

RICHARD WALTER'S GREATEST HITS OR THE READER'S BACKFLIP

When I speak to screenwriters they remind me of rules I wrote in my first screenwriting book.

The following rules--principles, actually--come from my twenty-seven years chairing the graduate Screenwriting program in the film school at UCLA.

It's quite possible to succeed in what is in fact a thoroughly democratic enterprise; from my perch in Westwood I see it happen all the time.

You must be willing to give it the time.

When you give your script to a producer or an agent he or she is actually going to give it to a professional reader who will provide coverage--a summary and a recommendation. Before even reading the script, the reader flips backward through it. Certain clues immediately give a script away as unprofessional and amateurish; others suggest the script is worthy of further consideration.

Here are some musical cues for screenwriting success:

RUNNING ON EMPTY

Screenplays run shorter and have fewer pages than they used to. A screenplay at 99 pages isn't too skimpy. 105 to 112 pages is the norm. (Comedy is sometimes shorter than drama.) And the readers who read your scripts prefer 'shorter'. The reader holds the script in her hand to feel if it's too "heavy" (more pages to read) or if it's just right. If it feels like the right length it may be an early indication that the writer displays craft. Of course, the reader will have to see for herself when she reads it if it's compelling. Nonetheless, page count counts.

STEALING THAT EXTRA BOW

Title pages frequently swarm with too much ink. Writers load them up with unnecessary information. All a title page needs is the title

of the script and writer's name, plus a contact number or email on the lower right. Leave off the Writers Guild Registration, the date, the draft number, the copyright, "original screenplay by", and even "by" between title and name. A title can be capped, or underscored. The writer's name should be lower case except of course the first letters of the first and last name, exactly as you write your signature. Any legal disclaimers look ridiculous. You can rejoice in having less ink on the page. Experienced writers learn to love to throw things away. Cartridges are expensive! Save ink! (And the reader's time.)

THE LINE FORMS ON THE RIGHT BABE

Avoid parenthetical directions. In your screenplays use no parentheses marks below the character's name, which describe the attitude, or anything at all about the character. A character is what he says and does. Characters exist in the screenplay without add-ons. Many writers think they need to show more detail than they do. That's what directors are for. Write the lines. That's a tough enough task. Your job is "give great read" effortlessly. So rid yourself of those pesky parentheticals and your script will look just right. When writers show me all the time how working, saleable writers frequently use parentheticals I respond with "Perhaps, then, you can put their name instead of yours on your title page."

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Three basic rules for creating audience-worthy characters are: First: No stereotypes. Make your characters different from every movie you've already seen. The hooker with a heart of gold, the crooked politician, the evil headmaster, the macho cop have been done ad infinitum. Find a way to make these characters fresh. Second: render everyone, even the foulest villain, sympathetic. Sympathy for one's characters raises a tale above the mindless equation in which everything fits perfectly but is also quite perfectly dull.

Third: require your characters to grow and develop throughout the tale. In Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Ratso in MIDNIGHT COPYBOY he's introduced as a thieving, lying, rancid, skuzzy maggot; he finishes the film caring, considerate and honest, if also dead.

I AM I SAID

Exposition, the part of the script that we see gets written using active verbs, present tense. Writers should avoid the verb "to be"

(am, are, is), if possible. Your story takes place in the present-- here and now--whether it's a million years in the past or a million eons in the future. Whenever I read words like being, be, are, or is, I'm reminded that the writer isn't moving the story along for the reader. The character "dances in the moonlight" not "he is (or was) dancing in the moonlight" Also, words before the true beginning in dialogue or exposition; words like well, you see, look, listen, and noises such as hmm, um, uh, etc. must be left out. Remember to leave out everything except what has to be in (I apologize for using the verb "to be" but this is not a screenplay that I'm writing here!). Less language allows for greater appreciation of the scene, setting, story and characters. Less is more.

BACK DOOR MAN

No new main characters introduced after Act 1. There is no such thing as new Act 2 & Act 3 characters. The writer must have at least ten ways to reveal information about the 'new' character if we don't meet him or her till later. This can be achieved by introducing the character without the audience or the reader actually seeing him or her introduced. Rethink how to weave your character into Act 1. Figure it out with clever and fresh exposition, such as a flyer blowing away that mentions a character we'll meet later. The writer must plant; it's her job! The audience must feel satisfied and surprised, not cheated or tricked. In Sixth Sense you aren't tricked, just led.

AND BABY YOU'RE SO SMART

The protagonist uses Deliberate Mental Cleverness (Liar, Liar; Indiana Jones) to resolve Act 3 dilemmas. Put Indiana in with snakes, now you have to get him out. The protagonist must have obstacles. Make all your settings different for the protagonist. It must offer something and not be mundane.

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

Avoid scenes in restaurants, unless they're integrated. Integration is the second most important component to tell your story. If you'll just put nothing on any page that isn't integrated, you'll spin a solid yarn. For example, many writers over-describe their characters. They say a character has red hair for no other reason than to say it. All you really need to describe your character is gender, and age (written numerically). Red hair on a character is only relevant if it's part of the story. For example in Basic Instinct

the hair color of the character matters for the story to climax and resolve. So writer Joe Eszterhaz is wise to mention in the beginning, that the character' a blond. It's a lot easier to describe a character then give a character juicy, nifty dialogue, in fresh settings. The restaurant scene in My Dinner With Andre was the entire movie. In Moonstruck the restaurant scene gets Cher engaged, and in Mt. Rushmore the protagonist learns that the object of his affection--his teacher--is dating a doctor when she shows up with him at the restaurant following the student play.

AT THE END OF THE RIVER, YOU'LL FIND A POT OF GOLD

As Aristotle says, the beginning (of the script) is the part before you need nothing. And the end is the part after which you need nothing. Too many writers start their stories too early and too many writers end their stories too late. "I think" is before the beginning. It's not necessary to have a character start his or her dialogue with "I think". Screenplays model the idealized human life. Short beginnings, long middles, and shorter endings. Spike Lee in Do the Right Thing keeps telling his story even after the clear ending where Mooky trashes the pizza parlor. He runs ten minutes of text crawl with Malcolm's words, and Dr. King's words too. The story goes on even after the end. A fine film is rendered just a little less fine, thereby.

I SAID OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN, THIS DANCE IS GONNA BE A DRAG

Don't have characters tell us what they already told us. Each scene must move story and move character. Don't let one character tell another character what the audience already knows. In Scent of a Woman the young student Chris O'Connell tells Pacino on the plane how they trashed the school. The audience already watched all that happen in the previous scene. This scene doesn't move story and character. When trying to impress an agent, you can't repeat information.

I WRITE THE SONGS THAT MAKE THE WHOLE WORLD SING

Don't try to guess the trends in Hollywood. Even if you could they'd be long over. You must write your own personal story. That is the most important component in crafting a saleable screenplay. Write what you care about. There are no trends. There are only two kinds of scripts--good and bad. Good ones get you on the radar. Bad ones waste everyone's time.

BUT I CAN'T REMEMBER WHEN I DIDN'T KNOW THEN

Don't write Charlotte "remembers" or Charlotte "realizes" she left the gun in the drawer. You can have but two kinds of information: What we see, which is the description, and what we hear, which is the dialogue.

JUST KNOCK THREE TIMES AND WHISPER LOW

Three questions need positively to be answered for information to be tolerated in the script. Is there a purpose for including the information? If so, is it a worthy purpose? And again, if so, is this the best way to achieve that purpose? A purpose that is worthy affects, steers, expands and enhances both story and character. Only when all three questions are satisfactorily answered is the material deemed worthy to reside in the screenplay.

TALK TALK TALK TALK ALL YOU DO TO ME IS TALK TALK

Little things mean a lot. Like punctuation and spelling. Avoid ellipses... Write declarative English sentences. Avoid funny punctuation. Avoid long speeches in dialogue. Don't underscore. Let the words and language tell the story in perfectly crafted, journeyman-like English. Don't number your scenes. This is a spec screenplay you want to write, and sell. Scene numbering is for shooting drafts. Remove all the "Continued" from your software program if it's programmed. The word "continued" twice on a page, times 105 pages, is 210 unnecessary words in the screenplay. You have to get all the little things done, as well as the big ones.

LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH

But let your characters argue. Conflict is the lifeblood of drama. Where do you need conflict? Everywhere!

OH, YOU'RE MY BEST FRIEND

Try to keep phone calls to a minimum. You could argue how much Ron Bass used them in My Best Friend's Wedding. But you can't write Ron Bass on the title page of your screenplay. So come up with inventive ways to reveal exposition.

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

Not all scripts are for selling. Some are for drill. For some reason, after an inexperienced writer writes a script, he thinks he must sell it. If you swim, and won in a local swim meet you would not apply to the U.S. Olympic Swim Team. You know how much it takes to get there. Yet when you complete a script, you trudge out to sell it. In this highly democratic endeavor, you get read on the same weekend by a reader who's reading experienced writers, some with successful movie credits. It's far more important to make the work stand up to a reader's scrutiny than to try to sell it merely because you wrote it. Probably, as with all scripts, it needs a couple of rewrites. Then, another polish. Then, you hire a script consultant, or give it to your trusted "kitchen cabinet" for their opinion. The last person to see it should be an agent, manager or producer, not the first.

WILL YOU READ MY MIND WILL YOU TAKE A LOOK

For a spec script, photocopy but one side of the page as we've always done. Currently most agencies photocopy their clients' scripts on both sides of the page—in the interest of recycling—but the jury is still out on whether you should submit your spec this way.

TIME IS ON MY SIDE

The biggest mistake writers make is: we write too much. The second mistake is: we show our work too soon. Give yourself the time. Writers don't fail in Hollywood; they merely give up. If you give yourself the time, in terms of getting the script ready and getting the career ready, you will succeed.