nerd! a shy biker! a swearing grandma!) in a room together and making them talk to each other – and talk and talk and talk – comedy will ensue. Surely, the blabby writer thinks, all you have to do is get the characters talking and the jokes will write themselves! Spoiler alert: the jokes do not write themselves. *You* have to write the jokes.

They're hiding a lack of proper pacing and scene structure. In the best movie conversations – as in actual, real-life conversations – people don't just talk constantly. They go suddenly quiet; they pause for dramatic effect; they forget what they were saying; they interject; they alternate between short and long sentences; they stop talking and act instead. This is how you inject drama into a scene. A scene has a beginning, a middle, an end, and a turning point in the middle, remember?

At least, that's the theory. But in blabby scripts, the scenes never seem to make any sense. Because the characters speak too much, it's hard to discern the twists and turns of the scenes – the dialog doesn't resemble human conversation, making it difficult to know who wants what, or why.

Blabby characters will often repeat each other ("Hey dude, have you seen my cake?" "Your cake?" "Yeah, my cake. You know, the cake I baked." "Why would I have seen your cake?") or they'll sum up complex conversations in one huge dump of a line ("Look, it's obvious your cake's not here. But I don't think we're really talking about your cake. This is about you and me, isn't it? This is about how you think I stole your girlfriend. Well, you don't know what you're talking about. And even if I had seen your cake, I wouldn't tell you!").

Oh god. That was painful to write.

So how do you avoid blabbiness? It's not difficult. Simply go through your script and meticulously hunt down those lines where characters have repeated themselves ("I love cake! Cake is the best"), then cut the repetition. If a character is described as "quiet" or "taciturn" or "shy," make sure they're not holding forth with dialog that runs for half a page. And if you're writing a comedy, make sure that you don't just have designated "funny" characters – actually write some jokes in there as well.

But most of all, think about the value of words, especially as it pertains to dialog. *This is Sparta. E.T. phone home. Good morning, Vietnam. I'll be back.* You can do a lot with just three measly words. The more careful you are with your dialog – the more you treat it like a precious, valuable commodity – the more your characters will feel like the strong, smart, or witty people they're supposed to be.

> **Screenwriting Tip #81:**
>
> Stop making people nod during conversations. I don't care, the actors don't care, it breaks the flow of dialog, *and* it screws up your lovely white space.

God, I love white space.

If you're not familiar with the term, "white space" refers to the amount of white (i.e., everything that's not text) on the pages of a screenplay. White space is a beautiful thing, both from an aesthetic standpoint and for the power it gives us over the narrative flow of our scripts. It's one of our most powerful screenwriting tools because it naturally draws the reader *down* the page instead of *across* it; and down the page is exactly where we want them to go.

Think of how it feels when you're reading a really gripping novel. It's 3:00 a.m., you've got work in the morning, but you can't stop reading because there's only a few dozen pages left and you *have* to find out how it ends. How are you reading? You're reading fast – blazing through those pages to see what happens next. When readers are engaged with a story, they read quickly. And conversely, we can "trick" readers into becoming more engaged with our screenplays by subtly cuing them to read faster. That's what white space does – it "pulls" readers down the page.

Now that we've established that white space is great, let's talk about how you keep screwing it up. I'm referring to those overly long action paragraphs you keep writing; those annoying parentheticals you put after every second character name; and, most importantly, those little one-sentence bits of inane character action you keep dropping into your conversations.

You don't need to tell us that "Bob nods" or "Susie smiles." We don't care that Aaron says something "(cheerfully)" or that Jennifer pauses for a "(beat)" before her next line. These are screenwriting tics, and they're bad for the white space. Don't believe me? Let's go line by line through the tip above:

I don't care.

The "I," in this case, is the script reader. You remember script readers, don't you? They're the gatekeepers of Hollywood, the first (and possibly last) people who will read your script. They are the people you have to impress. Their bosses literally do not have time to read your script.

No, really. They are *that* busy. How many hours do you think a Hollywood development executive, producer, or manager works? Got a figure in your head? Okay – add half again on top of that, and throw in weekends, too. That's why they need script readers (or poorly paid assistants) to read the scripts they don't have time for. If a reader loves your script, she'll pass it along to her boss for consideration. That's why script readers matter – in a very real sense, we're all writing to impress the script readers.

Let me tell you something in confidence: as a script reader, there is nothing worse than the feeling of turning the page to find a mammoth wall of text staring back at you. Because *we have to read all that*. That's right – the story about script readers throwing screenplays in the trash after just a couple of pages is pure mythology. We have to read to the end, and worse, we have to follow and understand everything you wrote so we can write our coverage. Under these circumstances, it's no wonder that a whole page of dialog surrounded by white space starts to look like the most beautiful thing in the world.

One of the best scripts I ever read was written by a Serbian gentleman who had obviously learned English as a second language. The paragraphs were short, there were very few adverbs or adjectives, and the dialog was thinner than Courteney Cox. But with all that decoration stripped away, the story shone through. Let me tell you, I read that script *fast*.

Script readers – despite rumors to the contrary – are human beings, and human beings tend to like things that are fun. Scripts that read fast are fun, and fun scripts get recommended to managers and executives.

The actors don't care.

They really don't.

If you'll permit me to generalize broadly: actors are vocal, emotional, outgoing people. And yes, okay, a lot of actors are kind of vain. (This is broadly true for the same reason that a lot of screenwriters are kind of neurotic and a lot of comedians are kind of suicidally depressing. It comes with the territory of self-examination.) So it follows that when actors read a script, they tend to focus on the dialog because, hey, that's the stuff that makes them looks good. That's their meat and potatoes. The other stuff – all your carefully chosen adjectives and heady, descriptive prose passages? They don't care so much about that.

Remember also that whenever you add a parenthetical to a dialog line or a minor piece of physical action to a conversation, a good actor is going to come up with something better. They're going to put their own spin on it, and thanks for your input and all, but they probably know their own craft better than you do.

The actors don't care. So don't gum up your script with action that'll never get used.

Also note: the director doesn't care either.

It breaks the flow of dialog.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with creating a sense of geography within a scene; it's good to give the reader some idea of where characters are and how they're moving and acting in relation to each other. The trick is hiding it.

Stage direction shouldn't stick out like a sore thumb. We shouldn't be rollicking along with a page full of dialog and suddenly stop dead at "Jason giggles," or "Molly nods in agreement," or "Cletus picks his nose." These lines exist only because the writer got scared. The characters were talking

too much, or there was too much dialog, so they decided to throw in a totally unnecessary line of action. These lines are nervous outbursts, little twinges of fear that scream "I don't trust my own dialog to carry the scene."

White space, on the other hand, is cool. White space is rock star calm. White space says, "My dialog is brilliant. My dialog carries weight. Borne within my dialog are whole universes of subtext and implied character action. So screw you if you don't like my white space."

You too can exude confidence and cool. You can impress actors, charm script readers, and make your dialog the centerpiece of your script. All you need is a little white space.

Screenwriting Tip #82:

Never interrupt your characters when they're arguing with each other. Let them slug it out, then edit later.

Screenwriting Tip #83:

If you tell me in a character's introduction that they're "fun-loving," "mischievous," or "free-spirited," then their dialog had better reflect that.

Screenwriting Tip #84:

There are some speech markers that act as bright flags that signal to the audience, "This dialog is important." "I promise" and "trust me" are two of them. Don't waste these valuable markers on filler dialog.

Screenwriting Tip #85:

You can't just tell us there's dialog coming from the radio, the TV, or some character in the background. You have to actually write that dialog.

Screenwriting Tip #86:

No need to put (beat) or (pause) into the dialog because you think it'll sound nice — the actors will have their own ideas. Beats work best for suspense- or timing-dependent jokes.

Screenwriting Tip #87:

Imagine you were an actor and you had to say these lines. Which ones sound weird or ridiculous? Which ones sound like clichés when you say them out loud?

Screenwriting Tip #88:

Don't write phonetic dialog (e.g., "Ah coulda bin a contendah."). If you absolutely must, at least keep it rigorously consistent throughout.

Screenwriting Tip #89:

People talk very differently around their family and friends than they do around strangers. Shorthand dialog, familiarity, and in-jokes are your ticket to quick characterization.

Genre: Waiter, There's a Comedy in My Thriller

Let's just get this out of the way: Yes, "genre" is a complete and utter marketing construct. We (and by "we" I mean "people who market films for a living") divide movies into arbitrary categories based on how they make us feel: "This one made me laugh – comedy! This one was scary – horror! I fell asleep in this one – indie coming-of-age drama!" And so forth.

Of course there are films that defy genre, or play with it, or merge multiple genres into one entirely new creation. Genre is also culturally specific – in Asia, there's an entire movement of cheesy ghost story horror-comedies, sort of like if *Beetlejuice* had spawned a hundred imitators. But for the purposes of the screenwriter, it pays to play the game a little. Learn how genre works, what its rules are, and what marketers and audiences expect from the major popular genres. Learn the system. Then, one day, you might get the perfect opportunity to break it.

> **Screenwriting Tip #90:**
> Horror doesn't need to target the mind, or even the heart. Horror needs to target the hairs on the back of the neck.

Horror films tend to get overanalyzed. There's the "Final Girl" neofeminist theory, the postmodern approach, the whole Freudian "sex equals death" thing, and so on. These approaches aren't just film school wankery – for the most part, they're valid and important. They're a big part of why horror is one of the most interesting and uniquely cinematic genres.

Yet when you're sitting in a cinema watching a horror movie, you're not thinking about the psychosexual implications of the heroine's choice of weaponry. You're thinking "JESUS CHRIST IT'S RIGHT BEHIND HER OH MY GOD I THINK I'M HAVING A HEART ATTACK AHHHH!"

That's because horror is primal. Horror hits you where you live. Next to horror, other screenplay genres seem gentle, almost timid. They politely appeal to your empathy or your sense of humor: "Would you like to see a man run away from some criminals?" they say. "How about an attractive couple having a humorous argument? Don't worry – the man will get away from the bad guys, and the couple will make up by the end of the story. It's just a story; it can't hurt you. Everything's perfectly safe here."

Meanwhile, the horror genre has broken into your house, beaten you unconscious, and thrown you into a pit full of corpses, because horror doesn't have to be smart or clever (although it certainly helps). Horror just has to target a primal nerve. Fear of the dark. Fear of the other. Fear of your own body betraying you. Fear of being powerless. Fear of pain. These are the weapons in your arsenal when you're writing horror. These weapons don't replace your normal tools – pacing, characterization, scene structure – but they're just as important.

The big mistake that newbie horror writers make is focusing too much on superficial genre elements. They concentrate on the well-worn tropes of the genre without understanding why they're including them in the first place. There's no law that says your slasher film has to have a cabin in the woods, an inquisitive sheriff's deputy, and a randy teenage couple. Those are just plot elements (isolated location, investigation plot, and a "sex = death" metaphor, for those playing at home) that a lot of past slasher films happened to include. Don't fall in love with the trappings of the genre. Keep your eyes on the prize: scaring the living bejesus out of the audience.

Monster movie writers seem to be particularly obsessed with the trappings of genre. They describe their monster/alien/mutant shark-beast in loving detail, right down to its vestigial tentacles, the details of its life-cycle, and the noises it makes when it moves. Incredibly, I've read many

amateur scripts in which the monster is described in detail in Act 1, despite the oldest and most effective trick in the monster movie book, which is *don't show the monster until Act 3*.

When it comes to horror, the less the reader knows, the better. The monster is not scary. By itself, it does not inspire dread or fear. The horror stems from what the monster does and how the characters react to it, and also from the terrifying images that the readers/audience build up in their minds.

The design of the creature in *Alien* changed numerous times during rewrites and production – from a quasiphysical force, to a Lovecraftian space octopus, to a more humanoid figure – but that didn't change the fact that the plot was brilliant. H. R. Giger's alien design is rightly praised, but by the time we finally get a good, full-body look at the creature, we've already seen it take out almost the entire crew of the *Nostromo*. Ambiguity, shadows, and psychology are the tools of the truly terrifying monster – not acid blood and fangs.

That's what I mean about horror being primal. Jump-scares, suspense, and sudden violence are all a major part of the horror genre. But they can be found in thrillers and action movies, too. So what does good horror writing have – beyond fear, suspense, and shock – that elevates it above bad or simplistic horror writing?

It's dread. Dread is primal – it's the tingling hair on your arms and the chill down your spine. Suspense is knowing something's going to happen, but not knowing when. Dread is not knowing what the hell will happen at any given moment. It's uncomfortable, disorienting. In primal, animal terms, it's the difference between being chased by a predator and being placed in a cave with no light and no way out.

In the first case, you know what's happening to you. It's a predator – you can try to either fight it, hide from it, or outrun it. In the second scenario, you have no idea what's in this cave, where the tunnels lead, or why you've been put here. There could be *anything* down here in the dark with you. That's true horror.

> **Screenwriting Tip #91:**
> Jokes can't save a scene that's not advancing the plot or affecting the protagonist. Comedy should never be the entire point of a scene.

It works for Will Ferrell. It works for Judd Apatow's crew. It used to work for Chevy Chase, Bill Murray, and other ex–Saturday Night Live cast members, back when their movies made money. But I have bad news: it doesn't work for you.

I'm talking about writing scenes that exist for no other reason than to set up jokes – scenes that don't advance character, affect the plot, or have any reason to exist at all, really, except to allow the actors to deliver a stream of jokes.

I can take a guess at why so many young writers add these kinds of scenes. Comedies are about jokes – everybody knows that. That's the prime motivating factor for picking a movie on a Friday night. *Will it make me laugh? I heard it was funny. Everybody's quoting the best lines at work.*

Plus, have you seen some of these modern comedies? *Anchorman*, *The Other Guys*, *Funny People* – they're full of long scenes in which nothing much happens while the characters bounce jokes off each other. That's what comedies are all about, right?

Actually, no. The screenplays for those films were written by people who knew they were going to get made and that they would be directing them (and by "they," I mean Judd Apatow and Adam McKay). That knowledge gave them the freedom to write loose, nebulous scenes that allowed for a lot of improv by specific actors, who, incidentally, they also knew they'd be working with.

Unfortunately, most spec comedy writers are not Adam McKay or Judd Apatow. When most writers try to write long, set-piece scenes that consist of nothing but jokes, it just dies on the page.

Why is this? Why can't we all just write pure joke scenes and have them work? A couple of reasons:

We can't hear your characters. The funny voices in your head, with their impeccable comic timing? We can't hear them. Sorry.

When was the last time a novel made you laugh out loud? Exactly. I've read scripts that made me smile or go "hah," but actual-physical-laughter comedy scripts are as rare as Bigfoot eggs. That's because we don't know what your characters look or sound like, or how they're saying each line.

Timing and delivery comprise an unbelievably large part of comedy. That's not to say that readers can't appreciate a well-written joke – they do, but usually in an intellectual way. They don't read it and belly-laugh; they read it and think, "great joke – that'll probably play well on the screen." They can imagine it but not *experience* it.

(Funnily enough, this doesn't apply to spec scripts of existing comedy television shows. Those *can* be hilarious, because the reader usually knows what the characters sound like and can "hear" their voices in her head. Of

course, they'll also hear every wrong word and slightly off phrase and think "this character would never say that." So the actual joke writing can sometimes be harder. Hey, you win some and you lose some.)

It kills your pacing. If the protagonist is close to a huge revelation, or the romantic subplot is coming to a head, or the Dark Point is bearing down on the plot like a runaway freight train, the last thing anybody needs is a scene of two characters casually bouncing jokes off each other. The pacing will feel wrong because the scene isn't serving the story in any way.

Look at *Groundhog Day*. (I know I keep going back to it, but quite frankly it's the greatest comedy ever written. And if you don't agree with me? It's on. Pistols at dawn, pal.) Bill Murray does a lot of ad libbing in that film … *but it's all in service of the plot*. He's constantly joking, mocking, and putting other characters down because that's the only way he can retain some kind of control over his own life – control that he knows is inexorably slipping away from him.

Finally, he gives up and actually stops making jokes. Check out the Dark Point of that film, with the repeated suicides and the attempt to save the dying homeless man. It's somber and miserable, partly because Murray completely stops ad libbing and joking around.

No joke is wasted in *Groundhog Day*. No scene exists solely for the sake of comedy. The structure is a beautiful clockwork mechanism, and that's why the film packs such an emotional punch. As a thought experiment, try imagining *Groundhog Day* starring Will Ferrell as Phil Connors, with every scene paced like *Talladega Nights*.

When you're done weeping, we'll continue.

Real comedy – not just throwaway gags or pop culture references – flows from character. But you already know this. You know Michael Scott on *The Office* or Bernard Black on *Black Books* intimately because you've watched them for hours. You know that their personalities are so volatile and weird that whenever they're put in an interesting scene, hilarity is probably going to ensue. Heck, they just have to walk into a room and encounter some kind of odd situation and already you're laughing.

Look at almost any half-hour comedy pilot. Chances are good that the pilot isn't your favorite episode of the show, because they're typically heavy with plot and characterization. That's by design! The pilot is designed to set up the characters – to make you love them – so that you can laugh at them later. The situation should always come first so that the comedy can grow organically from it. (Please note: "the situation," not "The Situation" from *Jersey Shore*. He should never come first at anything.)

Try not to look at scene structure and story as something that competes with comedy. Don't separate your "funny scenes" and your "plot scenes." Let them coexist in harmony. You might find you end up with a funnier script, as well as a better story.

> **Screenwriting Tip #92:**
>
> Always remember that funny trumps everything. Your script could be written in crayon with your name spelled wrong on the cover, but if it's genuinely, screamingly funny, none of that matters.

Way to contradict what I just said in the last tip, huh?

Well, sort of. You should strive to write a screenplay that's both funny *and* structurally sound. But if someone put a gun to your iPad and made you choose between funny and correct structure, you should probably pick funny. Because god knows you don't want anything to happen to your iPad.

This shouldn't be taken as an excuse to go off and write a poor script. Being funny at the expense of everything else is a Hail Mary pass – a last-ditch plan B, not something to aspire to. It's also incredibly rare for any-one to pull this off. The number of poorly written scripts that have been bought on the basis of humor alone could probably be counted on your fingers and toes.

One script that does come to mind is *Fuckbuddies* by Liz Meriwether (released as the film *No Strings Attached* with Natalie Portman). It's poorly structured and littered with spelling mistakes, the characters mostly sound the same, the scenes are way too long, the whole thing is way too long, and the original script has an unmarketable title.

It's also incredibly funny. Like, rolling on the floor, afraid you're going to asphyxiate funny. It ended up placing sixth on the 2008 Black List (an industry list of the most popular unproduced scripts of that year) and, of course, optioned and turned into a film with Natalie Portman. It kick-started Meriwether's career – she'd been a comedic playwright before that, which probably explains why the script doesn't follow the usual conven-tions of screenwriting.

If you're as naturally hilarious as Liz Meriwether, or if you're a successful stand-up comedian – the kind who just has to open her mouth to speak and people start rolling in the aisles – then you can close this book and step outside. Continue being freaking hilarious. It'll stand you in good stead.

But what about those of us who aren't successful comedic geniuses and aren't able to make people laugh with a snap of our fingers? We can still bend humor to our will. Our scripts still have to be well-written, but every little laugh we wring from our readers will act as a pardon for something else they didn't like, a love potion to make them look favorably on our screenplays and overlook their quirks. When it comes to comedy, every little bit counts.

So how do you write funny?

Well, if it was that easy, everyone would be doing it. The traditional advice for writers who want to learn how to be funny is to join a comedy improv troupe or to at least attend an improv class or two. This seems to

work for many people, and I can see why. Forcing yourself to stand in front of your peers and make them laugh must be an illuminating experience.

Me, I choose the easy way. I follow funny people on Twitter.

No, really. You'd be surprised how many comedians and comedic actors use Twitter. And not just once or twice a day. They use it compulsively. Twitter's become almost a de facto testing ground among many comedians for material that they're not sure about, or that they want feedback on, or even just for spontaneous exercising of the comedic muscles. You can learn by following these girls and guys and reading what they're talking about. For very popular comedians, you can even get a rough metric of how popular certain jokes are by the number of retweets on a given joke.

When you're ready for the next step, why not start your own comedic Twitter account? You could be the next "Shit My Dad Says" … or your jokes could sink like a stone. Either way, you'll get some valuable knowledge about how to write comedy.

For more general comedy-writing advice (or maybe you just don't like Twitter, you Luddite, you), try this all-purpose aphorism: comedy is surprising. Good comedy is a little like horror, in that it sneaks up on us and hits us where we live. It's not something we're expecting to hear. It skews our perception sideways, makes us see something we haven't seen before – so we laugh.

That's why people will say that a joke or comedian they liked was "random" – they mean they didn't understand it at the moment they heard it. Then they got it, and they laughed. It was a phrase or a juxtaposition or an aspect of a character that they'd never encountered before, and it tickled their brains in just the right way. In other words, it was surprising.

The flipside of this is the unsurprising joke – the lazy, tired old gag that nevertheless occasionally succeeds in grabbing a laugh because it utilizes a well-worn pathway to the brain. These are the jokes based on stereotypes and pop culture references. We laugh because we've laughed at these things before.

Maybe you can tell which kind of humor I prefer. And it's not just me. The slush piles are full of lazy jokes, jokes that wrote themselves, jokes for which the writer clearly did nothing more than insert Subject A into Punchline Format B. On the other hand, the Black List and the spec sales reports are full of the first kind of joke – the clever, uncategorizable breed of comedy that comes from the writer's own mind and heart.

Here's another bit of advice: comedy is fun. If you're not laughing as you're writing, it's probably not funny. If you have to go the Internet to look up the name of that one actor for a pop culture reference joke, it's probably not funny. If you're not engrossed in the characters – really hearing them say the joke, *loving* the fact that they're saying it – again, it's probably not very funny.

Put yourself in this mindset: *everything that jumps into my brain is right.* (This is how comedy show writers' rooms work, by the way – writers are encouraged to throw any and all ideas out there, even the stupid ones. Especially the stupid ones.) If you're having fun, really grooving on the characters and the scene you wrote for them, then weird jokes are probably going to pop into your head unbidden.

Don't censor them – just roll with it. Write it all down, even if the characters blab on for pages and pages. You can edit it later. But for now you need to save everything, because there might be a gem in there. Something that came straight from your subconscious. Something that makes you laugh every time you read it, even if you've read it a dozen times already. That's the kind of joke you want to keep.

Now you know the rule: being funny makes up for a lot of problems in a comedy. It gets readers on your side and causes them to overlook other things in the script that may not be so good.

The funny thing is (get it?), this rule of thumb applies to other genres, too. *Paranormal Activity* is slow-paced, has two fairly unlikable characters, looks like it was made for three dollars and was. It's also soil-yourself scary, which renders all those other problems moot. And *Avatar* is complete and utter nonsense, but it gets a pass by virtue of looking incredibly beautiful in 3D (*Avatar* is its own genre, you see – the "half-billion-dollar 3D CG James Cameron extravaganza"; I expect we'll be seeing more from this fledgling genre soon).

The moral is this: you can cover up screenwriting flaws by piling on more genre-y goodness. Just remember that this cover-up job can go only so far.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #93:
>
> Write scripts in the same genres you watch, love, quote, and buy the Criterion DVDs of. If you don't love horror movies or romantic comedies, why are you trying to write one?

It might not be the Criterion discs. Maybe you buy the iTunes downloads instead. Perhaps you loved that one movie so much you went back to the cinema to see it seven more times. Or maybe you constantly evangelize to your friends about that show you're obsessed with, lending the full DVD set out to anyone who wants it.

However you happen to express your love, the fact remains that you enjoy some genres more than others. You make space on your DVR and time out of your schedule to see shows and films in your favorite genres. Conversely, there are some genres that you can't stand. You'll watch them if you have to, but they'd never be your first choice.

So why would anyone be crazy enough to write a screenplay in a genre they don't like?

There are plenty of reasons, most of them stupid. Writers sometimes get weird notions in their head, like "Hollywood is only buying comedies right now, so I have to write a comedy to have a chance on the spec market" or "Horror is cheap to produce, so there's a chance a small production company will buy my script if they think they can shoot it for nothing."

Here's why that makes no sense:

It's a waste of time. At least a month to develop the idea, the characters, and the outline. Probably at least two months to write the first draft. Let's be generous and say two months of rewrite work to get the script up to a decent standard. That is *five freaking months*. Do you really want to be living and breathing a project you don't like for five months? That's five months of forcing yourself to be funny when you don't feel funny, or forcing suspense when you'd rather just kick back and write a romance.

I don't know about you, but that would drive me insane. And at the end of it, all you have to show for your efforts is a script you don't love.

You can't chase the market. Not only is the feature film spec script market incredibly small – around a hundred sales a year at the very most – it's also a moving target. You'd have to be a lunatic or a genius (or Lex Luthor, lunatic genius) to believe that you could accurately predict what the next "hot" genre will be. If you just go by what's popular now, you'll fail spectacularly.

For example, early 2011 saw a boom in *Twilight*-style supernatural teen thrillers, such as *Red Riding Hood*, *I Am Number Four*, and *The Hunger Games*. The problem is that those scripts were bought at least a year before the films

were made. Then you take into account release dates and marketing building up to a movie's release, and you realize that by writing a teen thriller spec right now, you'd be aiming at a window that probably closed a year and a half ago. It's pointless to look at the market. Go with your heart instead.

That's films, though; television's a little different. You *can* actually chase the market in television, to some degree. For instance, the fashion this season might be for male-driven procedurals about cops with special abilities who deal with weekly stories, plus a light serial component (just kidding – those are always in fashion!). If you knew the networks were buying pilots like these, you might have time to dust off an already written script, give it a polish, and send it out.

But here's the thing: you'd be competing with the legions of showrunners and staffed writers who do this dance twice a year. As an unknown writer, what hope do you have against them? It's much better to write something unique and different. Go *against* the flow of what's popular this season, and you stand a chance of getting noticed amidst a sea of private practicing mentalist criminal investigators.

Ignorance will get you nowhere. If you don't know your genre, you're going to make all the obvious mistakes. There's a story about a young writer who comes in to a general meeting with a network executive. He pitches a TV pilot, and it's just terrible – a bad idea, littered with clichés, and just not a good fit for the network. The exec stops him and says, "I can't really picture this show. What's it like? What other shows would you compare it to?" The writer replies, "Oh, I don't know. I don't watch television. In fact, I don't even own a TV." The executive's response isn't recorded, but I'm guessing it was, "Get the hell out of my office."

If you write genres you don't watch, you won't have the necessary background knowledge to know what's been done, what works, and what doesn't.

You will be branded with it. It's a sad fact, but if you ever have any success in the industry, you will be pigeonholed by that success. The genre you break in with is the genre you'll be expected to continue writing. Everybody will remember the last thing you did, and attempts to deviate from that last thing will be met with confusion or indifference. The best-case scenario is that you write exactly what you think they want, and you finally reach that shining plateau of moderate success … only to find out that you've just made a name for yourself as "the action girl" or "the comedy guy" or whatever your least-favorite genre happens to be. So choose the genre of that first spec script wisely.

There you go – four compelling reasons to not write screenplays in genres you don't love. Anyway, there are more important things in life than outcome and reward. Wouldn't you rather follow your bliss?

> **Screenwriting Tip #94:**
>
> Add more genre. If you're writing comedy, dedicate an entire rewrite to adding more jokes. If you're writing horror, up the levels of dread in every scene, and so on. Make the genre obvious on every single page.

This one's pretty self-explanatory. You already know that you should hit the reader with some pure genre goodness in the first few pages – open with jokes for a comedy, blood for a horror, sweeping battlefield vistas for a historical epic, and so on – because not only does it wake them up, but it also locks them into a certain tone and style. They don't have to cast about, trying to figure out what sort of game you're playing. They just have to get on board the roller coaster of your script.

Here's something you may not know: you can do this for *every page* of your script, not just the first ten.

Ask yourself this: if a reader opened your screenplay at any random page, would she be able to guess the genre? You don't necessarily have to cram a joke or a horrific murder-beast attack into every single page. What you *can* do is make sure that your tone is consistent with your genre throughout the script.

If you're writing a western, make your dialog and action lines spare and stoic and make your physical action vicious as a flashing knife. In a thriller, skip quickly over exposition, setup, and calm scenes, but draw out those lingering, suspenseful moments. In a comedy, be a little goofy in your action lines; maybe even address the reader directly every now and then. The more genre you can inject into your script, the stronger it'll be – and the more commercially viable.

Ah, but what if you're writing a "hybrid" genre? A horror-comedy, "dramedy," sci-fi western, or something along those lines? In that case, I have some bad news. The unfortunate fact is that hybrid genre films tend not to do as well as straight-up, pure genre flicks – not because audiences are stupid, but because marketing is hard.

It's easy to sell a pure genre film – you just concentrate on the explosions, the jokes, the teenagers being stalked by shadowy monsters, or whatever the film's *raison d'être* happens to be. A hybrid is harder. In the case of, say, a horror-comedy, marketing teams will sometimes create multiple trailers: one emphasizing the comedy, the other emphasizing the scares. This approach can result in audience confusion regarding what kind of movie they're actually going to see.

But that confusion can really be traced all the way back to the film's initial writer. It's simply harder to maintain a coherent tone when your script is a mashup of multiple genres. Sometimes it goes fantastically well and the new multigenre script feels like a magical, alchemical mix of its constituent parts. Other times … well, other times you get *Howard the Duck*.

Of course, there are some great and commercially successful hybrid movies. But for every *Rush Hour* there is a *Cop Out*; for every *Shaun of the Dead* a *Jennifer's Body*. Hell, even Shane Black struggles with this stuff – check out *Long Kiss Goodnight*, which is equal parts action, comedy, romantic comedy, and spy thriller but somehow ends up feeling like half of a great film.

Don't limit yourself as a writer by passing on a difficult hybrid genre concept. Just go into it with the knowledge that hybrids have a higher degree of difficulty. They're simply harder to pull off than "pure" genre scripts, requiring a lot more work to create a consistent tone.

One thing I will say, though: don't write a "weird west" (western meets sci-fi or horror) spec. For some reason, there are always tons of these floating around Hollywood, despite their well-known reputation as career-killers and financial black holes. Every few years, some poor producer forgets why they don't make these kinds of scripts. Then a *Wild Wild West* or a *Jonah Hex* happens, and everyone remembers. By all means, write a weird west script if that's what you love, but don't be offended when nobody wants to read it.

Screenwriting Tip #95:

Write something in the genre that most intimidates you. You might be surprised to learn that you're funny/scary/able to relate to the opposite sex.

Screenwriting Tip #96:

If you're writing a thriller, the suspense has to be there from the start, even if it's something as innocuous as the protagonist desperately trying to get his kids to school on time. Don't start at zero and accelerate – instead, start tense and build higher.

Screenwriting Tip #97:

If your script's a comedy, open with a joke on Page One. Otherwise you're like the stand-up comedian who opens her routine by coughing nervously and asking how everybody's evening is going.

Screenwriting Tip #98:

If *Family Guy* has taught us anything, it's that pop culture references are not necessarily the same thing as jokes.

Screenwriting Tip #99:

Don't follow comedy trends. If there's anything worse than recycled dick or poop jokes, it's recycled dick or poop jokes for which the writer's heart obviously wasn't in it.

Productivity: Writing Equals Ass on Chair (So Buy a Decent Chair)

They say being a parent is 90 percent just turning up, and the same is true of screenwriting. You can't do anything if you're not parked in that chair in front of the computer. Once you're parked in that chair, you can't write anything if you're staring out the window, catching up on your email, or trawling coupon sites for a good deal on artisanal cupcakes.

The Internet is a distraction, sure. But so is *everything* when you're trying to avoid writing. It's not because you're bored, and it's not because you don't dearly want to get this story written. It's because you're scared. That's understandable, but it's not a valid excuse. Snap out of it. Focus in. Harden up. It's time to get the work done.

Screenwriting Tips, You Hack

> **Screenwriting Tip #100:**
> The point of a first draft is just to exist. Nobody should ever spend more than three months on a first draft unless they're hand-chiseling it on a stone tablet.

The psychological process of writing the first draft follows a predictable arc.

At first it feels like love in the springtime – your concept's strong, your characters are speaking to you, Act 1 is rocketing along; look at you – you're a screenwriter, and it feels great! Then Act 2 arrives, and things get dark. You've lost track of your subplots; your protagonist is bouncing around aimlessly from plot point to plot point; and who are all these people in your script, and what do they want? By the time you finally arrive at "FADE OUT," you've forgotten why you thought this was a good idea in the first place.

This struggle is demoralizing and draining. It's bad for your mental health, but most important, it makes it that much harder to face the rewrite process. This is what leads so many young writers to throw up their hands and send out their first draft (perhaps after a bare minimum of rewriting) while crossing their fingers and hoping against hope that somebody will notice their "hidden potential." This rarely works because, well, screenwriting *is* rewriting. And insufficient rewriting is the number-one cause of shitty scripts.

Here's my suggestion: burn through that first draft as fast as you can. Just get it done. The faster you finish it, the faster you can get on with the real work – rewriting. So how do you finish the first draft as quickly as possible?

Well, you could pretend you're possessed by the ghost of Hunter S. Thompson, go on a crazed coke- and meth-fueled bender and knock out your entire first draft in seventy-two hours. Sadly, for legal reasons, I can't recommend that you do that. But these tips might be the next best thing.

Write the easiest version of every scene.

Subtext is hard. Like, *really* hard. Trying to deal with unconscious or unarticulated desires on top of more overt character motivations is just confusing as hell. Yet teachers and screenwriting advice book authors are always telling us that our scenes should be built upon layers of subtext – that they must contain "inner goals" and "reversals of expectation" – or else they'll wither on the page. Who do those people think they are?

Okay, so they may have a point. All that stuff makes for better scenes. But sometimes, let's be honest, we don't know the characters and their motivations well enough to be layering those subtleties into the first draft. If we sat there trying to come up with the fanciest, most intricate and interesting version of each scene, we'd become totally paralyzed and write nothing.

Instead: write the easiest version of the scene. The scene still has to contain conflict, but make it the simplest version of that conflict. Can't think of a clever way for the protagonist to escape the villain's death-trap? Have him escape the dumb way. You'll have plenty of time to make it brilliant during the rewrite.

Dialog first, then action.

I don't know about you – perhaps I'm a little dimmer than most – but I find switching gears between action lines and dialog to be quite mentally taxing. Constantly jumping between terse descriptive prose and, say, a Southern vernacular speech pattern is hard on the brain (it's even worse if you have multiple characters in a scene who all speak in a different style). It wears you down over time, and it slows the pace of your writing.

The solution? When you come to a new scene, write the scene heading, and then *write all the dialog first*. Don't write in any action at all – go full Shakespeare on its ass. Then, when you've got the dialog hashed out for the entire scene, go back and fill in the blanks with action. Not only does this method eliminate brain strain from switching between writing styles, but it also allows you to clearly map out the arc and pacing of the scene.

This tip doesn't work for all genres. You'll find it's of limited use when scripting, say, an action film or a thriller. But for comedies, dramas, and other talky scripts, it's a godsend.

Strip your action lines down to the bone.

Adverbs and adjectives. Who needs them? I don't know if you've noticed, but our Anglo-Saxon linguistic forbears left us some really strong, powerful, all-round excellent verbs and nouns. They're so good, in fact, that we wielders of English can easily build elegant, multilayered sentences without resorting to elaborate clauses or two-dollar words. Take *that*, French.

But maybe you're not into the whole brevity thing. Maybe you like to labor over your action lines. In that case, my advice to you is: don't do it on the first draft. Just write the simplest form of every sentence. Remember, the heart of your story isn't your sentence structure; it's your protagonist's actions.

Go back and add the foreshadowing later.

We've all been there. You start writing that pivotal, emotional scene in Act 3, and you realize: this would have a much bigger emotional impact if these two characters had talked to each other about their past. Or if they'd been lovers. Or if their mentor had left them a postcard warning them about the situation, or what have you.

When you realize this – that you could enrich the scene you're currently writing by setting it up earlier in the script – your first instinct will be to dive back to an earlier act and start tinkering. Don't. Resist the urge. Instead, write the current scene as if that early foreshadowing is already in place. *Then* go back and add it in the rewrite.

If it helps, think of this trick as being a bit like the time travel in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* – Bill and Ted need the keys to the police station, so they trust that their future selves will remember to go back in time and leave the keys for them. And voilà – there they are! You can do this, too. Just make sure you don't forget to remember to go back in time … if you follow me.

But! Don't skimp on the emotional arc.

This is important. You can rush the first draft. You can write it as bare-bones as you like and trust that all the meaty stuff will come later in the rewrites. But the one thing your first draft must always contain is a strong arc for the protagonist. That's your guiding light – the backbone of your entire story. Without that, you're just typing sweet nothings into Final Draft.

Follow this advice and you'll have a finished first draft in no time. Congratulations! Now the real work begins.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #101:
> Write even when you really don't want to. Often that forced, no-fun, "I'd rather do laundry" writing turns out to be surprisingly good.

We've all been there. It's 9:00 p.m. on a Friday night. Your friends are all in the next room playing poker, or carousing at the local bar, or murdering orcs online, or whatever it is normal humans do on a Friday night. "Join us," they cry. "Come ante, carouse, and/or murder with us! Seriously, it's Friday night, girl. What's wrong with you?"

What's wrong with you is, of course, that you're a writer. You've got a deadline tomorrow, or you haven't made your daily target number of pages, or perhaps this is the only time of the day that you can find some time to yourself in which to write.

So you ignore your friends and stare at the computer screen instead. The cursor blinks. The hard drive spins. A vein bulges on your forehead as you stare at a new blank scene. You want to write. You *need* to write. But you cannot, for the life of you, get anything down on the page.

Why does this happen? Assuming it's not just sheer laziness, why does writing come so hard when you're in a bad mood or a distracted frame of mind?

Because you're worried that it's going to suck. After all, how can you do your best work under bad conditions? This stuff is coming straight from your brain, so if your brain's not right, surely the words won't be either?

Wrong. Let go of the concept of a magical state of mind, a wondrously inspired writing "zone" that you can slip into. It's a fantasy; it doesn't exist. When you're setting down your first draft, I don't care if you're blissfully, transcendentally inspired or staring hatefully at the screen while forcing out every word. It simply doesn't matter. Either way, it's probably going to suck.

Now, don't get me wrong. As you've learned, it's okay to suck because *everybody's* first draft sucks. Whether you're happy or frustrated at the time of writing, the first draft is still going to consist of whatever the first crap is that leaps into to your mind, and invariably it won't be very good.

In fact, you stand a better chance of writing usable first draft material when you *are* yelling at the screen and laboring over every word, because at least you're engaged and thinking. Compare to your happiest writing days when the words flow freely. Who knows what you're writing, and who cares if it's any good? It could be absolutely terrible, but you wouldn't know, you happy-writing bastard. In this way, cheerful, flowing writing is a little like religious ecstasy: it feels fantastic to you, but to everyone else you're just rolling around on the floor spouting gibberish.

So now you know – forced writing is good. Let go of the concept of "writer's block." It's fiction – an imaginary excuse. Electricians don't get

electrician's block, and lawyers don't get lawyer's block. You need to force yourself to write every single day, even when you don't want to.

How do you do that? Honestly, it varies from person to person. Some writers practice micro time management, structuring their work around half-hour writing "sprints." Others use rewards; they'll allow themselves chocolate or booze or something else after reaching a certain number of pages or scenes for the day. Neither of these techniques works particularly well for me. I prefer to use guilt.

Here's how it works. Step one: in the morning, when I turn on the computer, the *very first thing* I do is open the file for the script I'm working on. Before I check my email or read my RSS feeds, that file gets opened. Step two: I'm not allowed to close that file or shut down my computer until I've written something in it.

Sounds simple, but it works. On days when I really don't feel like writing, that open file will sit there in my computer's dock, taunting me. Procrastinate as I might, I know I'm only delaying the inevitable. So eventually I'll click over to that file and type something, anything, just so I can close it and make the damn thing go away. But of course, once I've typed one sentence, it's easy to type another, and another, and suddenly I'm writing whether I like it or not.

Personal psychological manipulation. Days and days of unfun, unglamorous hard work. Sitting alone in a darkened room while your friends play *Call of Duty* next door. Welcome to the wonderful life of a screenwriter.

Now keep typing.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #102:
>
> Don't just back up your data. Put your working file in your Dropbox (or other cloud storage service) folder and keep it there. Ta-da – your script is now immune from hard drive failure.

Hard drives – the spinning kind, at least – are pretty much designed to fail. If your computer is older than about three years, your hard drive and all the data on it are living on borrowed time. Cloud storage is free and insanely simple. If you aren't using it already, the joke's on you.

Dropbox (or other cloud services like it – SpiderOak is a good open-source alternative) can also be used as a free, idiot-proof file sync between different writing machines. If you've got a netbook as well as a primary computer, or a tablet and a primary computer (or maybe even all three, in which case you have a serious gadget-buying problem. Also? I'm jealous), you'll want to have the same Dropbox account active on all your devices. That way, when you start to get serious crotch-rash from sitting at your main computer for six hours straight, you can walk into the next room, pick up your secondary device and immediately continue from where you left off. Hey, I never said screenwriting was glamorous.

This trick is particularly useful if you work with a writing partner. Just create a mutual Dropbox account on each writer's machine. *Et voilà*, your script will always be in sync with your partner-in-crime's latest changes.

However, this system might break down if you and your writing partner have a habit of working on your script *at the same time*. In this case, I recommend something like Google Docs or Scripped.com. New iterations of Final Draft also have a function called "Collabowriter" that accomplishes this.

But if you're a real paranoid delusional nutjob (you're a writer, hello), you may worry about hard drive failure *and* loss of access to cloud storage. Hey, it could happen – the company might shut down overnight or something. You never know. Fear not – just buy a small, cheap, solid-state USB stick from a reliable brand like Kingston or SanDisk. Copy your data onto that stick once a week or thereabouts, and you can rest easy. I can't do anything about the black helicopters that are following you, though. They're your problem.

Hey, while we're on the subject of technology, I should probably talk about screenwriting software. There's really not much to say – all the major brands are well-known, and they all offer comparable features and stability. The only thing they're not comparable on is price, which is why, if you haven't already selected your software, you should probably choose Celtx.

You see, Celtx is free, as in it costs nothing and is available to everyone, everywhere. It's also built upon free (as in freedom), open-source software.

That may mean nothing to you, but it's a noble attribute that makes Celtx worthy of your support. I won't bore you with the details here; Google "open source" if you want to learn more.

Celtx also makes more sense for more writers around the world than other competing programs. Online writing services like Scripped.com assume that you'll have constant, cheap access to the Internet, which just isn't the case for all international writers. Final Draft actually requires you to phone the United States just to activate the software you paid for. Their touted features include phone support (a U.S. number) and live chat support (available only during U.S. office hours). Celtx, on the other hand, is free and international, and it just works. I say try it out – if you find it's not for you, you haven't lost anything but time.

> **Screenwriting Tip #103:**
>
> Juggle as many ongoing projects, half-formed ideas, job applications, and query letters as you can reasonably handle. More lottery tickets means more chances to win.

As any poker player will tell you, playing conservatively will get you absolutely nowhere. Sure, you'll muddle along for a little while, but eventually your stakes will dwindle away to nothing and you'll be asked to kindly leave the table. The only way to win big is to play big – by bluffing, pushing your luck, and generally taking calculated risks.

As a writer, you also have to take risks. Pop quiz, hot shot:

A friend of yours is a director. She calls you up and says she wants to hire you to write a film for her. She won't need you to start for another month, but hopefully by then she can get the funding and investment needed to pay you a proper fee. Do you:

A: Start writing the film immediately. Why not get a head start on it?

B: Kick back and do absolutely no writing for a month. You've got a guaranteed gig coming up – why strain yourself now? Start checking eBay daily for that new jet-ski you've been wanting.

C: Tell your friend, "Thanks for thinking of me. I'd love to do it. Give me a call in a month when the funding comes through." Then hang up the phone and continue on with your life as if nothing has changed.

If you answered anything other than C, you're not going to last long in this business.

The unfortunate reality is that film and television are built entirely out of bullshit, promises, and bullshit promises. Here's a good rule of thumb: assume that maybe three-quarters of all job offers you get will not amount to anything. That means under 25 percent of your plans will actually play out the way you want them to.

And the funny thing is that it's never the ones you expect. That pitch meeting you had set up with Steven Spielberg? It'll get cancelled at the last minute. That sketchy friend-of-a-friend who drunkenly gave you his business card in the bar last week? He'll end up introducing you to your first agent.

When things are as random and nebulous as this, you can't get attached to any one project or idea. Never, ever pour all your energy and hopes into one script – and if you do, make sure you've got the next one lined up and ready to go. Never wait by the phone (or email) waiting for somebody to contact you – you could be using that time to work on another project with an equally good chance of succeeding.

Nobody has guaranteed work any more. It's gotten to the point where even seasoned television writers – even *showrunners*, for god's sake – will write spec scripts in their spare time, because they never know when they're going to need them.

Every spec script, project, and plan is a lottery ticket. No one ticket is more important than any other – the game's random, remember? And the more lottery tickets you're holding, the better your chances of winning the lottery.

You can increase your chances by teaching yourself to write for other media. If you write only feature films, now's the time to try your hand at a television pilot. If you already do TV, why not switch it up and try comic books? Pick your craziest, highest-concept idea, reach out to a hungry young artist on the Internet, and away you go.

If you know some stage actors, why not try writing a play? If flash fiction and short stories are more your thing, try converting an old, unused film idea into prose. And if you have any programming knowledge at all, you might even have a go at writing your own videogame. (Actually, with tools like RPG Maker, you might not even need the programming knowledge.)

All of these options are potentially valuable lottery tickets, because as well as being worthwhile pursuits in their own right, they also make for interesting writing samples. If you were a manager, who would you be more interested in meeting – someone who writes only romantic comedy features and nothing else, or someone with a portfolio that includes plays, graphic novels, and published fiction?

Of course, the elephant in the room here is time, or lack thereof. How the hell are you supposed to write eighty different side projects when it's hard enough to find time for one or two major ones?

I can't give you an easy answer to that question, because there isn't one. The best I can do is tell you to kiss goodbye to your free time, your evenings, and your weekends, and don't expect to see them again for a few years. Even so, finding energy and motivation to come home and keep working after you've just pulled a full shift at your day job can be extremely difficult. I personally get a lot of mileage out of caffeine and guilt, but you'll discover your own fuel in time.

One possible drastic adjustment is quitting your full-time job for a casual one, leaving you with some income but a lot more time in which to write. You're going to want two things in order to pull off this trick: decent health care (sorry, Americans) and an understanding partner. In fact, many professional writers will tell you that their career would never have survived without the support of their long-suffering partner or spouse. If you're lucky enough to have found a good one, remember to tell them that you're going to be rich and famous one day, and that you promise to thank them first in your Oscar acceptance speech.

Screenwriting Tip #104:

'Write more" is not a very good New Year's Resolution. But "Finish the latest draft by Jan 15th" – now you're onto something.

Screenwriting Tip #105:

Are you planning on taking part in Script Frenzy, the annual community challenge to write a draft script in thirty days? If not, why the hell not? We could all use a little extra motivation.

Screenwriting Tip #106:

Don't spend more time making mp3 playlists for the project than actually writing the project.

Screenwriting Tip #107:

Don't let your health go when you're working on a script. Remaining hunched over a desk for twelve hours a day while slamming Doritos, energy drinks, and/or booze may help you get that draft finished, but try telling that to the paramedics as they're scissoring you out of your chair.

Screenwriting Tip #108:

Work on the project that excites you the most … unless you have a deadline for a different project, in which case you should use the exciting one to reward yourself after slogging through the boring one.

The Dark Point: Why Are You Doing This Again?

Sometimes – let's face it – writing blows. There will come a day when you just can't handle it any more. Every line of dialog will sound like gibberish; every scene will feel wrong in a way you can't explain. Your concept will seem patently ridiculous, and even your own outline won't make sense. The very thought of sitting down to type will make your head hurt.

Just know that you're not alone. Not only is this normal, it's nigh on mandatory for every screenwriter on every project since the golden age of Hollywood. The Dark Point comes to us just as surely as it comes to our protagonists. And like them, we endure it, we push through it, and we grow stronger.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #109:
> Watch your favorite movie at least once a year to remind yourself why you're doing this.

If you're reading this book, I already know a lot about you.

I know you're dedicated. You're not a dabbler; you don't do things half-assed. You've chosen to devote yourself to the enormous field of storytelling, which encompasses film, television, screenwriting, and a host of other related topics. And you want to know *everything* – even if that means watching every film and reading every book and blog post you can get your hands on.

I know you believe that art matters. And not just the kind of art that you have to go to a gallery to see – the kind that enters people's homes and shares their lives for a little while. The kind of art that you share with loved ones, or talk about with friends, or relax with alone. You believe "popular art" like film and TV is more than escapism, more than just an opiate for the masses – it's the defining culture of our time. You know it has the power to change the world, and you want to be worthy of that power some day.

And last, I know you shun the easy path. You're probably aware that you picked one of the most difficult professions in the world. You could have put your natural skill with language to work in a hundred other fields, from law to advertising to academia. Instead you picked the one with no health care, fixed salary, or proper unions, the one where nobody owes you anything and everybody competes for a tiny handful of jobs.

But that doesn't matter now. You're in this for the long haul. You'll do what it takes to succeed, because you can't imagine doing anything else.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you're only doing this because you think it'll make you a lot of money (in which case, I'm sorry, but you've been grossly mis-informed). But I don't think so. I don't think that's you. People persist with something as difficult as screenwriting only for irrational reasons, like love.

I know you love screenwriting. You know it, too.

But every now and then, you forget. The work gets too hard, the days feel too short, and there are a million other things you'd rather be doing than sitting in front of a computer putting words in the mouths of fictional characters. At these times, it's a good idea to step away. Take a day off every once in a while, or perhaps just an evening. Kick back with the drink and dessert of your choice and watch your favorite movie or TV show.

And by "favorite" I don't mean the new episode of *Mad Men* from last Sunday. I mean your *formative* film or series, the ones that made you realize you wanted to become a writer. I'm talking about the stories that live in the back of your brain – the ones that changed your life when you first saw them and now subtly influence everything you write. Mine are *Blade Runner* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. What are yours?

When the screenwriting grind gets you down – and it will – take the time to rewatch your own personal classics. When you go back to work the next day, you'll feel a lot better.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #110:
>
> Don't worry that you're getting too far away from the ideal movie in your head. Not only is that entirely normal, but it actually means you're making progress.

Nonwriters just don't get it. They think we're being boastful when we say that we can "see" the entire script perfectly in our mind's eye, and they think we're being melodramatic when we complain that the words on the page don't match the brilliant ideas in our head.

But you and I both know that this *does* happen. Nothing we write is ever quite as good as we imagined it would be. It's a crappy feeling, but it's something that comes with the territory when you're making art.

Yes, art – any kind of art. Painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, novelists, and poets sometimes feel the same way about their work as we do about ours: crappy, because it's not quite what they imagined it to be. And why wouldn't they feel bad? When an artist conceives of an idea for a project, they don't immediately think of the dirty, compromised, hacked-together version of that idea – they think of the best possible version, the Platonic ideal of the concept.

This is because Platonic ideals are quite easy to imagine. Just take an idea for a screenplay and then picture it moving the audience to tears with the raw power of its imagery and themes, the emotional intensity of its characters, and the sheer intellectual vision of the story! You can see it now, can't you?

Well, not really, because what you're imagining is an impossibility – an exaggerated cartoon version of a perfect screenplay. The truth is, no script (and no work of art) was ever that perfect. All of the most successful and highly regarded films of all time waded through rivers of crap to become what they are. *Apocalypse Now* almost murdered its lead actors. Nobody wanted to buy *Slumdog Millionaire*, let alone release it. The original draft of *Alien* featured a spectral psychic space octopus. And *Star Wars* used to be called *The Adventures of Luke Starkiller as taken from the Journal of the Whills, Saga I: The Star Wars*. Yes, really.

Great films, and great scripts, don't just spring fully formed out of your skull like Athena from the head of Zeus. There's nothing in there to spring. A script doesn't exist in any form, great or not, until you sit down and do the hard work of actually writing it. Your Platonic ideal is nothing more than a golden target, a battle standard to keep in your field of view as you're hacking your way across the battlefield. Your ideal script is also a useful dream – something to think about when you need that little extra hit of motivation.

But that ideal script is not your script. Your script is the one that exists in this reality, the one you get to share with the whole world. It'll be full of compromises, patched-up mistakes, clever revisions, and last-minute

additions, because as you worked on it, you will have realized that not everything about your ideal script was actually feasible. Certain changes had to be made, and they were all for the better because they allowed your script to get written. And a flawed script that actually exists is infinitely more valuable than a perfect script that lives only in your mind.

Don't fear that your real script is getting too far away from the one in your head. Be grateful that you have that ideal script to show you the way … then get back to work.

> **Screenwriting Tip #111:**
>
> The answers to most story problems are right there in Act 1, where you left them.

Writer's block is a myth.

Well, sure, it exists. But the way people usually think of it – as a bedeviling curse that stifles creativity and leaves the writer in a depressed fugue state – is romantic nonsense. We do get stuck while writing, but that's only because we don't know what happens next.

Sometimes you reach a point in the narrative where everything stops making sense. You've lost any sense of the protagonist's voice and you can't remember why she set out to do whatever she's supposed to be doing. You went off the outline twenty pages ago, and now you're flying blind with dark fog all around you. You know something needs to happen to move the plot along, but damned if you know what that is.

Relax. Deep breaths. This happens to everyone at some point. And the only solution is to go back to Act 1 and attack the problem at the root.

What you've got to understand is that problems as big as these (losing sense of the protagonist's motivation, mushy plot where things happen for no reason, etc.) aren't the kinds of things you can patch over with a new scene or a few additional lines of dialog. These are deep problems – iceberg-deep. All you're seeing are the symptoms of the problem, but there's a whole mass of issues floating just below the surface. What you need to do is go back to Act 1.

Really examine that first act, especially the early setup pages. Go even farther back and look at your own backstory and concept notes. Figure out what's absolutely vital to your story versus what you might have thrown in there because it seemed like a good idea at the time.

If you're lucky, you'll find the cause of the problem. And, unfortunately, it won't be an easy fix. It'll be something quite drastic. Two characters need to be rolled into one. The protagonist should clearly be a teacher, not a stockbroker. The romantic subplot should be with her best friend, not with the barista character you invented just to give her a love interest. Or maybe the whole thing is too absurd to play seriously, and the script should be a comedy instead.

These are major surgeries. But the thing is, if the changes are right – if you've correctly diagnosed the problem and identified the fix – it won't feel difficult or daunting at all. In fact, you'll find yourself inspired. You'll cheerfully dive back into your script with a scalpel and a blowtorch, because once you know what you have to do, all you'll be able to think about is fixing it.

Even a page 1 rewrite – the most dreaded of all rewrites, the mere thought of which is enough to reduce a normally stoic screenwriter to

tears – won't sound so bad to you, because you'll have the keys to the story again. You'll be back in control, and screenwriting will suddenly feel less like work and more like fun.

If you get stuck or lost, don't despair. You've just been given a unique opportunity to drastically improve your screenplay. Now go back to Act 1 and crank up that blowtorch.

Screenwriting Tip #112:

"I've been working on this script for two years" isn't a boast; it's a cry for help. If you can't finish a project, put it away and start one that you can finish.

Screenwriting Tip #113:

Remember when you were a kid and movies were beautiful, frightening, and transformative? Forget the rest of the world and write for that kid.

Screenwriting Tip #114:

Writing can be massively therapeutic. Just make sure to edit those angrily written scenes so that the antagonist isn't as obviously your annoying boss, neighbor, or housemate.

Screenwriting Tip #115:

Keep writing. When your first draft sucks, and you don't know how to fix it. When you've been rejected by every agent with an email address. When your boyfriend leaves and takes the cat with him. Keep writing.

Chapter | thirteen

Advanced Structure: Getting from Good to Great

Structure is like a trusty mountain guide. He's walked these trails a thousand times before and he never wavers, not even in the face of freezing rain and heavy snow. He's forgotten more about this rocky path than you'll ever know, and if you earn his respect, he'll share his deepest secrets with you.

(And that, dear reader, is what we call a "labored metaphor.")

Mountains aside, once you get comfortable with basic structure, you can start to pull off some clever new tricks. These are the sorts of techniques you should probably save for the rewrite – remember, the point of your first draft is just to get it done so you'll have something concrete to work on.

> **Screenwriting Tip #116:**
> Raise questions, drop hints, leave riddles half-solved — whatever it takes to keep them interested and turning the page. Novelists have a lot to teach us about this trick.

Imagine you're playing a game with the script reader, and that game is called Keep Them Reading at All Costs. Ideally, the reader who picks up your script will not put it down again until she's finished. When the phone rings, she ignores it. Her stomach growls, but there's no time for food, because she *has to see what happens on the next page*. You're communicating directly to that reader through your script, making her read at the pace you set. You're the puppetmaster and the reader is your own personal marionette.

Sounds good, right? And the best part is that all those tricks you use to keep the reader reading? They're also valuable narrative devices that will make your script more dramatic and your characters more dynamic and interesting.

But what about the slow parts of the story? Even a rollercoaster has boring points – slow uphill climbs and straight sections. How do you keep the reader's attention through those quieter parts of the script?

Well, you could make sure you always have some kind of action going on, no matter how calmly paced or exposition-heavy the scene is. In *Inception*, when Cobb wants to explain the fairly complicated rules of the dreamworld to Ariadne, he takes her inside the dreamworld to show her directly. Their conversation is mostly conflict-less exposition, but it's set against a backdrop of cool dream architecture, twisting streets, and exploding cafés. Interesting.

Or you could allow the audience to know something the characters don't know. Hitchcock believed that was the essence of suspense – when the audience knows that fate is coming to screw with the protagonist, but she remains painfully oblivious. Hitchcock's example was two people sitting at a café (hey, I'm sensing a theme here) having a perfectly average conversation … except that the audience knows there's a bomb under their table. The characters could be talking about any old crap, but the audience would still be on the edge of their seats, hanging on every word, waiting for the bomb to go off.

And then there's a third way, perhaps the trickiest of all: *don't* let the audience know something very important. This is called adding mystery, and it can be extremely effective if done right.

How do you inject mystery into your scripts? Let me count the ways:

If you don't read mystery novels, start. Novelists have been using mystery to keep readers on their toes ever since Edgar Allen Poe let an orangutan loose in a morgue. Conan Doyle, Hammett, and Chandler taught us to pay attention, trust nobody, and suspect everybody. But it's not

just mystery and crime genres that use this trick: the Song of Ice and Fire series opens by setting up an ambiguous supernatural enemy who is then barely explained. They're just constantly *there*, lurking on the fringes of the narrative, casting a shroud of mystery and tension over the entire story. In fiction, and in your script, the unseen and the mysterious can make the reader sit up and pay attention to the seemingly mundane.

Let things remain unsaid and unexplained. Two characters are meeting again after years apart. They used to be lovers, but now there's bad blood between them, and they both have secrets they'd rather not confide to the other. Now imagine you're writing the scene where they meet. You could tell the audience all of that information up front … *or* you could throw them in at the deep end – maybe even in the middle of the conversation – and let them try to work out what's going on.

Why are these two characters acting so evasive? Why are they avoiding talking about the past? What's up with the sexual tension between them? Readers and audiences absolutely *love* deducing the relationship between characters through watching their actions and listening to their dialog. It makes them feel like little Sherlocks – they get a thrill just by figuring it out. If you told them all that information before the scene started, you'd be denying them their fun.

Create paranoia. "*One of the people in this room is a murderer.*" "*There's a mole inside our unit.*" "*I'll work with him, but I don't trust him.*" Whenever the story throws doubt on the status of one of the main characters – good guy or bad guy? loyal or informer? – the audience sits up and takes notice. They start seeing every scene and hearing every line in a new light.

Drip-feed the audience. Give them what they want … but only a little at a time. In *Chinatown*, Gittes is always learning a little bit more about Evelyn, only to find that there are other, deeper mysteries lurking underneath. Eventually, though, you'll have to come out with the full secret or risk the audience feeling ripped off. When you hold out on the mystery too long, the relationship between you and the audience becomes adversarial. Just ask anyone who paid to watch *The X-Files* movie.

Learn from the best. Television handles mystery better than film, probably because it's easier to parcel out your secrets and reveals over twenty hours than over two. *Veronica Mars*, *Twin Peaks*, *The Prisoner*, and *Rubicon* are just a few shows that were built entirely around a central mystery but still managed to tell compelling stories on an episode-by-episode basis. Other, weaker shows tend to prop up poor episodes by dangling the prospect of revealed secrets in front of the audience. By studying strong mystery narratives, you can learn when to hide your hand and when to play.

Be ruthless in the rewrite. This is the quickest, easiest way to create a sense of mystery: just stop explaining everything. Writers always overestimate how much information and explanation the audience needs to appreciate the story. You would be blown away by how much an attentive reader and audience can infer from just a few lines. So why not test it out? Go brutal on the rewrite – cut explanation and leave hints; change obvious setups into subtle clues. Give the new rewrite to your favorite reader friends. Can they still follow the story? If yes, then congratulations – you just made your script leaner and stronger, *and* you've allowed your audience to feel more involved by cultivating a sense of mystery.

> **Screenwriting Tip #117:**
>
> If you give me the same information twice, I will assume it's a vital plot element. If you give me the same information three or more times, I will assume you're treating your audience like idiots.

This tip stems directly from the previous one about hints, suggestion, and mystery. There is an art to parceling out information to the reader. Get it right and they'll feel involved and invested. Get it wrong and they'll resent you for telling them what they already know.

Don't repeat when you don't have to. It's that simple. If you respect your readers' intelligence enough to assume that they heard you the first time, you don't need to tell them again. The temptation to repeat yourself will sometimes be overwhelming – do they realize that this is the same assassin from Act 1? Will they remember what happens if somebody touches the MacGuffin without reciting the sacred words? – but you must fight it. You're building a contract with the reader, and part of that is trusting them not to be a drooling moron.

Still, you can help ensure lack of drool by carefully foregrounding your most important facts so that the reader doesn't miss them the first time round. Make sure that the assassin's features are clearly described so they can remember her later. Emphasize that dialog in which the priest explains the horrible fate of those who touch the MacGuffin *sans* prayer. If you do your job and make that vital information stand out, the onus is on the reader to remember it.

That said, learn to recognize when it *is* necessary to repeat yourself. Sometimes there's no way to highlight or foreground a certain piece of information without being head-slappingly obvious that it will turn out to be important later (the classic example being the shoddily written episode of *Law & Order* that spends way too much time focusing on a seemingly insignificant character. Hint: he's not insignificant. He's the killer, duh). In this case, it may be necessary to remind the reader of an earlier piece of information that seemed innocuous at the time.

The same thing applies to a character we haven't seen in, say, fifteen pages or more. If that character makes a bid for the narrative spotlight and becomes suddenly important, you might want to remind the reader of who they are: "in walks Mary (whom Tobias met at the wedding in California)."

Still, if you find this happening a lot, it might be time to take a good, hard look at your structure. Does that character *really* need to disappear for so long that the reader forgets who she is?

Finally, try not to point out the blindingly obvious. I once read a script that contained the following line about a character riding his BMX bike: "He does a wheelie (a trick in which the rider rides the bike on one wheel)." What the hell kind of native English speaker doesn't know what a wheelie

is? Anyone who writes a line as thick as this is not only conveying a lack of respect for their readers, but is also breaking the unspoken contract that assumes that the writer and the reader are the same kind of person, with the same knowledge, the same hopes, fears, and desires. They're lecturing instead of conversing. In screenwriting, as in life, it pays to treat others the way you'd like to be treated. Unless, of course, you're a masochist.

Information management is hard because you're too close to your own material – you can't possibly experience it the way a new reader would. Remember: trust the reader, but use your judgment. A good rule of thumb is to assume that the reader is exactly as smart and attentive as you are.

> **Screenwriting Tip #118:**
>
> Give your scenes different shapes. Write some with hard outs (ending on a strong beat) and some with soft outs. Start some in the middle, or even skip to the end and show us the scene's aftermath.

One of the things that readers will frequently complain about is "repeating scenes" – when every scene seems to follow the exact same pattern of action, turn, and consequence. For example, in a sex comedy the protagonist might go to a bar to try and meet a guy … but she fails, so then she goes to a club … but *that* doesn't work out, so she goes to a friend's party … and on and on, ad nauseam.

In a thriller or procedural, this problem usually manifests as follows: (1) arrive at crime scene, (2) discover vital clue that leads to next crime scene, (3) go to 1.

This doesn't have to happen. Only you can break the cycle of boring, similarly shaped scenes. Go ahead, play around a bit in the rewrite. You've got all the time in the world to get this script perfect, so why not experiment a little? And besides, your first draft's probably ten pages too long – you've got to cut *something* out of it.

Treat it like a lab test: what happens if you cut away from this scene right after the turning point line of dialog, leaving the rest of the action unseen? Or what if you start this other scene a few pages later? Instead of showing the protagonist coming home, sitting down to dinner, and getting into an argument with her partner, why not open the scene with their argument in full swing? How does that change the pacing? Does the audience miss out on any vital information? How about the character development? Does it enhance or detract from the protagonist's arc?

You'll find the best scene shapes through your own experimentation, but here are some rough guidelines:

Cut in late to wake the reader up. Jumping into a scene in which the conflict is already ongoing is like a slap to the face. It forces the reader to pay attention and figure out exactly what's going on. Sometimes it's useful to write from the perspective of the protagonist's own consciousness – as when she wakes up in a hospital after being knocked out – allowing the audience to take in a new situation at the same time as the character.

At other times, it's simply used to skip the boring bits. Two people meet in a bar, and *bam* – cut straight to them making out on the couch at home. The audience doesn't need to see the cab ride, the drinking, or even the flirtation, because they're smart enough to piece together what happened from the new information given to them. Plus, they'll enjoy the little flash of cognitive dissonance that comes with an unexpected temporal jolt.

Get out late to emphasize a point. Why would you want to show a little extra at the end of a scene – the calm after a battle, or a character brooding after an argument with her friend? Usually it's because the writer wants to extend an emotional beat just that little bit further. If, say, an argument ends with one character storming out but the scene lingers on the remaining character, it's because the writer wanted the reader/audience to feel what that remaining character is feeling or to remember some key aspect of their character that the argument just touched on. Which is probably something like, "Oh god, I can't believe she walked out on me. Doesn't she know I have abandonment issues?"

Mad Men is the undisputed king of scenes that hang around and leave late. Try watching that show and taking a shot whenever a scene ends with Don Draper alone, pouring himself some booze from his office stash. Actually no, don't do that – I don't want your death by alcohol poisoning on my conscience.

Soft outs are generally more about emotion. As a corollary to the previous point, scenes that end on a soft out (i.e., a character moment, not a plot development) are usually best when you want to make an emotional point. In features, they're most useful in Act 1 or during the Dark Point, when you need the reader to really feel for and identify with the protagonist. On the other hand …

Hard outs are generally more about pacing. A hard out ("We've got him cornered inside the warehouse – let's go!" or "I'm sorry. We did all we could, but you'll never be able to walk again") at the end of a scene is generally used for purposes of impact and pacing. They speed the plot along by ending on key plot points or turning points. Sometimes they can be followed by a new scene that cuts in late, *in media res*, so that while the audience is reeling from the hard out, they're hit doubly hard by the action in the next scene. This is one of the easiest ways to achieve faster pacing. If you're trying to improve the pacing in your rewrite, hard outs will quickly become your new best friends.

There's no perfect scene shape for every situation, and you'll find that certain kinds of scenes are more suited to certain genres. Just make sure to not write the same kind of scene over and over again. Variety is the spice of life, and lack of variety can make your screenplay look about as appetizing as cold porridge.

Screenwriting Tip #119:

"Romantic subplot" is just the name of a structural element. It doesn't necessarily mean "romance." If it makes no sense for two characters to hook up in Act 3, don't force them.

Screenwriting Tip #120:

Don't sabotage your own pacing by cutting directly from tense scenes to boring ones.

Screenwriting Tip #121:

Unlike film protagonists, the goal of TV protagonists is often to preserve the status quo. House wants to keep popping pills forever, Don Draper wants to keep living another man's life, and so on.

Screenwriting Tip #122:

Quick – make a list of everything your protagonist would do to achieve her ultimate goal. Lie to strangers? Lie to loved ones? Suffer, sacrifice, cheat, steal? Kill? Now look at the list and ask yourself: how many of these happen in my script?

Screenwriting Tip #123:

Don't start a sentence with the word "then," even in clipped, action-heavy scenes. It screws up the pace of the read completely.

Screenwriting Tip #124:

Here's a quick and dirty rule for action paragraphs: nothing longer than three lines. Try to stick to it – you'll be amazed how economical your description becomes.

Rewriting: Now the Real Work Begins

You'll hear people say "writing is rewriting," but you won't quite understand or believe it until you do it yourself. If you thought writing that scene was hard, try staring at it for hours trying to diagnose why it doesn't work.

Sometimes rewriting is teeth-grittingly unfun – you feel like you're playing Jenga with something that took you months of hard work to assemble. Other times, though – when a single tiny change or cut brings an entire scene into sudden clarity, like pulling focus on a camera – rewriting can make you feel like a genius at play.

Screenwriting Tips, You Hack

> **Screenwriting Tip #125:**
>
> Don't change a few lines of dialog and pretend it's a whole new draft. When you half-ass the rewrite, you're screwing yourself only.

You finished the latest draft. You let it sit for a week or so. You even sent it off to friends and colleagues and got some valuable feedback.

Now it's time to rewrite. *But …*

There's that creeping sense of doubt. You don't want to do the work, so you start to wonder whether the work is really necessary. Maybe your first draft is great? Maybe your friends' critiques are wrong – or hell, maybe they're just jealous of your amazing draft?

What if you sent your script out now – would it be good enough to get you an agent or a manager? And hey, maybe you don't want to send it out or show it to anyone? Couldn't you just say it's done and move on to the next thing?

No, no, and no. Your draft is not "good enough," not for other people and not for you. If you don't take the time to do a proper and thorough rewrite, you're screwing yourself out of a major part of the screenwriting process. If you never rewrite, *you will never get better as a writer*. You need to do it, and you need to do it properly. End of story.

So that's the bad news. Here's the good news: rewriting's not quite as hard as everyone says.

Not when compared to outlining or writing the first draft, it's not. Never again will you have to face the tyranny of the blank page – it's all right there for you to work with. You won't have the uncertainty of not knowing quite where you're going because you'll always have the rest of the script there to serve as a roadmap.

Even when you're performing major cuts or writing an entirely new scene, you'll be surrounded on all sides by already written scenes – your own personal structural safety net. The story exists. You wrote it down. And working on it will never again be as scary as it was during the first draft.

The only thing hard about rewriting is that it requires a lot of time and a great deal of concentration. No longer will you be able to enjoy flights of fancy or inspired, semi-automatic writing ("It was like the characters were speaking to me!"). Instead you'll have to carefully and rigorously consider every single word, from dialog to scene description to action.

Mark Twain said, "Write drunk and edit sober." He meant that you can be as loose and carefree as you want in the first draft as long as you treat the rewrite with all the seriousness of an IRS audit. Once, you might have been a divine medium. But now? Now, you're an engineer.

Many writers rebel against this, for obvious reasons. We got into this game for the chance to express ourselves creatively, and now we have to work hard and make sacrifices? Man, if we wanted a real job, we would have become a real estate agent or a shady stock broker.

Fight that angry little voice. Suppress that urge to slack off on the rewrite. Improving and fine-tuning your script is not homework or a mindless office job that you can half-ass your way through. Rewriting is part of your art, and all art involves a little bit of suffering. Just be glad you don't have to cut off your ear.

So what are you actually trying to accomplish in a rewrite? Well, every rewrite has a different objective – your first pass might be about tying together the protagonist's motivations and choices, and the next pass might focus entirely on the jokes. But in general, here's what you're trying to do:

Fix errors. Yeah, this scene has made no sense ever since you removed that subplot. These typos and grammatical problems need to be fixed. And this section? It's possible you were taking Mark Twain's "write drunk" advice very seriously when you wrote this bit. The chief job of the rewrite is to fix those embarrassing errors that you would never want to show to anybody.

Lose what doesn't work. Sometimes the funniest, coolest scene in your script is the one that totally screws your pacing. Or maybe, try as you might, you just couldn't integrate your favorite secondary character into the main plot. Be ruthless. If it doesn't quite work, and you don't know how to fix it, it's probably just slowing you down.

Bring it all back to the protagonist. The number one problem with all amateur spec scripts – the ubiquitous, mutating flu virus of the screenwriting slush pile – is the weak protagonist. Plot and action are happening around her, but the protagonist herself is a void. Go back and make sure every single act break and turning point ties into the protagonist's emotional state in the strongest way possible.

Make sure the characters sound like themselves. Often it takes the experience of writing the first draft for you to "find" the characters' voices. For instance: back in Act 1, you weren't quite sure how the love interest was supposed to speak, so you wrote him as wordy and boastful. But by Act 3 you had a much better handle on his character, and you switched to writing him as shy and guarded. Use the rewrite to go back and fix that early dialog so that all the characters sound the way they should.

Add what's missing. No sense of threat or stakes in Act 2? You'll want to add a ticking clock. Antagonist's plans and motivation opaque? Add her into a few more scenes and give her more dialog. Identify what's missing in your script and add it in. After all, you've got plenty of room now that you cut all the stuff that wasn't working.

Once you've achieved all these objectives, you've got yourself a second draft. Congratulations … but you're not finished. That was just the *first* rewrite. It might take you five, ten, or even twenty rewrites to get your script to where it needs to be.

If you think you can sit down and bang that out in a few hours, then good luck to you. But ultimately, you're not fooling anybody but yourself. Comprehensive rewrites take time, concentration, and dedication. If you find yours is a breeze, you're probably doing it wrong.

> **Screenwriting Tip #126:**
>
> Know how to use the Find function? Great! Then you know how to go through your script and remove every single use of the word "is" in your action lines.

The use of passive writing is making your script weaker. It is cheapening your action and slowing down your pacing. It really is sucking –

Ahem. Excuse me. Let's try that again:

Passive writing makes your script weaker. It cheapens your action and slows down your pacing. It really sucks, as that horrible first paragraph ably demonstrates, and it has no business being in your screenplay.

Unfortunately, it's probably *already* in there, somewhere. It's very hard to completely avoid passive writing when writing a first draft. It's a bit like studiously trying to avoid the latest manufactured teen pop star – you know you'll eventually have to give up and Google the little monster just so you can get by in polite society.

What are we talking about when we talk about passive writing? This kind of garbage:

Agent Trask watches the gunman entering the bank, ordering the customers to the ground, vaulting over the barrier and holding his gun to the manager's head.

Or:

The party is heating up. Lynn and Kate are doing tequila shots, Angie and Terry are making out in the corner, and Dave is puking into the pot-plants.

See how it lacks any kind of immediacy? There's no forward momentum. The pace of the prose is completely out of whack because we're now an instant *behind* the moment ("it is happening") rather than *in* the moment ("it happens").

This is easily fixed:

Agent Trask watches as the gunman enters the bank, orders the customers to the ground, vaults over the barrier, and holds his gun to the manager's head.

And:

The party heats up. Lynn and Kate do tequila shots, Angie and Terry make out in the corner, and Dave pukes into the pot-plants.

You'll notice that the Find function won't actually pick up all these instances of passive writing, because not all of them involve a word like "is" or "are." The Find function is a good start, but you'll probably have to go through your script page by page and manually fix the remaining errors.

Believe me, it'll be worth it. You don't want this kind of sloppy, laid-back writing bogging down your screenplay.

However (and you just knew there was a caveat coming, didn't you?), there are times when passive writing is not only appropriate but also useful. It works as a legitimate stylistic choice on those rare occasions when the writer actually wants to slow down the pace of the action and put the reader at a slight remove from the script's events.

When would you ever want to do that? Maybe in action scenes. Try the following on for size:

> The gunman turns – sees Agent Trask standing there. Trask goes for his pistol and –

> <u>Time stops</u>.

> The vault alarm RINGING. The two men staring each other down. Customers SCREAMING, running for the exits. Trask raising his gun, as –

> The gunman <u>dives</u> behind the vault door.

See how the passive use of "it is happening" lines creates a sense of being outside the moment? It can be used to sneakily suggest slow-motion or rubber-banding of time without actually having to write "SLO-MO."

If you're clever – and I know you are – I'm sure you'll be able to come up with other interesting uses for passive action writing. With some practice, you'll be able to turn an annoying error that distances the reader and slows down the read into a smart stylistic choice.

As long as you don't write, "Dave is puking," I think we'll be fine.

> **Screenwriting Tip #127:**
>
> Characters not meshing properly with the theme? Go back and change their backstory and motivations so that they do. Remember, you're allowed to change anything at any time – you're the writer.

Every writing book will tell you that the plot must grow organically from the protagonist. Who she is, what she wants, and what she's willing to do to get it – these are the seeds that grow into a story. When it comes to rewriting, if you change a story element, you'd better damn well show how that change affects the protagonist.

But here's a dirty little secret that they don't tell you: *you can reverse-engineer character from plot*. That's right – you can go back and change a character so that she fits into the events of the script you've already written.

Let's say your story is a drama, the themes of which deal with the vagaries of fate and chance. You've written your story so that the protagonist's boyfriend is killed in a car crash during the Dark Point. The scene has a huge emotional impact on her … but it just seems so out-of-left-field. It doesn't quite fit with the protagonist's arc – it's just a big old sad thing that happens. How do you fix this?

You go back and change it so that the protagonist's parents died in a similar crash, way back in the mists of her backstory. And by making that change, you'll have subtly altered her character. Maybe she's nervous whenever she gets into cars, or whenever she can't get in contact with loved ones? Maybe she holds onto relationships a little too tightly out of fear that she might lose someone again? Suddenly her relationship with the doomed boyfriend becomes even more poignant, and his death seems like the manifestation of all her worst fears.

There you go: a stronger Dark Point, better integrated into the themes of the script, plus a new spin on the protagonist's characterization.

(I chose this example because it's a quick-fix solution to that old Dark Point trope of one of the protagonist's loved ones dropping dead.)

This is not the "proper" way to craft a screenplay. In fact, this method of rewriting might charitably be called a "hack" (as in an inelegant solution, not a crappy writer). But if it works for you and it gets results, then there's nothing stopping you from using it.

> ### Screenwriting Tip #128:
> Listen to every piece of script feedback like it's the most important advice in the world. Really hear what people are saying. Weigh and judge later.

Ah, the feedback process. For many writers, it goes a little something like this:

- Line up three or four close friends and colleagues whom you trust to give valuable feedback on your latest script. Promise to send it to them today.
- Obsessively rewrite for three days. Change tiny lines of dialog, then change them back again. Finally, bite the bullet and email the script out.
- Five minutes after the email is sent, notice a really obvious spelling error.
- Wait by the phone/computer for your friends' reply. Alternatively, pester them on Facebook. Get inexplicably angrier with each day that passes without a reply. Don't they know this is your masterpiece?!
- Pray/drink/cry.
- A week later, get a reply by email. Read it once and realize that although it's thoughtful and well-reasoned, it is also critical of some of your favorite bits in the script.
- Delete that friend from your contact list and never speak to her again.

So clearly there are a few problems with that approach.

Number one: you obviously didn't run spell-check. Number two: when you ask someone to give you feedback, you owe it to yourself and your reviewer to *actually read and absorb that feedback.*

Read your friend's email twice. Then read it once more, carefully. What is your friend really trying to say? Is your friend projecting his own opinions or is he actually giving valuable, objective advice? Did the friend actually like the script or is this just a litany of criticisms?

(They probably *did* say that they liked it. It's right there at the start of the email. You just conveniently ignored that part because you've conditioned yourself to be suspicious of praise.)

Above all, you need to figure out what kind of criticism your reviewers are giving you. Here are the four most likely scenarios:

They wimped out. There's no useful feedback here. Either they profess to find no fault in it at all, or they praise you generally while suggesting tiny changes ("What if the main character had a dog?" "What if the two leads met at Denny's instead of IHOP?"). The most probable explanation is that these readers are not a film/television person, and you made a mistake by sending your script to them. This happens occasionally, and it's really nobody's fault. Thank them politely and cross them off your list of trusted readers.

They're horribly wrong. They've missed the point entirely, and you can safely discount the whole of their criticism. For example, they thought the problem with your Holocaust drama was that it wasn't funny enough. Or maybe they just couldn't stand your British protagonist because they have an irrational fear of British people.

This scenario is actually incredibly rare. You picked these people because they're intelligent friends whose script knowledge and instincts you trust. What are the odds that they totally missed the point of your script? If I were you, I'd carefully examine all of their points before declaring them 100 percent wrong.

They're horribly right. This possibility is much more likely. They hit every problem, exposed every flaw … and it *kills* you to admit it. That character that you suspected was underdeveloped? They thought so too. That scene that didn't quite make sense as you were writing it? They couldn't understand it either. You can't dismiss a single one of their criticisms. They've laid bare all the flaws in your script, and it's so overwhelming that you just want to curl up in a ball and die.

Congratulations – you just got some great feedback. The rule of thumb is: if it hurts you, then it's accurate. This is exactly what you were hoping for when you asked for feedback in the first place. It's time to pick yourself up off the floor, woman up, and confront that email again. Go through every one of its points and use them to come up with an action plan for the rewrite. Maybe send a follow-up email to clarify some of the points made by the reader. You may even want to call your friend on the phone, run your proposed solutions by him, and generally pester that friend as much as you can without pissing her off.

They're right about the big things and wrong about the little things. This is the most likely scenario. It's probable that two-thirds or more of your responses will be like this. This is when your reader knows that something is wrong but can't quite put into words what that something is.

For example, she might suggest that your protagonist's brother is boring and should be removed. You might initially balk at that – after all, you know that the brother is supposed to be vitally important to your protagonist's character development, and their relationship forms a major part of the plot in Act 2. So you immediately reject the suggestion to remove him.

But look deeper – your reader is suggesting that there's a problem with that character, something deeper than just "he's boring." Ask yourself: are you giving the brother enough screen time? You know he's an interesting character, so why isn't that coming across? Could the emotional ties between

him and the protagonist be made stronger? Your reader was wrong about the little things (the brother being "boring") but right about the big things (problems with characterization and connecting it all back to the protagonist).

Your job is to examine your readers' feedback and sift the useful from the useless. But always give them the benefit of the doubt – they may be wrong about some things, but right about other, connected things.

Now you know how to receive advice … but what about giving advice to others? It's something of a learned skill. Here are the basics:

Open with praise. I cannot stress how important this is. Writers tend to take criticism of their work extremely seriously. Anything that even remotely suggests that they could maybe, possibly, think about changing a small part of their script – you know, only if they want to – will be taken as a negative. So you have to soften the blow. Find something nice to say about their script – *anything* – and open with that. Put it right at the start of your feedback so the writer knows that you had at least one nice thing to say. *Then* launch into the bad news.

If this makes writers sound like precious, precious snowflakes who need constant validation, that's because, well, we are. Like actors, we put our innermost thoughts, dreams, and emotions out there for all the world to see. We sell ourselves, and it hurts a little to find out that nobody's buying.

Focus on the macro, not the micro. Don't tell your screenwriter friend that her protagonist shouldn't have worn a pink sweater – tell her you didn't think the protagonist's personality was coherent enough. Don't say that bus explosion set-piece was ridiculous and hard to believe – say the overall action was unclear, and the action scenes could be more grounded.

In other words: lead the horse to water, but don't shove its face in the lake and yell "Drink, you bastard!" Frame your suggestions as large-scale issues, not as specific scene-by-scene problems. Otherwise writers may feel as though you're nit-picking, which will cause them to shut down and stop listening to your advice. Because we're weird and defensive, remember?

Try to see the best version of their script. If you take nothing else away from this chapter, remember this: if you want to give someone real, genuine, useful advice on their script, you have to imagine the best possible version of their concept.

For example, you personally might think the idea of a screwball comedy about a politician trying to find his lucky pen the night before an election is ridiculous, and the writer's take on the concept isn't so great, either. Here's what you do: close your eyes, clear your mind, and imagine the *best goddamn*

version of a screwball comedy about a politician trying to find his lucky pen the night before an election that you possibly can. Then tell your friend exactly what she needs to hear to get her to that perfect version of the script.

Unless you absolutely adored the script, giving feedback is no fun. And getting it isn't exactly a picnic, either. But if you can cultivate a trusted circle of clever readers and writers who are similar to you in skill level, you'll be adding a powerful new weapon to your rewriting arsenal.

Screenwriting Tip #129:

People will say they can tell in the first ten pages whether they'll like your script. They're lying — they can tell by the first page. So make page 1 a thing of beauty.

There's a persistent myth that script readers only read the first ten pages of a script, and if they don't like what they read, into the "circular file" it goes.

This is not true. Script readers don't do this (or if they do, they're not doing their job properly). They actually have to write coverage on every single script that comes to them, and part of coverage involves writing a synopsis on the whole script – all three acts.

No, script readers aren't allowed to throw your screenplay in the trash if they don't like the first page. The only people who can do that are *everyone else in Hollywood*.

Managers, agents, executives, showrunners, actors you met a party – none of them are under any obligation to read your goddamn script. And unlike script readers, who are secretly hoping they'll love your script and be able to champion it to their bosses, everyone else in Hollywood is hoping your script will suck so they'll be able to stop reading it. These people work ridiculously long hours. They just don't have a spare hour and a half to waste on reading your screenplay. They want to find an excuse, any excuse, to put it down forever.

Your job is to not give them one.

They want to see less-than-confident prose in the action paragraphs. They want to see dialog that sounds identical no matter which character's mouth it's coming out of. They want a bad title and a stupid quote on the first page. They want character names that no mortal could pronounce, let alone remember.

They're looking for a thankless role no actor would actually want to play, a protagonist who lets everyone else speak and act for her, and a theme that's not clearly spelled out in the first few pages. They want to have no idea what the story is about, or even what genre they're dealing with, after the first few scenes. They want to put it down after ten pages and have no inkling of an idea of what kind of journey the protagonist was about to embark on.

Most of all, they want to be bored and disengaged from the story, always viewing the characters at a distance, unable to get inside their heads and feel what they're feeling. They don't want to feel a confident, human voice speaking to them through the script. They want to resist the spell of your fiction. They *do not want to believe*.

But you're not going to give them what they want. Because your first page is a thing of beauty. Of course it is – you had months and months to hammer away at your script, revising it and improving it through feedback

from trusted friends. You studied your craft – not just scripts, but other fiction, too – and learned how to hook a reader with a few deft sentences and dramatic questions. You put special care and extra time into the first few pages of your script, because you know that first impressions matter.

Your Page One is a thing of beauty. Isn't it?

Screenwriting Tip #130:

Most of the time, voiceover feels like scaffolding: something that you left in there when you were constructing the first draft, but that you really should have torn out when it became useless.

Screenwriting Tip #131:

100 pages is the new 120 pages. Cut it down.

Screenwriting Tip #132:

A little exercise: take one of your big action scenes and try rewriting it without using "as," "while," "are," or "then." Just one event after the other, in the order that they happen.

Screenwriting Tip #133:

Just as you'd cut a sentence down to its leanest, strongest form, so should you cut a scene down to its leanest, strongest emotion.

Screenwriting Tip #134:

Do an emotional pass … not for the protagonist, but for the audience. Go through each scene in your script and ask, "What do I want the audience to feel?" If you can't answer, the scene's probably unnecessary.

Screenwriting Tip #135:

Almost everything in your script can serve more than one purpose. Jokes can also define character, action scenes can advance the plot, emotional moments can foreshadow doom further down the line. Anything that's not multipurpose is a candidate for cutting.

Screenwriting Tip #136:

In the first draft, the plot has to make only emotional sense. In the final draft, it has to make logical sense, too.

Common Mistakes: Don't Be That Guy

The average to-read pile (or digital inbox) contains a lot of scripts by Jill Average. Jill Average forgets to include a logline with her query; she also forgets to put her email address on the title page. Jill leaves typos on every second page, numbers her scenes (just like the pros!), and bumps the margins out in Final Draft because she thinks nobody will notice. Jill doesn't proofread, doesn't revise properly, doesn't care.

The typical script reader meets Jill (and Joe) Average dozens of times over the course of a working week, and believe me, they have grown to hate her. Your script will stand out from the pack by virtue of the care you take in every little detail, from spelling all the way up to character arcs. When you aim to be good enough, you wind up average. But when you aim to be the best, you elevate yourself above the pack.

Screenwriting Tips, You Hack

> **Screenwriting Tip #137:**
>
> The spellcheck is not your friend. The spellcheck doesn't even have a brain.

Which means it's incapable of thought. Which is exactly what you are as well if you don't individually read every single page of your script before sending it out.

Let me repeat that: you must read your entire script, word for word, page for page, before you send it to *anybody*.

Perhaps it's laziness or just unthinking reflex, but a lot of writers treat spellcheck as the last thing you do before signing off on a script. The spellcheck is good enough for your day job, but this isn't your day job. This is your career. If you care at all about how you're perceived as a writer, you'd rather extract your own teeth than leave one single spelling error in your script. Errors make you look like an amateur. Errors are vicious little landmines that strain your credibility and a reader's patience. And believe me, like a blind Pokemon player, spellcheck is definitely *not* going to catch 'em all.

"Loose" and "lose." "Their" and "they're." "Its" and "it's." These are only the most common words that are used incorrectly. There are thousands of other words that when you mistype one letter, form another perfectly good word – just not the word you wanted. Not to mention that it's very easy, when your fingers are flying and you're in the zone, to accidentally skip entire words or even type the same word twice. Spellcheck doesn't give a crap about any of that. Like a disgruntled employee, spellcheck cares naught for the boss's problems. Spellcheck just does what it's told and clocks off at 5:00 sharp.

When you want something done right, do it yourself. Save that script as a PDF, put your editor's hat on, sit down with a cup of coffee, and *read*. I guarantee you will find mistakes.

For extra effectiveness, read that PDF on a different device from the one you wrote it on. Put it on your netbook or your phone, or even – if you're feeling particularly twentieth-century – print it out and read it on paper. The best thing about the latter option? You get to use an honest-to-goodness red pen. Hey, when you're a writer, you have to find fun where you can.

Now, I hear you. Yes, you in the back. You've got a complaint, haven't you? You're asking why, if spelling is so vitally important, every second production script you download from the Internet contains spelling errors. I'll tell you why: because the people who wrote those scripts are professional writers.

Sounds counterintuitive, but hear me out. Those screenplays were most likely written on assignment, that is, as a project for some studio or production company. The writer probably had a track record and a working

relationship with that company, and was hired to write the script, plus revisions, under an extremely high-pressure deadline. Under those circumstances, typos are unfortunately going to happen.

You, however, have none of those excuses. You are (probably) an unknown writer trying to impress an agent, manager, or production company with a script that you wrote on spec. Naturally, because you're unknown, you have to work exponentially harder than the professional, or the semipro, or that guy the producer owes a favor to. Every little mistake you make is more evidence that they don't need to pay attention to you and that you're not ready for the big leagues. It's up to you to change their minds.

And if doing that requires treating spellcheck like an unreliable, untrustworthy bastard, then that's what you've got to do.

> **Screenwriting Tip #138:**
>
> When was the last time you called somebody "bro," "sis," "Pops," "neighbor," "good buddy," or "co-worker"? Thanks for the help, but maybe you should trust the audience to figure out how your characters know each other.

Look, I get it. I know you're worried. Is the audience going to understand who these characters are or what they're talking about? Will this scene have any emotional impact without the knowledge of all that's come before? Dear god, what if they get bored and stop reading! I have to establish everything in the first half page or I'm doomed! Dooooomed!

But no, you're not doomed. Everything is going to be okay. Or at least it will be, if you trust your audience just a tiny little bit.

Trust us to understand that when two characters of similar ages hang out casually, talk about family issues, and trade easy banter and in-jokes, they just might be siblings. It's nice when you trust us – it makes us feel good. But when you crowbar in a line like "it's you and me, little bro" or "remember what our Dad always says," we don't feel trusted any more. We feel like you're talking down to us. In a small way, your script starts to feel less like an organic story and more like a guided tour in which somebody's holding our hand, leading us from room to room, and making sure we don't miss any of the good stuff.

Here's a good rule of thumb: any time you need to estimate the audience's intelligence, aim high.

Sure, you're going to miss a few people. Those readers can scroll back a few pages and figure out what they missed, or they can keep reading and slap themselves in the forehead when they finally get what's going on. Really, what's the worst that can happen?

Think about it for a second: would you rather read a leanly written, exciting script in which you don't quite know what's going on, or an airless, overly talky script in which everything is always carefully explained? Damn right you'd rather read the first one! That's because you're an intelligent audience member. And it's people like you whom you should be writing for.

Even simpler, there's the fact that open questions create drama. Leaving something unresolved tickles that part of the human brain that *needs to know*, that curiosity, that drive to explore and quantify and understand. You could write an entire scene in which we don't know how the characters relate to each other or where the balance of power between them lies, and we as the audience wouldn't be angry … we'd be intrigued. (Well, assuming the scene is any good, but that's another tip.)

Screenwriting Tip #139:

Don't do that thing where one character makes a lame joke and another character points out that it was lame. It reads like an apology. Hey, here's an alternative: make the first joke funny.

You have no idea how many times I've seen this. It's usually – let's say seventy percent of the time – a pun. It's a really dumb joke, but you knew that when you were writing it. You're reading it back now, and you *still* think it's dumb … but you just can't bring yourself to delete it.

This struggle is partly due to rewrite apathy. But it's also because you want to leave it in as a little nod to the reader – a way of saying, "Look at me! I'm just a regular guy, trying to write a script. Please take pity on me." But they won't take pity on you. They'll roll their eyes and turn the page.

You see, self-deprecating humor is self-deprecating only up to a point. Then it becomes weak and spineless. It's hard to laugh at the girl who's constantly beating herself up – at some point, you just feel bad for her. Pity will get you only so far. At some point, you have to step up and show them who you really are. The whole point of a spec script is to show the reader that you are in control. Ideally, you want to demonstrate an absolute command of language, tone, plotting, and pacing. You want to look like an ice-cold, dark-glasses-wearing professional who knows exactly what she's doing. Apologizing for a joke shatters that illusion.

It also kicks the reader out of the story and back into reality for a moment. Imagine that you're happily reading along, getting immersed in the world of the script, hearing the characters' voices in your head … and then one of them says something that completely derails the story train. Suddenly you remember that you're reading a script. You can see the plywood holding up the set – the living, breathing story is briefly revealed to be nothing but a construct.

See also: fourth-wall-breaking asides, notes to the director, casting suggestions, and pointless meta-jokes about things the characters wouldn't actually know.

One classic variation on this is the moment when something ridiculous or highly implausible happens and a character says, "Wow, I thought that kind of thing only happened in movies!" or some variation thereof. It's not funny or original, and in terms of mood killing, it's approximately as effective as farting in bed.

Screenwriting Tip #140:

Everybody names their protagonist "Jack" or "Zack." Everybody names their preppy douchebag character "Chad." Try to pick something cool, weird, and/or memorable.

You can do better than the first thing that pops into your head.

Hell, you can do better than the second thing. Nine times out of ten, what you think is a really cool and original name is actually something you saw on an episode of *Modern Family* three weeks ago. That's just how our brains work – we pull things out of our memory and delude ourselves into believing that they're completely original. By the time we figure out where we stole them from, we're seventy pages into the first draft, and there's no turning back.

So do the right thing – sit down and seriously think about your character names. Don't just think "heroic name, heroic name, manly, testosterone … I know: Jack!"

(However, "Jack" is much less common now than it was a few years ago. These things come in waves. Personally, I blame the character of Jack from *LOST* for hammering the final nail into that particular coffin. "Zack" was the obvious successor – it's manly-sounding like "Jack," but with subtle emo overtones.)

How do you learn to think of better character names? You don't, really. Names tend to come from somewhere else; unless you're a genius, you won't be able to conjure up a brilliant, original name out of thin air. You could spend hours on the Internet poring over registries or those "most popular baby name" sites, but that's a sucker's game. Your best bet is to open a Word doc or an Evernote file or a physical notebook and write down every cool or unusual name you come across in your daily life.

I'm not talking about just people you meet. I'm talking about advertisements, radio, overheard conversations, nonfiction books; the list goes on and on. I once picked up a real estate flyer because the agent's name was – no kidding – Avian Webber. There are real historical people with fantastic names like Stamford Raffles or Ethelred the Unready.

For some reason, I find train/subway stations a particularly compelling source of names – in my personal Evernote file I've got Wynyard (a station in Sydney, Australia) and Doby Ghaut (a station in Singapore). Don't tell me you wouldn't read "The Adventures of Wynyard and Doby Ghaut," because I know you would.

Antagonists – particularly the jerky, overbearing assholes beloved of modern comedy screenplays – require a special touch when selecting names. "Chad" is a punch line now. So are former favorites like "Brock," "Todd," "Spencer," and "Tyler." Female antagonists have the same problem – "Heather," "Veronica," "Naomi," "Whitney," and "Morgan" are all completely played-out as mean, bitchy antagonist names.

These names just don't work any more, but there's a danger in trying to be original by naming against type; you might end up with a really wimpy antagonist name. A villain named Artie, for example, isn't going to inspire a lot of fear and loathing in your readers.

Again, the best approach is to keep your eyes and ears open and write down names that you come across in your travels. You never know when you'll stumble across the perfect antagonist name. Here's one from my personal file: I recently discovered that there's a director with the excellent name of "Lodge Kerrigan." With all apologies to Mr. Kerrigan, who I'm sure is a warm and wonderful person, that is a *fantastic* name for a jerkbag antagonist character. If you find a name like that, hold on to it and don't let go.

> **Screenwriting Tip #141:**
>
> Don't do running gags that run the entire length of your script. Why? Because if somebody hated that gag the first time, they're going to want to hunt you down and rip out your trachea after the thirtieth.

You can't force funny. You can study it, practice it, and take it apart and put it back together to see what makes it tick. But you can't make people laugh if the joke just isn't there.

You might think that diarrhea joke on page ten is the funniest thing in your script. In fact, it's so good that you're going to repeat it with a different character every fifteen pages. But here's your first mistake: the joke on page ten wasn't funny at all. It sucked, actually. And now you've gone and repeated it five more times. But you'll never know what a mistake you've made, because you're not privy to the audience's reaction. You're like a blind, deaf stand-up comic who doesn't know that the crowd is booing.

This crops up with astonishing frequency in amateur scripts. The root of the problem is, I'm guessing, newbie writers who don't show their comedy scripts to anyone. Or, if they do, they don't watch and listen to see when the reader laughs, or take advice when their friend tells them a certain joke sucks. If they do listen to advice, they ultimately decide not to change it because, hey, humor is subjective, right?

Nope. Uh-uh. Humor is about one thing, and that's making your audience laugh. If a joke doesn't accomplish that, the joke is bad. Objectively.

More than any other genre, comedy is organic. There's a reason why stand-ups work in troupes or improv clubs, and why television comedies have collaborative, hands-on writers' rooms. It's because comedy evolves, changes, and grows stronger in the presence of a feedback loop. If you throw out a bad joke in a group environment, someone else might be able to flip that joke around and make it good. Obviously, that's impossible when you're sitting alone at a desk writing jokes for yourself.

With that in mind, the best thing you can do – aside from work with a brutally honest writing partner – is road-test your jokes. Read bits of your script aloud to people. Tweet lines of dialog to your followers and see if anybody LOLs. Really know for sure that the jokes you put in your script are funny, otherwise you might become one of those oblivious writers who thinks the worst parts of her script are actually the best.

See also: comic relief characters. Who told you these were a good idea? Was it Shane Black? Christ, that guy's done more emotional damage to aspiring screenwriters than Tarantino. Here's the thing: the trend for catchphrase-toting sidekicks died with *Lethal Weapon 3*, or at least it should have. It was definitely dead by the time George Lucas inflicted Jar Jar Binks on an unsuspecting world.

Screenwriting Tip #142:

Stop telling us what characters' faces look like, as in "his face has a look of horror," "her face shows sorrow," and the like. Use dialog instead.

Screenwriting Tip #143:

Please don't use voiceover to describe the action that we're seeing on screen *right now.*

Screenwriting Tip #144:

It should be "fourteen," not "14." Write the actual word. This is a screenplay, not a tweet.

Screenwriting Tip #145:

Don't put action in the parentheticals. You know: (paces the room), (laughs at his own joke), (carefully writes all this down), and that sort of thing. That's what the action lines are for.

Screenwriting Tip #146:

Characters who blurt out non sequiturs right after waking is now a comedy script cliché.

Chapter | sixteen

Extremely Specific Mistakes: Hey You! Yes, You

Everybody's got their own personal bugbears.

Depiction of videogames in scripts is one of mine. If the only game-playing character in your script is the protagonist's snot-faced kid brother, and his favorite game has some desperately cynical title like *Hooker Killer 3000*, I may – fair warning – suffer a rage blackout and wake up in a pile of shredded script pages.

Okay, maybe not. But I will get the feeling that you're not exactly my kind of person, and I'll lose a little of the carefully built rapport I had with your script. Every reader has something different that sets them off – a specific problem or three that they love to hate every time it crops up in a screenplay. Your job is not to give them that luxury. There can be no mistakes, major or minor, in your screenplay. You must become bulletproof and unimpeachable, like Chuck Norris if he became president.

> **Screenwriting Tip #147:**
>
> Please stop creating characters whose "world changed on 9/11." It is the laziest of all tragic back-stories, with the possible exception of "parents died in a car crash."

Inevitably, when you're playing Dungeons and Dragons (you have played D&D, right? Try it – it's a great way to learn some advanced narrative skills), there's always that one guy who can't think of a backstory for his character. After much deliberation and prompting from the other players, he comes out with, "Uh, my character's Bob the Fighter. His whole village was killed by orcs. And, um, he inherited his father's magic sword, I guess."

It's sad, but it's not Bob's fault. In real life, he's probably an accountant or an electrical engineer – he can't be expected to bust out elaborate narrative constructs in his spare time. *You*, however, are a professional or soon-to-be-professional screenwriter, which means that you're not allowed to get away with laziness like this.

Although "orcs killed my whole village" has been used as a backstory in films before (see *Conan the Barbarian*), the modern-day equivalent is something called "my whole world changed on 9/11." It may sound bizarre, but you see this constantly in spec scripts: protagonists whose child or husband or best friend died in a terrorist attack, or (related) while serving in Iraq or Afghanistan.

To be fair, this approach is occasionally justified, such as when the script itself deals with espionage, terrorism, or war. But when it doesn't – when that date is invoked for nothing more than a cheap shiver of recognition from the audience – it comes across as lazy and exploitative. It absolves you of any real responsibility to create a dramatic backstory for your character by subbing in something that everybody already associates with strong emotions and memories. It's the "here's one I prepared earlier" of formative tragedies.

"Parents died in a car crash" is similarly problematic. It instantly provides your protagonist with a tragic childhood (depending on her age at time of tragedy) and an excuse to go around with a big chip on her shoulder. We feel bad for her, but we also don't need to know much of anything about who her parents were, how she dealt with the loss, or what happened in her life since. This one is the "bag of Doritos" of backstories – looks filling, but actually leaves you feeling vaguely sick and hungrier than when you started.

Don't choose the easy path. Get serious about backstory. If it's true to and appropriate for your protagonist, you'll figure out a way to make it work.

> **Screenwriting Tip #148:**
>
> Protagonists who yell their epiphanies to the world are – you guessed it – a cliché. Bonus points if a passerby drops a snarky one-liner about how nobody cares.

This is the ultimate form of on-the-nose dialog; the *ne plus ultra* of over-writing. Just when the protagonist can't take it any more – or, alternatively, when she figures out exactly what she wanted all along – she can't contain her emotion. The protagonist just has to shout it to the skies!

This is almost always a terrible writing choice. In a comedy, it might be funny, but it's also been done to death as a joke. (Think of all the times you've seen a character yell something like "God, give me a sign!"followed immediately by the character receiving a phone call. Good luck coming up with a unique spin on that old gag.)

The softer variant of this is when, during a heated conversation, a character blurts out something nakedly emotional like, "Because I love you!" or "I'm just so scared." There are usually better, softer, subtler ways to achieve this effect that won't leave the reader snorting with derision at what's supposed to be the high point of an emotional scene.

The opposite of the emotional on-the-nose line is the plot reminder line. You know, the bit where a character utters a dramatic line designed to remind us all of the stakes, or what's just happened, or what's going to happen next. Something like this: "You know what this means, don't you, Alec? If you beat this guy tonight, you'll have to fight Killer McBastard in the final round." Well, of course he knows what it means – and so do we, if we've been paying attention and you've been doing your job. This kind of line doesn't really have any emotional payload of its own; instead, it relies entirely on what we already know about the plot to give it impact. It's like poking the audience in the ribs and going, "Hey! Remember that feeling you're supposed to be having? Feel it harder."

And finally, there's that interminable line of dialog in which one character (usually a minor character, for some reason) sums up the theme of the entire story for us: "I guess it's true; people really can change," or "Maybe all we have to fear … is fear itself." Listen: if the theme of your script is so opaque that you feel you have to hand it to the audience? There's probably something wrong with your script beyond that one line.

As you can see, there are a lot of interesting ways to write terrible on-the-nose dialog. Now that you know what they are, you can go into your draft and remove them with extreme prejudice.

> **Screenwriting Tip #149:**
>
> Your character did not "pour" over the documents – not unless she just spilled her drink.

The word you're looking for is "poring." Yes, I know – it doesn't look right. Welcome to the English language, pal.

This is one of the most common mistakes in amateur scripts. Usually it happens with words that people hear but don't commonly see written down. It's a harmless and understandable error … unless you happen to be a professional writer, in which case you should be embarrassed and mortified.

You cannot afford to be all *laissez-faire* with the English language. Obvious mistakes like this are the domain of hobby writers, journalists, and Facebook. You, on the other hand, are an expert. When you tell people you're a professional screenwriter, the implication is that you are a god-damn *master of words.* You bend language to your will. You do not make mistakes – and if you do, they were probably deliberate stylistic choices.

If spelling and grammar do not come naturally to you, be prepared to study. Read a lot, write a lot, and try to learn as many new words as you can. This is your specialty, and you'd better be damn good at it.

Here's a quick heads-up on some common offending words and phrases in amateur scripts:

- "Ying and yang"? It's actually "yin" and yang. However, cool fact: apparently "ying" is Mandarin for "shadow" or "film."
- There's no such thing as a "harbringer." I'm so sorry – I know you were counting on those hars being brought. Sadly, the actual word is "harbinger."
- Unless your character's hands are really small, she's probably not performing "slight of hand." The word you want is "sleight."
- I understand these two characters don't get along, but if they don't "jibe" with each other, then it's highly unlikely that they'll "jive," either.
- The guy who rents your spare room is a "tenant." The "tenets" of hospitality apply to him while he stays there.
- I'm just going to assume that's a typo and not really an emoticon. The alternative is too horrible to contemplate.

Something else to look out for is international spelling, grammar, and word use. Learning to write dialog for characters from another culture requires lifelong study and practice, but even the most basic words and phrases tend to differ between American English and everywhere-else English.

If you're British or Australian, nothing makes you look more like an amateur than sending an American producer a script containing phrases

like "football pitch," "grey colour," and "bloody oath, the lads put on a cracking good show." Even punctuation placement is different. The whole thing requires a lot of care and attention, but the first and last thing you should do is switch the location setting on your word processor's spell checker – that way you can catch yourself before writing about "Mum's apple pie."

> **Screenwriting Tip #150:**
>
> If you're going to break the rules, do it in spectacular fashion. That way it's obvious that you're breaking the rules, not ignorant of them.

There's a mental process that takes place when you start reading a bad script. It's a kind of desperate denial, and I blame it on the sense of fragile-yet-unfailing optimism that is cultivated by so many writers – and script readers. It goes like this:

> This script is not going to suck. Against all odds, it's going to be good. Maybe even excellent. Hey, maybe I'll be the first to read the next brilliant, Oscar-winning script? Today could be my lucky day! Okay, here we go – page one . . .

> And we're off. And . . . oh. Hm. The first dialog line is voiceover of the protagonist musing to herself. And . . . yep, so are the next three paragraphs. Well, I guess that's not too bad. Let's see if . . .

> Oh. There's a camera move in here. Er . . . and here's some unfilmable action. Okay, this isn't looking good. Still it could be worse. At least there's no passive voice or notes to the director on what songs to choose for the soundtrack.

> Wait, no. There they are.

> But hey, this is still the first page. Maybe the rest of it doesn't suck. Maybe I'm judging it too harshly. I'll just keep reading . . .

Nine pages later:

> Yeah, this sucks.

It's a sad process, but it's one that most script readers will happily repeat day in and day out. Why? Because most script readers are also writers. They love the medium and they love reading good scripts. Trust me, they truly want you to succeed – as wonderful and exciting as it would be for a script reader to love your script, it would be even more exciting for them. They live for those rare good scripts, because just one gem can make a huge pile of awful scripts seem worth it.

They want your script to be good, and that's why they cut you some slack in the first few pages. If you do something stupid – if you break the typical rules of screenwriting and go off the reservation in some way – they won't immediately assume you're an ignorant hack. You're innocent until proven guilty.

That's why, if you're going to try something slightly dangerous and possibly insane – like, for example, multiple viewpoint protagonists each with their own voiceover – you need to *sell it*, hard and fast. Make it clear

straight away that there are multiple protagonists, that they're each equally important, and that their multiple voiceovers are a unique and important feature rather than a gimmick.

Boldness is the name of the game here. You need to predict when and why the reader will have doubts about what you're doing, and cut those doubts off at the root.

"Stunt scripts" are a good example of this. Almost every year, the Black List, a list of Hollywood insiders' favorite unproduced screenplays, contains one or two stunt scripts – scripts that break all the conventional rules (see for example *Balls Out* and *Dan Mintner: Badass for Hire*). They're usually comedies and they're often bizarre, overblown, and deliberately unfilmable … but that's the entire point. The point of a script like this is to *get noticed* – to stand out from the crowd of frat-boy-humor comedies, thick-headed action films, and overplotted thrillers. They're a flare sent up over Hollywood on the off-chance that somebody, anybody, will look up and notice them.

They get noticed because they break the rules. They do it early and often, and they do it in spectacular fashion. And so can you.

Be warned: this isn't the kind of thing you should attempt on your first or even second spec script. This is advanced screenwriting. It's something of a psychological game that you're playing with the script readers. Will they be clever enough and switched-on enough (or perhaps bored enough) to pick up on the game that you're playing? Will they understand that you're deliberately attempting something different, or will they yawn and skip to the end? It's the screenwriting equivalent of high-stakes poker, and you have to go all-in if you want to stand a chance of winning.

Screenwriting Tip #151:

"Ordinance" means laws. "Ordnance" means military supplies. Neither is synonymous with "bullets."

151 Tips?

Yeah, here's the thing: I lied to you. There are more than 150 tips in this book. Writers lie, you see - in fact, it's sort of our whole deal. But on the bright side, that's a lot of extra value that you didn't know you were getting. Just go with it.

Screenwriting Tip #152:

If there's an animal in your script, it had better not be there as a lame, throwaway joke. Do you know how much those things cost?

Screenwriting Tip #153:

An ellipsis cannot be made longer by adding more dots. Don't be that guy.

Screenwriting Tip #154:

Don't write a scene in which somebody cracks a safe in five minutes with a stethoscope. Instead, spend five minutes Googling and find out that this process actually takes hours.

Screenwriting Tip #155:

Thunderstorms do not automatically make your third act more badass.

Screenwriting Tip #156:

Just a friendly reminder: the word "penultimate" does not mean "really, really ultimate."

Chapter | seventeen

Selling Yourself: Loglines, Queries, and Managers

With all our high-falutin' talk of screenplay structure and narrative arcs, we writers sometimes lose track of the fact that this is a business. Plus, many of us are completely hopeless when it comes to money, time management, and the nuances of human social interaction. (Which is why we became screenwriters! I kid, I kid.) We dearly want to introduce our work to the world, but sometimes the world just sort of stands there, whistling to itself and pretending it doesn't notice us.

That's why agents and managers were invented. It's the job of these charming and talented people to usher you and your work out of your dimly lit bedroom and into the bright arena of business. If you luck out and find good representation, they will work unbelievably hard for you. And not just you – they usually manage more than a dozen writers at once, which I imagine must be like herding neurotic, depressed cats.

If things are working out with your agent and/or manager, you may find yourself "in a room." This is not slang for imprisonment, but rather the industry term for a meeting between you and one or more persons with money. These meetings may seem casual and breezy on first glance, but beneath the surface they seethe with more silent judgments and unspoken rules than a meeting between rival samurai clans. Welcome to the big, wide world of the screenwriting business.

> **Screenwriting Tip #157:**
> There are exactly three reasons why someone will buy a script:
> 1. It's a brilliant concept, brilliantly executed.
> 2. It's written in a fascinating and unique voice.
> 3. It made them cry.

The first one's tricky, but if you've got a great idea, you're already halfway there – and I mean a genuinely *great* idea, not a "cloned Jesus fights vampire Longinus in modern-day New York City" kind of idea. The other half, of course, is the brilliant execution, for advice on which see every other page of this book.

(Sometimes you may not even need to execute it well. It's becoming increasingly rare, but studios and production companies have been known to buy scripts solely on the strength of a killer concept, with an eye to rewriting them from scratch. But I wouldn't rely on it.)

So that's the first option sorted – amazing idea, amazingly written. It's the last two options that are the *really* interesting ones.

What does it mean to write in a unique voice? It could simply mean that the prose style of your script reads like nobody else – it's instantly identifiable and different. Shane Black is the obvious choice here – pick any random page from one of his scripts and you'll see his unique, sardonic style shining through. There's an unproduced script by G. J. Pruss called *Passengers* that's famous for being written entirely in the first person. Now that's unique!

Alternatively, it could mean that your story is about something incredibly unusual and mostly unknown to the average reader or audience. I once read a fantastic script about a murder in a small Alaskan town in which all the characters were kids in the local Inuit hip-hop scene. Before cracking open that script, I had no idea there *was* such a thing as an Inuit hip-hop scene. If the concept sounds faintly ridiculous, consider that *Slumdog Millionaire* probably sounded pretty silly when that was first pitched. Humans are curious creatures with curious brains, always looking for something genuinely new. Show the reader a whole new, totally original world and you'll have them by the brainstem.

But what if your concept isn't incredible, and your writing voice doesn't crackle with raw genius and originality? Then you've still got one chance to win the reader over, and that's raw emotion.

Empathy. We've all got it (well, most of us), and it's a real bitch. It's what makes us worry about our workmates, get wrapped up in reality television, miss our families, and leap from our cars to help people in traffic accidents. It's also why we get sad, scared, elated, or angry while watching movies, reading books, or playing videogames. In short, it's the ability to place ourselves, mentally and emotionally, in the body of another. As far

as we know, animals don't have it. Neither do most psychopaths. Along with language, it's one of the two quirks of evolution responsible for human civilization. So if you're not a fan of human civilization, now you know where to direct the blame.

Empathy is how our *entire operation* works. It's the man behind the curtain of screenwriting … all writing, in fact.

Some might say that we writers are, basically, puppetmasters. We create fake people in our minds and spew them out upon the page, there to dance for our delight. We give our characters imaginary problems and imaginary emotions for our audience to imprint upon while we hide backstage, safely out of sight. We're immune to the emotional connections we create; we float above our creations and our audience like airy, artistic gods.

Except that's bullshit. That's not how it works at all.

Here's the real deal with emotion in screenwriting: if we don't put a bit of ourselves into the writing, there *is* no emotion. It simply doesn't work. You can tell when a writer hasn't invested any of her own emotion into the script, because the audience is unable to connect with the characters. They seem soulless – images once removed from real people.

But when we do our jobs right, the characters we create aren't just amusing puppets – they're little extensions of ourselves, our fears and hopes.

Really, the distance between a writer and her audience is imaginary – just smoke and mirrors. The characters *are* the writer, and their emotions are the writer's emotions. After all, one must have been truly scared to write a convincingly horrified character, must have truly loved to write a character in love. Here's the bottom line: if you want to create emotionally affecting characters, you need to believe in the emotions that you're writing.

And that's it: the whole secret of emotion. Before you can make a script reader cry, you need to make yourself cry. Well, perhaps not literally, but you have to feel that emotion as you're writing. You have to fall for your own tricks, believe in your own fiction.

You know how they say the best liars are the ones who can convince themselves that they're actually telling the truth? Welcome to screenwriting, where we lie bigger and better than anyone, and our job is to believe our own lies.

Sure, it may not be psychologically healthy. And yes, it'll probably be messy and embarrassing and uncomfortable. You may want to lock the door and/or make sure any relatives are out of the house before working on your most emotional scenes. But that's the work you signed up for, and that's the reality of dealing in raw emotion.

Make the script reader cry, and they'll love you forever. Just remember: if you don't believe in the emotional truth of your story, nobody else will, either.

> **Screenwriting Tip #158:**
>
> Sell your ideas. Don't sound shy and retiring in your loglines and query letters – sound like you just had the best idea of your entire freaking life and you can't wait to share it.

Actors act. Painters paint. Plumbers plumb (okay, honestly, I'm not sure about that one). And writers? They *write*.

If you're thinking about query letters, logically, you must already be a writer. Think about it – the only people who should be sparing even a second's thought for query letters are those who have already finished writing, revising, and re-revising an entire spec script. That's a lot of hard, bare-knuckle work. If you've done that – if you've made it that far – you have earned the right to call yourself a genuine goddamn screenwriter.

So why does your query letter sound like an apology? What's with the rambling preamble, the buried lede, and the "sorry for existing, Master" tone? In short, why does your query sound like it was written by a twitchy little ferret-person with an anxiety disorder?

I think I know why. On one hand, it feels like everything is riding on this query letter, and you have only a scant few sentences to convince a very important person that they should read your work. And on the other hand, you've spent so much time with your own concept that you can no longer see what's great about it.

Let's talk anxiety first. *This is the most important email you'll ever write in your entire life! Even a single wrong syllable could mean the difference between everlasting fame and everlasting obscurity! Gaahh!*

Except, no, it's not and it won't.

Here's what your query letter actually means to the person receiving it: email number thirty-seven on a slow Tuesday morning. That's it. She (and here I'm thinking manager or agent – producers probably won't read your query, no matter how nicely you phrase it) has already read thirty-six of these damn things, and they were all poorly written, fawning, obfuscatory, or downright boring. Now it's your turn. What's she expecting when she clicks to open your query email?

Just this: to find out what the script is about. That's it. Just some basic understanding of the genre and the concept, with perhaps a sentence about who the heck you are. Friendly, short, and sweet. Like this:

Dear [the recipient's actual name],

Hi, my name's Melanie McWriter. I'm a playwright with the Tulsa School of Theater and Thespianism, and I've written several award-winning plays.

I'd love to send you a copy of my latest screenplay, *Buzz Kill*. It's a thriller set in a near-future world overrun by giant bees. Humanity's only chance

lies with brilliant entomologist Helga Honey and a crack team of U.S. Marines. Their mission: infiltrate bee-infested Washington, D.C., and take out the queen bee.

Let me know if you'd be interested in reading *Buzz Kill*.

All the best,

Melanie McWriter

It's that easy. Just don't write about giant killer bees. That's *my* concept.

Notice how Melanie McWriter quickly explained who she was, then dove straight into the concept of her screenplay. No "I think this would be a good fit for you" or "I'm a big fan of your clients' work." Just *giant killer bees*. Melanie (rightly or wrongly) sounds like she's damn proud of her concept and wants to show her screenplay off to the world. Which is exactly how you should sound when you write a query letter.

But what if you don't believe in your concept any more? Ah, now we come to the tricky part.

It often happens, in the course of writing and revising, that your original concept gets away from you. What was once a simple story of giant killer bees has become, in your head, a thematically layered, character-driven, genre-spanning tapestry of Shakespearean proportions. You've been working on this story so long that you've lost it.

Somehow, "what's your script about?" has become the hardest question in the world. What's it about? *It's about life, and love, and the human condition, man. It's about everything!*

Well, no. It's about giant killer bees. Remember when you came up with this brilliant idea (possibly while drunk), and for weeks you could think of nothing but the amazing bee-related screenplay you were going to write? You didn't know who the characters were or what would happen in Act 3, but goddammit, people were going to get impaled by giant stingers and it would be *awesome*.

Go back to that simpler, more precise definition. That's the kind of simple enthusiasm you need to bring to your query letter. Know your story, know what you're selling, and sell the hell out of it. Succinctly.

Screenwriting Tip #159:

Stop me if you've heard this one: a man wakes up in the morning, brushes his teeth, has breakfast on the way to work. Wait, except before that, he gets a call from his girlfriend … well, she's not really his girlfriend any more. They're kind of going through a rough patch. But what he doesn't know is that she's cheating on him with her boss who's … no, hang on, you're not supposed to know that until later …

You wouldn't tell a joke like this. So for the love of god, don't pitch like this.

You have one minute.

Actually, let's make it thirty seconds. In this world of RSS, push notifications and overnight YouTube stars, our collective powers of concentration are basically shot to hell. If you can't grab somebody's interest in thirty seconds, they *will* tune out.

Sure, they'll nod politely, but in their head they'll be thinking about what to make for dinner or perhaps composing their next tweet ("Some jerk cornered me, tried to pitch remake of Chinatown 'but with musical numbers like Glee.' #ihatemylife"). Before your sixty seconds have elapsed, they'll make their excuses and dive out the window to freedom.

The way to grab your listener's attention is to lead with the most interesting aspect of your story. Take a cue from journalists: if it bleeds, it leads. By which I mean, if there's something sexy, weird, funny, or scary about your concept, for the love of god *open with that*.

Consider *Inception*. That's one heck of a complicated film. Totems, triggers, dream devices, levels, limbo, anti-gravity Joseph Gordon-Levitt. What the hell is that film about, and how would you describe it in thirty seconds to someone who'd never heard of it in their life?

Easy: Leonardo DiCaprio travels into other people's dreams. You see, he's actually a dream agent – sort of like a spy who can extract information from people's minds.

Bam. Done in two sentences. Notice I didn't mention the "inception" of the title – that whole thing where they have to implant a suggestion inside three layers of Cillian Murphy's subconscious so he'll grow up to be a real boy, or whatever – that is, the actual plot of the film. Why didn't I mention that? Because that complicated plot doesn't lead as well as "Leo DiCaprio, Dream Spy." Once you've got your audience hooked on the catchy "dream spy" idea, *then* you reel them in and hit them with "ice fortress inside Cillian Murphy's brain."

Thirty seconds. That's how long you have before your listener mentally wanders off. Use your thirty seconds to hook them in with the sexiest, coolest, or scariest part of your script.

Incidentally, the hookiest thing about your script may not necessarily involve the story. It could be casting ("I've got Jared from the Subway ads attached to play the villain"), a unique protagonist ("Imagine a female,

Irish, alcoholic version of James Bond"), or an interesting setting ("the entire film takes place inside the caldera of an active volcano"). Get it? Use the best thing about your script as bait to catch your listener's interest. After all, nobody starts pitching Dracula by explaining Jonathan Harker's relationship status (and nobody even remembers the narrator of Frankenstein, probably because he has all the personality and appeal of driftwood).

So how do you identify the single greatest thing about your script?

You ask somebody, of course. If it's not immediately obvious to you, then you're going to have to get a little help from your friends. And I don't mean acquaintances or colleagues – I mean people who won't coddle, sugar-coat, or equivocate, and who won't mind reading your manuscript multiple times at different stages of completion.

You need an honest assessment of your screenplay's most exciting elements, and that requires trust. Preferred targets include family members, very old friends, and people whom you are currently sleeping with. Nobody else will have the guts to tell you that your romantic subplot is boring and you should probably refocus your pitch around the blood drinking and demon hunting. (Sorry, Dracula again. Great book, by the way – if you want to know how to write a sympathetic villain, look no further.)

Learn how to sell your pitch in just a few choice lines. Not only will you gain a better understanding of your own story, but you'll also be totally set if you ever happen to find yourself in an elevator with a Weinstein.

> **Screenwriting Tip #160:**
>
> When pitching a bunch of ideas at once, don't short-change any of them. Sell every single one with absolute conviction … even the ones you just made up on the spot.

While we're talking about pitching, see if this sounds familiar: somebody asks you to pitch them a whole bunch of ideas. "Let's hear it – everything you've got." You've probably got, say, five ideas – one killer concept that you absolutely adore, three half-formed ideas, and one barely-a-logline that you came up with in the bathroom five minutes ago. How do you pitch them?

That's a rhetorical question; I know exactly how. It's how every writer pitches a big pile of ideas.

First, you open with two of those half-formed ideas, just to warm up the room. Then – carefully at first, but getting more and more excited – you pitch the big one, your killer concept. Surprisingly, they fail to buy it on the spot.

When they indicate for you to keep going, you grudgingly finish up with one more half-baked pitch. Desperately, you try to wrap it up … but, oh dear, they're still looking expectantly at you. "What else have you got?" they ask. What *else* have you got?

Good question. And that's when you remember the barely-a-logline you came up with in the bathroom stall. Grudgingly, you hurl it at them and pray they don't ask any follow-up questions. Your big idea-dump ends with a whimper, not a bang.

Please, please don't do this.

What you should do instead is treat all your ideas as equally good and give them all equal billing. I realize this is a lot harder than it sounds. It goes against our natural inclination, either consciously or subconsciously, to champion our favorite ideas and downplay the ones we don't really understand, don't like, or haven't fleshed out.

The problem is that our champion ideas may not be the kind of thing this particular pitchee is looking for. Maybe we're pitching them strongly on romantic comedies, but they only want to hear about horror. If so, then – unbeknownst to us – that back-pocket horror concept we just plucked out of thin air might be our only real ticket. No matter how good our other concepts are, the buyer just isn't buying them.

Even if the pitched party is interested in all genres, there's still no accounting for taste. In fact, you'll be astonished at how different their taste is from yours. It happens all the time – you pitch six great ideas that play to your writing strengths and one iffy one that involves a genre you hate. Guess which one the pitchee always likes best?

Now you know that even your half-baked ideas are in with a shot, you see why it's so dangerous to undersell *any* concept. If you sound incapable, tentative, or bored at any point in your idea-dump, you may have just

undersold the perfect pitch for that particular audience. They'll perk up …
only to deflate when they realize you're not the writer for the job. You just
shot yourself in the foot.

It's easy to avoid this defeat. Just pretend that every single one of your
ideas is a precious, precious snowflake. Act so excited and enthusiastic
about each and every idea that they'll never be able to guess which one is
your favorite and which one is the runt of the litter. Polish each pitch and
delivery until it shines. No, you're not an actor, but you *do* spend every day
trying to convince others that your fictional realities are real. A little more
fiction shouldn't be too much of a stretch.

In conclusion, ideas are like children. Whether you have a lot of them
or only a few, you have to convince the world that you love them equally.
After all, you made them, and that makes you responsible for their tiny
lives. Even the ugly, weird ones that don't resemble you, and the ones you
created accidentally or on a whim.

No, I don't have kids. Why do you ask?

Screenwriting Tip #161:

A brilliant spec script is one of the most powerful things in Hollywood.

I'd meet people outside the movie biz who'd ask me what I do. I'd tell them I write movies, that I wrote Ruthless People, *to which they'd usually respond, "That Danny DeVito, he's so funny." Or "Bette Midler – she's hilarious."*

Later in the conversation, the outsider would always ask, "When you say you wrote the screenplay, just what exactly does that mean?" To which I would say, "I came up with the idea, wrote the entire story including creating all the characters, every scene, one scene after the other, what happens in the scene, where they take place, what time of day, all the action, and everything all the characters said." And they would be silent for a brief second, and then they'd respond with "Really?"

– Dale Launer

Let's face it: this is a depressing business. A shrinking market, indifferent gatekeepers, and a neverending sea of competition all combine to form a mile high barrier to keep newbie screenwriters out. If Hollywood were a food pyramid, writers would be on the very bottom with the Twinkies and gruel. (I'm pretty sure that's how food pyramids work.)

We keep on slaving away at the coal-face of our spec scripts, but nobody wants to read them. When they do read our scripts, it turns out they're either "not what we're looking for" or too close to a movie that just came out last week and bombed.

It can feel like producers, agents, managers, and sometimes even Lady Luck herself are conspiring against us. It sucks. So what are we supposed to do?

I don't have the definitive answer to that. As *Rocky III* taught us, there's no easy way out. Maybe you're cut out for this business and maybe you're not; you'll find that out in time. If you're already talented and dedicated, the only other thing you can really work on improving is your attitude. And that starts with recognizing one simple truth:

We've got all the power.

Don't laugh. It's true. It may seem like the film industry belongs to the suits and the actors. And okay, yes, in every visible way it does. But there's power in our words and in our ideas – power that they need to survive. Without us, they're less than nothing.

Think about it. Even the most brilliant directors can't make up a story out of whole cloth. An actor can't ad-lib her way through a two-hour feature film, and can't slip into a character's skin without knowing who that

character is. Even the greatest producer in the world can't sell a big bag of air; he needs a script, or at the very least an idea, before the wheels can start turning.

Casting agents, gaffers, Foley artists, 3D modelers, and every single other film and television profession you care to name – they all rely on us, and only us. Geniuses and artists they may be, but they are all, in the final estimation, interpreters. They interpret our words.

We interpret nothing. We are the creators. Every piece of cinema that has ever moved you, every character that touched your heart, and every story that opened your eyes all existed in the writer's mind before they existed anywhere else. No matter how good those other Hollywood artists and creators are, they're only working from our notes, our words, our original perfect vision of the story. Every time you open a blank file with the intention of writing a new spec script, you could be making history. At that moment before you begin to put words down on the page, your potential is (theoretically, at least) unlimited. You could write the next Oscar winner, the next game-changer, the next cultural icon that lasts for a thousand years.

You could write *anything*. The power, and the responsibility, are yours.

Don't screw it up.

Screenwriting Tip #162:

Pitching your script as a mashup of two popular films is just an opening gambit – it's the "jumping on" point so that people will know what you're talking about. Once you've got them, it's time to tell them why your story's different.

Screenwriting Tip #163:

Don't let your agent, manager, or best friend write your logline. You should always have control over how your material is sold.

Screenwriting Tip #164:

Do you have the life rights/book rights to go with your biopic script about a real person? And if not, why would somebody buy your script when they could just write their own version?

Screenwriting Tip #165:

Don't self-censor. No real agent or executive is going to be offended if your screenplay has swearing or sex in it (although they might be offended by poorly written sex scenes).

Screenwriting Tip #166:

Work as hard as you can reasonably manage. Don't compare yourself or your work ethic to somebody else's career.

Screenwriting Tip #167:

If your concept revolves around a big twist, then yes, you do have to tell people what the twist is. "Wait and see" is not an effective pitching strategy.

FADE OUT:
Why We Write

Screenwriting Tip #168:

As a writer, your highest calling is to remind us of a universal truth that we've forgotten. That truth might be "love conquers all," or it might be "explosions are cool." It's entirely up to you.

Why do you write?

What makes you spend hours of your free time in front of that computer or curled up with that notebook? Why did you reject a normal job with normal working hours – one that doesn't take up at least half of your mental faculties at all times? Why teach yourself a skill that can be learned only through hard work, long study, and sheer, brutal persistence?

Why even bother at all?

Hey, don't look at me. I don't know why *you* write.

But I can tell you why I write.

I write because I can't stop coming up with crazy ideas, then imagining them as movies and television shows. I write because when I don't I get fidgety, anxious, and ultimately angry with myself. I write because the people I love and trust encourage me to do so – they see something good in my work, even if I can't always see it. And sometimes I write because people pay me to, and I enjoy the creative validation that brings.

But ultimately, I write because I can't for the life of me imagine doing anything else. I think I need stories to survive. And it's not just me. I think all people do, everywhere on Earth.

Stories – narratives – are the number one method by which humankind relays information. This is probably what helped us survive as a species during our awkward teenage years. You know:

> Hey Gug! Yeah, what's up? Look, I should warn you, when you go out to hunt mammoth next time? *Don't* stab it in the butt with your spear. Seriously. Let me tell you what happened to *me* last time I tried to stab a mammoth in the butt with a spear …

Cue valuable story about how to avoid grisly death via mammoth.

Human beings breathe stories. Every second sentence out of our blabbering mouths is a story. We have the innate ability to turn any stupid old thing into a narrative, even – and this is key – things that have no obvious narrative qualities.

Sports matches become stories. A nation's rise and fall becomes a story. What the hell is up with the weather today becomes a story. We say goodbye to houses when we leave them behind, and we thank cars that get us safely to our destinations. We create stories for our pets, imagining what they're thinking and describing it using our own emotional terminology. This is because we are crazy, and will identify with – and invest narratively in – virtually any goddamn thing.

As Jeff Winger says in the pilot of *Community*, "You know what makes humans different from other animals? I can pick up this pencil, tell you its name is Steve, and go like this [breaks the pencil] … and part of you dies just a little bit on the inside."

Humans are thoroughly abnormal and bizarre animals, and the twin sources of our bizarre abnormality are language and empathy. These two elements – the ability to communicate abstractly and the ability to place ourselves into the mind of another – combine to form narrative.

"This happened to me." "This happened long ago." "What if this happened?" "Here is how I feel – perhaps you feel this way, too?" Anthropologists talk about "cultural myths" or "foundational stories," and they're not wrong. Stories are the foundation of all civilization. Without them, humanity as we know it would not exist.

People will tell you that it's weird to want to create stories. Those people are wrong, and possibly projecting a teensy bit of jealousy. Your instinct towards storytelling is exactly as "weird" as reason, speech, joy, loneliness, sex, tribalism, love, or any other innately human quality. That's why they say that everybody has a story to tell – it's weird *not* to feel like you have something to say to the world.

I'm not going to tell you that your aptitude for or inclination toward writing is a "gift." I don't believe that there's anyone or anything handing it out. Instead, I prefer to think of it as a human right. You were born with the natural human instinct towards storytelling, and you have the right to exercise it. Pity anyone who says otherwise.

So, then – why screenwriting?

Why *not*? How long do you spend daily staring at a digital screen? That's what I figured. You spend a huge amount of your time enjoying digital media – film, television, and videogames – and the fact is that

your children will enjoy even more of it, in more beautiful and better-connected forms.

We carry games in our pockets because we can't bear to be apart from them for even a second. Television crosses borders and cultural boundaries – one of the first objectives of every family, in every country on Earth, is to provide their loved ones with a television set. And cinema? Cinema is the most profitable form of entertainment in human history, worth billions of dollars a year, loved by every culture on the planet. Films change lives and shape personalities. It's no accident that the ultimate first date question is, "What's your favorite movie?"

Screenwriting is the most popular artform, and therefore the most human artform of all. Don't believe the scare stories about literature, journalism, or fine art being "killed off" by idiot culture – don't believe for a second that the idea of "high-brow" and "low-brow" art are anything but labels of convenience. The old arts all have their own merits – are all beautiful in their own right – but they can't compete with the immediacy and the emotional impact of the screen.

You're a screenwriter because you wanted to be part of that great wave of cultural change: to create art on the bleeding edge of culture. You're a screenwriter because you have a story to tell, and this is the best and only way to tell it. You're a screenwriter because film and television changed you, and you hope that one day you can return the favor.

But you understood all this already, I think. You just needed to be reminded.

You're a screenwriter because you could never have been anything else.

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed this book. I hope it made you laugh – with me or at me – and I hope it made you think.

Because you've read this far, I feel like we know each other. Like I said way back in the introduction, this book is a discussion. Let's continue the discussion elsewhere.

If you have questions or counterarguments, or if you just want to talk screenwriting, you can find me at any of the following places:

My website: screenwritingtips.blcklst.com

Twitter: @xanderbennett

Email: xanderbennett@gmail.com

Notices
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Introduction

Welcome to the book. Before we get into the serious screenwriting talk, let me introduce myself. My name's Xander, and I'm a hack.

Some people don't care for that term, but I wear it as a badge of honor. All screenwriters are hacks – even the very best – and they know it. The most experienced writers will be the first to tell you: the more you know about this craft, the more you realize you don't know anything at all.

Every single writer, when they go into a new project, goes in blind. We never really know how we're going to tackle a new script, a new medium, or even just the next scene until we try it. We all write terrible first drafts, then fight tooth and nail to transform them into something decent. We may act confident and cocky on the outside – in fact, that attitude is often vital when doing business – but the truth is, we're scared. We're scared we'll run out of ideas. We're scared we won't be able to sell our latest spec. We're scared that the next blank page could be the one that defeats us.

You remember Shakespeare – English guy, sweet beard, wrote a lot of really good comedy and drama? Here's what he had to say about writing and hackitude in general:

> I have been studying how I may compare
> This prison where I live unto the world:
> And for because the world is populous
> And here is not a creature but myself,
> I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.

> **– William Shakespeare, *Richard II***

That's Shakespeare complaining about being a hack. He hides it inside a clever metaphor – Bill loved his metaphors – but what he's saying is, "I'm just one guy, yet I'm expected to conjure up an entire world inside my mind ('the prison where I live')? C'mon! Writing is hard. I *suck* at this."

He's right; writing is hard, and screenwriting is one of the hardest writing disciplines. It's also very difficult to teach. Despite an avalanche of online advice, style guides, and one-true-way instruction manuals, the market continues to overflow with average screenplays.

Note I said "average." The fact is that most screenplays aren't terrible. They're just unpolished, underdeveloped, sloppy, or generally unmarketable. I came to this conclusion while working as a script reader for a

production company in Los Angeles. Every time I took home a new script, I'd hope against hope, praying that it would turn out to be an undiscovered gem. And every time, I'd get ten pages in and realize that it wasn't. (And then I'd have to read all the way to the end and write detailed coverage on it. Welcome to the glamorous life of a script reader: the hours are long, but at least the pay is bad.)

After months of reading about heroic Sea World trainers, transgendered circus detectives, and crime-fighting chupacabras, I couldn't take it any more. I started a blog called "Screenwriting Tips, You Hack," a place where I could vent my frustration at all the average screenplays of the world.

But then a funny thing happened. I moved on from that job, got a manager, started a script notes service, and became a professional writer. As I matured, so did the blog. What had begun as a source of snarky one-liners about bad scripts gradually transformed into an online discussion about the complex, challenging, dangerous, and occasionally rewarding art of screenwriting.

And that's what this book is: a discussion. This is not a paint-by-numbers instruction book; I'm not offering you the One True Path to screenwriting success. Instead, this book is full of simple, practical advice that you can use to improve an existing script, or if you're just starting a new spec, to get from outline to draft to polished work as smoothly as possible. If you're relatively new to screenwriting, this book will guide you through the whole hairy process, pointing out pitfalls and common mistakes as we go. If you're a journeyman writer, you'll find a lot of little tips and tricks to make your writing life easier. And if you're an old hand, allow me to humbly suggest that this book might remind you of a few things you always knew but forgot along the way.

You may not find a use for everything in this book. I guarantee you'll disagree with some of the things I say. But it's my hope that on the whole, the material in this book makes your writing life easier, your scripts stronger, and your creative soul more satisfied. All I have to offer is a little friendly advice, from one hack to another. As Bill Shakespeare would say:

I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.

I can't think of a better metaphor for screenwriting. Got your hammer ready?

Then let's do it.

Screenwriting Tips,
You Hack

PRAISE FOR *SCREENWRITING TIPS, YOU HACK*:

There's something fundamentally Promethean about this book. Xander has delivered fire from the mount in dangerously usable form. It will light the way safely for screen-writing newbies and seasoned veterans alike.

—Franklin Leonard, Founder and CEO, the Black List

More than just hundreds of practical tips to improve your screenwriting, Screenwriting Tips, You Hack gives you priceless insight into the mind of Hollywood's gatekeeper: the script reader. You would be wise to heed these words!

—Scott Myers, Writer (*K-9*), host of GoIntoTheStory.com

Xander Bennett—a guy who clearly knows his way around the trenches of Hollywood— explains screenwriting in an incredibly helpful way. A masterful work, his book makes me want to dive back into the script I'm working on because I now have powerful new arrows in my writing quiver.

—William M. Akers, author of *Your Screenplay Sucks!*

Xander Bennett provides the kind of writing advice that tickles my black, ugly heart: it is equal parts hilarious and practical, punching you in the throat with a fistful of poi-gnant screenwriting advice. This is one to keep next to your computer as you write.

—Chuck Wendig, author of Blackbirds, dispenser of writing advice at Terribleminds.com

Xander Bennett has succeeded where many before him have failed (looking at you, Aristotle), managing to condense centuries of storytelling wisdom into clear, insight-ful, tweet-sized chunks of brilliance. A great primer for hacks of all stripes, and anyone in the business of telling better stories.

—Matt Mason, author of *The Pirate's Dilemma: How Youth Culture is Reinventing Capitalism*

This is one of the best books on screenwriting I've ever read, and I wouldn't change a thing. It's well-written, easy to read, brimming with insightful advice, conversational and very funny.

—Eve Honthaner, author of *The Complete Film Production Handbook* and *HOLLYWOOD DRIVE: What it Takes to Break in, Hang in & Make it in the Entertainment Industry*

I'm in love with this format—bite-sized tips for our bite-sized culture. Each tip had me frothing at the mouth to open up a current project and put it into practice.

—Jeffrey P. Nesker, filmmaker, www.ocularnutrition.ca

A masterful work, his book makes me want to dive back into the script I'm working on because I now have powerful new arrows in my writing quiver.

—William M. Akers, author of Your Screenplay Sucks!

Screenwriting Tips, You Hack

150 Practical Pointers for Becoming a Better Screenwriter

Xander Bennett

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How to Cover
a Screenplay

If you've ever been curious about how the other half live and work – 'the other half' being professional script readers, our gatekeeping nemeses – then read on. By studying the art of coverage, you may learn a thing or two about screenwriting.

The day I got my first script reader gig, I was elated. I'd cracked the system; I was in. I'd be covering real, live Hollywood screenplays. What an amazing education this was going to be!

It was only later that I realized, er, hang on… I didn't actually know *how* to cover a script. We hadn't covered this (pun intended) in film school, and my soon-to-be employer hadn't provided any kind of guidance. I didn't even have so much as a sample to go off. I spent most of that night desperately Googling for sample coverage and attempting to reverse-engineer what those anonymous script readers had written.

But you don't have to go through all that, because I'm about to tell you exactly how to cover a script. It's surprisingly simple, and although there's some regional variation the process is pretty much the same throughout the industry.

Why would you want to know how to cover a script? Maybe you've just been hired as a script reader or assistant (congratulations!), or as an unpaid intern (condolences!). Or perhaps you're a screenwriter curious to learn about the process by which your masterpiece will be read, judged, summarized and packed down into a three-page summary.

Whichever the case, this is the appendix for you. Let's start with the obvious, shall we?

READ THE WHOLE THING

Cover to cover. Or rather, top to bottom – because, let's face it, you'll most likely be reading it digitally. Hollywood is becoming increasingly paperless. A hundred kilobyte PDF file is a lot easier to work with than a hundred pages of paper (and much easier to read while lying in bed).

And then there's the iPad factor. Executives love them, but I don't recommend using them to read the scripts you cover. Tablets and e-readers are nice, but their note-taking capabilities leave something to be desired. And if you do tap out your notes on the iPad, you'll have to go through the added hassle of transferring them over to your computer.

Much better to suck it up and read the script on your laptop. It's not elegant, but it's the quickest and most practical way. Just turn down that monitor brightness, unless you enjoy burst capillaries and looking like a strung-out drug fiend. Here's a tip: if your screen is big enough, open two windows side by side – one for the script and one for your notes. Which brings us to…

MAKE NOTES AS YOU READ

Here's how I do it: I make a note on *absolutely everything* that seems important. If it strikes me as noteworthy, I write it down. I record everything from major notes about the protagonist's arc, the structure and the tone, right down to very small notes – what made me laugh or what made me feel confused.

You have to be reasonable with this, of course. You probably have three more scripts to cover after this one – you can't afford to spend all day making notes for a single piece of coverage. Read the script and write notes as quickly as you can, but don't worry that you're not particularly fast the first time around. Reading a script quickly is easy. Reading a script quickly while also understanding it well enough to diagnose what's wrong with it is an acquired skill, one which you will develop over time.

Make note of all the major turning points and act breaks. Once you've read enough scripts you'll be able to spot them as soon as they appear, and in the meantime it's good practise to look for them. If they're *not* there, or very weak, then that's also something you should be noting down, as it will help you identify the root cause of other problems that the script may have (e.g. "the lack of a clear mid-point means the protagonist spends the second half of Act Two flailing around aimlessly", or "a weak Dark Point means we're not emotionally invested in the climax of Act Three").

Now that you've read the script and made your raw notes, you can move on to the real work of actually writing the coverage.

SUM IT UP

First things first: you have to write a logline. Yes, you – chances are they didn't send you the screenwriter's own logline, so you'll have to write one yourself. Just take your best shot at it. And hey, think of it as practice for your own loglines.

Next comes the summary, which consists of a quick, almost bullet point explanation of exactly what happens in the script. The summary is about a page long and may (depending on the template of the company you're writing coverage for) need to be clearly separated into Act One, Act Two and Act Three. See, I told you you'd need to take note of the act breaks.

The summary is fairly simple to write – it's just one thing after the other – which means you might be tempted to write it 'on the fly', i.e. at the same time as you read the script. I caution against this, as the first time you read a script it can be hard to tell which scenes are vital to the plot and which are pointless window dressing. Instead, I suggest writing the summary from memory immediately after the read. If the script is good, the summary will be very easy to write. If it's bad, you'll have to refer to your notes just to make sense of what the hell happened.

The advantage of this method is that you can use the summary to diagnose problems with the script. If your summary glossed over a particular storyline because it didn't really fit with the protagonist's arc, that's a structural problem. Likewise, if you completely forgot to include a certain character in the summary, then that character is obviously not integrated into the story correctly.

Now that you've got a summary, you can move on to…

WHAT SUCKED AND WHAT DIDN'T

This is the real meat of coverage. It's around two pages long, and it's a critical discussion of the script you just read. This is where you use your deep and prodigious understanding of screenplay structure to diagnose what worked and what didn't. And also to complain about the bits you hated.

Really, that's all there is to it. The tone will vary depending on your employer, but it will most likely fall right on the border between 'formal college essay' and 'casual conversation'. As with screenplays (and all forms of writing, really), clarity is your ultimate goal. Whoever reads your coverage must feel like they're getting a clear picture of the script's strengths and weaknesses.

Make sure you include everything of note, but don't get too hung up on the minutiae. Nobody needs to know about the typo on page 53, but if the entire script is riddled with misspellings and barely coherent action lines, that's probably worth mentioning in the coverage. Use your best judgment.

Yes, you're allowed to use technical jargon. The person you're writing coverage for can and will understand what you're talking about when you mention midpoints, acts, character arcs, parentheticals, etc. But at the same time, try your best to turn off your nitpicky 'screenwriting brain' and think like an audience member. Imagine the film visually, right down to the last gasp, transition, and special effect. Put yourself in the shoes of an 'average'

cinema-goer (a purely hypothetical creature, but that's beside the point) and ask yourself: do you sympathize with this character or do you find him irritating? Can you remember why the team is breaking into this building or did you tune out during the exposition sequence? If you can find a healthy balance between your audience brain and your writer brain, your coverage will benefit from it.

And most importantly, when writing coverage always remember to…

PERSONALIZE IT

Why are you doing this again? Why are you summarizing a script when the script is right there in its entirety? The answer is that you're writing coverage *for somebody to read*. Why? Because they don't have time to read the script.

It may sound silly, but it's not. Agents, managers and executives receive dozens, if not hundreds, of scripts a week. If they sat down and read them all – at a minimum of an hour per script – they'd never accomplish anything else. And yet, those scripts they don't have time to read? They still need to have an opinion on them.

Maybe they offered to check out a friend's script as a favor. Maybe they need to know why everyone's talking about the latest hot script in town. Or maybe they just want to see if there's a gem hidden in the slush pile. Whatever the case, they need an opinion.

And that's what coverage is: your opinion, standing in for theirs. That's why the better you know your employer, the better you can personalize your coverage for them. If they love snappy dialogue, pay extra attention to the witty style of the comedy you're covering. If they loathe anything with overt gore in it, make sure to mention those detailed decapitation scenes. And if they owe a favor to their actor friend, be on the lookout for juicy roles that fit their friend's style, even if the rest of the script happens to need a little work.

You may even wish to include a special paragraph or two at the end of your coverage devoted to the script's suitability for your employer. If your agent boss happens to represent a comedy director, talk about the script in the context of that director's previous films. If you work for a production company famed for its visual effects, discuss all the moments in the script which might lend themselves to flashy visuals.

One final thought to keep in mind: it's not always just about the script. In Hollywood, selling a script is rare, but getting work from an impressive script is slightly more common. In a way your coverage isn't just assessing the script; it's also auditioning the writer. Perhaps the script isn't great, but ask yourself: does the writer herself hold promise? Is her work interesting enough that the production company, agent or manager you work for might want to meet her? You might hate the script but if you spot something noteworthy about the screenwriter you should include it in your coverage.

THE FINAL VERDICT

Once you've completed your two pages of discussion you'll be ready to pass judgment. You only have three options: Pass, Consider or Recommend.

This isn't as hard a choice as you might think. Ninety percent of all the scripts you read will get a Pass verdict. This is because it's the safest and best option. It doesn't matter if the script sucks out loud or if it's simply not what your company is looking for – Pass doesn't make the distinction.

Don't feel bad about handing out a Pass. Look at it this way: all a Pass really means is that your employer doesn't need to read the script. That's it. It's no more or less judgmental than that. The script and your coverage of it will still go into the company filing system, just in case it's needed some day. But today, your boss doesn't need to read this script.

Consider means that she *does* need to read it. What you're saying with a Consider is that this script is worth her valuable time. Something about this script is important enough for it to jump to the front of the line. Be cautious, though – if you mark one or two scripts with Consider and your boss doesn't see anything special in them, it's a minor blow to your reputation as a reader. If you make a regular habit of it, you might not remain a reader for very long.

Save Recommend for special occasions. Recommends are for that one-in-a-million script that made you laugh, cry, glimpse the face of god, etc., *and* happens to be absolutely perfect for your employer. Needless to say, you won't be using Recommend a lot.

And now you know how to write coverage. If there's a trick to this strange little art form, it's this: trust your audience and your own instincts, and they'll carry you far. It's a trick that applies equally well to screenwriting. If you can perform a clear-eyed assessment of someone else's screenplay, you just might be able to do the same with your own.