

Where To Start

How To Be A Hollywood Script Writer.



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Introduction

By Glynn Turner:

Have you ever been to the movies and said to yourself, *“That was terrible, I could write something better myself.”*

Well, I ended up saying that to myself, more than once, and now here I am in Hollywood trying to do exactly that. And you can too, depending on how hard you want to push yourself. I lived in a small town in England, but felt that I wanted to be nearer the action...however, all you really need to try and write something better is a pencil, a pad of paper and the sort of imagination that feels at home roaming around on the moon or in the Amazon.

Where I lived in England, and before the internet, there weren't really many places for me to go and learn about writing a Hollywood movie. In fact, I read a bunch of books which I found pretty complicated and I researched a few courses that were running in London but they all seemed to be expensive, and I'm talking hundreds of pounds.



After a while, I took the situation further and started working in actual TV and film production, and this is where I really learned how to write a movie script.

Through meeting other writers and stumbling along teaching myself, I eventually started writing screenplays.

Now, I'd like to be totally upfront and mention that I'm not pretending to be Quentin Tarantino or James Cameron here. So far, I've not sold a single word, but I certainly intend to. And so far, through my time in Hollywood, I've read thousands of scripts through working for various producers, and I've certainly learned what studios and production companies look for when they're searching for movie projects.

I have, "optioned", a few scripts, which means a Producer has paid me a sum of money to hold onto the legal rights of the script that I wrote, for a certain amount of time.

And in that time period, he'll try and set up the movie. If that time period expires and he hasn't managed to set up the movie for production, that means I get the rights back and can put my script back on the market for other companies and producers.

I've also started writing and directing short films, and the knowledge that I've learned from writing screenplays has greatly helped me in directing my actors and giving them interesting dialog to say. But directing is a different machine to writing and that's another story.

This eBook is free, and my sole intention is to pass on the tips and tricks that I've learned about screenwriting over the last ten years, and to really help bridge the gap for the absolute beginner, something that would've helped me and something I would like to have found as a teaching aid when I lived in that small town in England.

I know what a daunting process it is when you're staring at a blank page and you really want to write something but aren't quite sure how to do it, but we all have to start somewhere.

I'm also motivated to share what I've learned because it appears that I've successfully managed to teach a few of my friends how to write screenplays themselves.

And if I can pass on my knowledge to a few friends, then maybe through the power of the internet, I can pass on my knowledge to the masses. After all, I love movies, and if I can help anyone else learn how to write one, then in the end, I'm also the one who benefits because I get to go to the flicks with my cinema buddy and see another film that might otherwise never have happened.

Anyone can write a movie script but there are a few rules to follow and several formalities to adhere to if you really want to seriously write a screenplay that a studio executive will actually spend a few hours of his or her time reading.

The actual story telling is up to you, but with the correct knowledge of how to execute your story, then just maybe you'll be out rubbing shoulders with Tom Cruise sooner than you expected.

Now, without further ado, I hope to help you bridge the gap from not knowing anything, to learning something about writing a movie.

The Write Tools

Let's start at the beginning.

If you decided to go into the construction industry, you wouldn't start building a house without the right equipment. You'd need some tools and some pretty heavy machinery to get the job done.



The same goes for writing a screenplay. You need some tools. There are software programs out there that will take away all the stress of correctly formatting a script. Use them.

Don't waste your valuable time working out the correct margins of a scripted page, when a computer program can take care of that for you. All you should be concentrating on when you're writing a script is your story. Once you start wasting time trying to work out margins and line spacing, you'll be sucked into a world that'll eat up your writing time at a rate you won't have thought possible, and your creative output will become drastically reduced.

I did mention earlier that if you do really want to write, all you actually need is a pencil and a pad of paper. This is true, but eventually if you want professionals to read your work, it'll have to be typed out correctly.

Not just because that is the professional way, but your handwriting in places might not even be legible, and the last thing you want to do is confuse your readers because they can't understand exactly what you've written.

The programs I recommend to write in are, "Final Draft", or, "Screenwriter". I've used both and I prefer Final Draft but I know writers who use both programs and each have their own merits.

You can Google these and find places to buy them all over the internet. They aren't cheap but they aren't bank-account-busters and they'll really help you make your screenplay look professional.

I've brought this up because I've read many screenplays that have just been written in "Word" or other notepad based programs. The problem with this is that when I see a script written in this fashion, it's not usually formatted properly. And if it's not formatted properly, I'm already unsure if it'll be any good. I'll be concerned that the script has been written by an amateur. Most people in Hollywood now don't like to read because it takes up too much time and most scripts are bad. The saying used to be that one in ten scripts would be good, but things are tougher now and I believe it's one in twenty five.

This means every time an executive picks up a script, he is probably already going to think the script is going to suck. And by picking up a script that hasn't been formatted properly, a red flag is already flying.

Studio Executives, Agents and Managers are very busy people who have a lot of lunches to attend and a lot of actresses to take out. These events tend to be fun, and what is not fun, is sitting in offices reading hundreds of scripts that drain the life out of you and make you wish you were being tortured to death instead. Once in a while they might read a great one, but generally not.

Amateurs tend to write most of the bad scripts, so don't advertise your very first script as being your very first script by incorrectly formatting it and typing it out in Microsoft Word just because you wanted to save two hundred bucks. The Executive will likely pick it up, open it and just throw it in the trash right away. I know this because I've done the same. I've been reading scripts for a Producer for ten years now, and when I open one where I can see the writer hasn't bothered to format it correctly, then I don't know if I can be bothered to read it. I'm already thinking it's going to suck harder than a Dyson vacuum cleaner because the writer doesn't know what he or she is doing, and almost all of the time, I'm right.

So don't spend months and months hashing out your movie script in an unprofessional program that'll betray you after you've printed it out and given it to an Executive who's agreed to give up half an hour of valuable cocktail time to read your work.

They'll be annoyed and your script will be left to prop up a wobbly table—leg somewhere.

Buy a program, format it properly. I promise you it'll help you in the long run.

Screenplays often take us months to write, sometimes years. I've been working on one for a decade so we need to spend the time making our work look professional, and only then will we be treated as professionals.

Oh, yeah, and as part of formatting your script correctly, ALWAYS, ALWAYS run a spell check before you show someone your work. A writer who can't be bothered to run a spell check probably shouldn't be writing, just like an actor who can't be bothered to remember his or her lines, shouldn't be acting.

I can't tell you how annoying it is to read a script riddled with spelling mistakes. To be honest, you can't even get into a story if you keep spotting mistakes.



Every mitsake brings you out of the stroy. So run a spel check, thsesse days it's easy, and it's free.

Anoying, isin't it!

We're not writing on typewriters anymore, there is no excuse for hundreds of spelling errors.

And read a book all about grammar. I like a book called, *Painless Grammar*, by *Rebecca Elliott, Ph.D.*

Correct grammar is important, but I'm still learning about grammar every day. Just the use of numbers in a document is something I find difficult. Everyone seems to say something different. Do I say, one, or just use the number 1? Who knows?

In this eBook I've decided to use numbers and stick with them. At least I'm consistent. Grammar isn't one of my strong points as you can probably tell, and I'm sure you've already spotted a thousand grammar mistakes in this very eBook, (sorry Rebecca) but I do think I know enough to get my general point across.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm from England, just north of London, and going from what my American and European chums tell me, I speak with quite a strong cockney accent, which doesn't help me at all with my grammar. But I'm making a big effort here to use the Queen's English as I write this eBook so hopefully you won't notice too many mistakes.

But generally speaking, if your grammar sucks, it'll be a problem. Nobody wants to read a script that looks like it was written by Forest Gump, but if you can reduce your mistakes to as little as possible; you'll be surprised at what you can get away with.

Correct Formatting

The following three pages show you exactly how a script page should be formatted. This is one of my own pages and was written in Final Draft.

The **PURPLE** color is known as a slug--line. This tells the reader if the scene is inside or outside. (INT. for interior, or, EXT. for exterior).

Then, where the actual location is should follow (COFFEE SHOP) and finally what time of day or night (AFTERNOON) is it.

This sets your scene, and every time you change the place (or location) then this is how you format it.

The **YELLOW** color is known as the narrative description. This tells the reader, or actor, what is going on in the scene who is in the scene, and who is doing what. The narrative always starts at the farthest margin point on the left side of the page.

And notice how brief the narrative is. Only describe what we need to know. Don't start describing every single person in the coffee shop, how old they are, what medical problems they have and what color underwear they like to sport.

All you need to do is put a little picture in our head of where your characters are and what they're doing, and then get on with the scene.

Don't overwrite everything or you'll end up with a six hundred page screenplay.

The **RED** color is where the character name is placed. It's always in the middle of the page. Notice too, that in the narrative, the first time we meet a character their name is in FULL CAPITALS. This tells us that this is the first time we've met a character in this particular script.

A very long script for example, might have a lot of characters, but every time someone new is introduced, their name should always be typed in CAPITALS. It basically reminds us that this is the very first time this character has appeared in the script.

The **GREEN** color is the actual dialog the character is speaking. This is always placed a little more left than the character name, but not quite as far left as the narrative.

This is the correct formatting for a movie script and that's why it's best to buy a program that will do all this formatting for you.

Otherwise, if you use something like 'Word', you'll have to worry about all these gaps, spaces and margins yourself, and nine times out of ten "Word" will try and auto format parts of the script for you and it'll turn out looking wrong and unprofessional.

After doing it myself when I first started out, trust me, it's easier to buy a screenwriting program.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - AFTERNOON

GLYNN, 34 sits in a coffee shop typing on a laptop.

He glances up from his computer as DONNA, also 34, breezes through the door.

DONNA

Hey, what are you doing?

GLYNN

I'm working on an eBook to teach beginners how to write a movie script.

DONNA

But you haven't sold a script yet. How can you teach something you haven't yet mastered?

GLYNN

Thanks for the confidence. It's just a quick guide for the absolute novice. Something I would like to have found when I was starting out.

DONNA

Oh.

Donna gazes at coffee bar and then back to Glynn.

DONNA

I'll have a latte, thanks. Soy milk, one sugar, and a shot of vanilla.

GLYNN

Anything else?

DONNA

Yeah. One of those shortbread, cookie things.

GLYNN

I'll get right on it.

Glynn gets to his feet.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - PARKING LOT - EVENING

It's getting dark.

Glynn walks with Donna to her car.

GLYNN

What are you doing now?

DONNA

I'm going for a massage and then I got invited to a premiere. You?

GLYNN

I'm going to pay my parking ticket and then I'm heading home to rewrite a script that's never going to get made.

DONNA

Have fun.

GLYNN

I will.

(glum)

I love working on scripts no one will ever see. It's one of my favorite things.

DONNA

Oh, and don't forget I need to be at the set by six AM. Could you still drive me?

GLYNN

How could I forget. I'll pick you up at five.

Donna opens her car door and climbs in. She slips her cool sunglasses on and fires up the engine.

Glynn walks back to his Mustang and freezes. There is a dent in the door.

Bad Films Can Be Good

One thing that I learned early on is that bad films can be good because they show you exactly *what not to do*.

They say that time flies when you're having fun and this is particularly true when watching a good film. Time flies so fast that before you know it the credits are rolling and you want to watch it again.

But bad films are the exact opposite. Time seems to slow down. The film feels like it'll never end. Your body feels like it's slipping into a coma and you're going to die a slow and painful death over a twenty year period.

Well next time you go to the movie theatre and watch a bad film, don't fall asleep. Instead, start questioning yourself as to why it's so bad.



There is no greater teaching aid for a script writer than watching a bad film. Ask yourself, "Why does this suck so hard? What is wrong here?"

It might just be one or two things, or it might be a whole bunch of things. The story might be too slow, or too confusing. The characters, boring and uninteresting. The plot could be too predictable, or just too outrageous. After everything that could go wrong in making a film, it's actually a wonder any good films get made.

But if you do start questioning yourself while watching bad movies, you really will learn what not to do, and you won't even have even wasted your money because you actually got something out of it.

So next time your husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend or pet drags you to the movies kicking and screaming and the movie sucks, just use it as a learning experience. Get something out of it and use the time wisely.

Write What You Know

There is a saying in Hollywood that in order to write something good, writers should only, “Write what you know about”. I’m not sure I’ve ever agreed with this. What did George Lucas know about galactic rebellions in galaxies far, far away when he was writing Star Wars? Had he ever taken part in a galactic rebellion? Did he mix with people about to take part in a galactic rebellion?

And what did James Cameron know about alien life on other planets? Aliens like the Na’vi in Avatar? Had he secretly visited other planets? Did he pick up their language after hanging out in various alien communities?

But what both of these writers did do was a whole ton of research. Star Wars really has similarities with ancient Rome, where one Ceaser gains total control after overthrowing a senate. I read that the research in Avatar was mostly science based. What might be possible, how other life forms might live. Of course it’s all fictional but research into how the creatures in Avatar lived mirrors certain creatures on earth. In some of the more extreme places on earth, like the bottom of the ocean, you’ll find corals that mimic the plants on the alien planet. Research is key to writing a good script.

Personally I don’t really know much about anything I’m sorry to say, maybe except for writing a script, and how to survive on ten dollars a week in a foreign country for three or four years at a time. Oh, and I know a little about what to do when immigration keep losing your paperwork while you’re trying to apply for a green card, but I thought that might be a boring eBook so I decided to go with the screenwriting eBook instead. I hope you’re finding it interesting and not slipping into a power nap.

So anyway, if we bring this topic closer to earth, rather than alien planets, it’s a little easier to talk about.

One of my own scripts involves a doctor. But I don't know much about doctors or medical formalities so I had to go out and find a doctor through my friends, who I could talk to and ask questions to. I also read some medical books.

Basically, if you want your characters to sound real, to sound like they know what they're talking about, you have to do research. You have to look into who they are and what they would know. How they would feel about certain situations. The poorer scripts I read tend to suffer a lot because the characters just don't sound real. It feels like they've been written by someone who doesn't know what they're talking about. I'd expect the character of a 48 year old lawyer to know a lot about the practice of law. And if, as the writer, you don't know much about law, then you need to go out and find lawyers to talk to.

Read some law books, surf the internet and go over legal documents. The ultimate test would be to give your script to a lawyer. He or she'll be able to tell you if your character sounds real. The more realistic your character sounds, the stronger he'll come across on the page and the more chance someone like Brad Pitt will want to play him.

If you wanted to write a story about space exploration then I'd imagine you'd need to go to the NASA website, read about the lives of astronauts, understand the physics of space, read news reports about missions to Mars and if you can, visit Cape Canaveral in Florida.

So know what your subject matter is and know what you're talking about. And if you don't know it, then research it. Get some knowledge. Don't always feel that the term, "Write what you know", locks you out of writing about an unfamiliar subject matter. All you need to do is educate yourself about the subject first, and then you'll know about it and your story will shine. Research on what you're writing is important, don't underestimate it.

Reading Other Scripts

It's important you start reading other scripts if you want to write your own. Look at the particular styles of other writers. Some are more detailed than others, but nothing is right or wrong, as long as it's entertaining. If you live in or around Hollywood you'll have plenty of access to movie scripts, but if you live in Mongolia, Antarctica or Welwyn Garden City in England (my home town) then trust me, you'll need to get on the internet and find some websites that can supply you with scripts. Think of some movies you like and then see if you can find the scripts for these movies online. See what your favorite movies looked like on paper, because they all started out on paper.

You can pretty much find any script on the internet.

I use sites like www.simplyscripts.com and www.script-o-rama.com to find scripts that I want to read. If I see a movie with a particularly complicated scene, I might want to read how it was written on the page. You'll be surprised in some cases. I've seen films where there have been battle scenes that go on for twenty minutes. But in the script, all it said was, "A battle takes place." And then you have something like Saving Private Ryan, which has a 25 minute battle on a beach right at the start of the movie.

And if you look at that script you'll find a very detailed description that goes on for pages and pages about exactly what is happening in the battle. All scripts are different and all writers deliver their own vision.

For a learning experience you can also try and download scripts to movies you found boring. This way you'll get a first hand look at the script and what went wrong. Generally speaking, reading is part of writing. If you want to write, you need to read. Reading more and more scripts will help you become a better writer.

Story

The all important, STORY. The Tony Soprano of the script. The Don, The Big Man, The Big Cheese.



And here is where a few critical rules need to be applied.

Rule number one is... start your story as fast as possible. And by saying that, I don't mean rush it, I mean, start getting to the POINT as quick as you can.

Remember all those times you've sighed when watching a boring movie because you thought nothing much was happening? Well, don't be one of those guys. Don't be the type of person who complains about movies being too slow and then end up writing a movie that moves too slow. Get into your story fast. As a writer, it's your job to hook the bored Studio Executive as fast as possible. If you don't get him or her quickly, your script is going in the trash with all the others and all you've managed to do is waste a tree.

People in Hollywood used to say, "You get ten pages", meaning, if you haven't hooked the reader by page ten, he'll dump your script. Well, I believe nowadays it's even harder to keep the reader interested. I think you actually only have two pages. I myself can usually tell if a script is going to be good within two pages, which sounds outrageous, but it's the truth.

If I see a spelling mistake, or something incorrectly formatted within two pages, I usually dump it because it's a red flag that the script will suck harder than a vampire on Valentine's Day. The writer didn't spend much time on his story if he couldn't be bothered to run a spell check. So I can't be bothered to waste my time reading it.

And these days we live in a world where everyone wants something instantly. Executives are getting younger and younger. They grew up playing fast, online video games, texting on their iPhones and watching movies like The Fast And The Furious. They're used to instant gratification in life, and also in movies.

A script that takes 6 weeks to get going isn't going to keep the young Executive's attention for more than 2 minutes. This is a personal observation of my own. We just need to start our stories faster and faster. Be detailed, and be entertaining, but be fast and don't linger around with scenes that don't go anywhere.

Rule number 2 – don't write a script over 120 pages long. As a rule, in Hollywood the length of a movie is measured by script pages and it's usually timed at 1 minute per page. So 120 pages would mean 120 minutes, or 2 hours of screen time. A lot of people are actually put off seeing films that are long, in case they suck. I mean, who wants to sit through a 3 hour bore-fest that ultimately ends up having an ending that sucks? Nobody, except for Kevin Costner.

The only people who can really get away with writing longer screenplays are those people who are already established writers and already proven to be able to successfully hold audience's attention for a longer period of time. People like James Cameron and Quentin Tarantino. So unless you're those two people (or a few others, including Kevin Costner, because Dances With Wolves was incredible) then forget it. Keep your screenplay at 120 pages or less, it'll be more attractive to studio executives than a screenplay that's 500 pages long, which would work out at over 8 hours. And I haven't even mentioned the cost of shooting a movie yet. It costs something like \$20k or even more, PER HOUR, to keep a film crew shooting a movie. Most crews work 12 hours a day, for 2, 3, 4 months a time, or even years depending on the project is, so the length of your script will somewhat reflect how much it's going to cost to shoot. And a first timer is going to have a heck of a party trying to sell a script 300 pages long. So don't create more obstacles for yourself when writing your first movie.

Keep it short, and save the Ben Hur remake for later when you've established yourself.

People in the past have also said to me, "Before you start writing, know your ending." And the logic to this is that if you know your ending when you start writing, then you know roughly where you're heading and you won't stray too far from it.

The problem is, I've never exactly known what my endings are when I started writing a project.

It might be rough, but it often changes and if I wanted to come up with the perfect ending, I'd never actually start writing.

The example of riding a bicycle was once used with me that I will share here. I was told that you don't get on a bicycle and just aimlessly cycle around, because you know where you're going, and you go there. Well that's apparently the same for writing a movie. Don't start writing if you don't know where you're going, because if you do, you might start taking your characters off down the wrong roads and your story might start veering all over the place. Before you know it, your romantic love story'll be taking place on the moon, where the star crossed lovers will be battling aliens and spending most of their time not talking to each other because they're either trying to conserve oxygen or busy looking for water. Not very romantic if you can't whisper sweet nothings to each other.

This seems to make sense, but the only problem with that is that I do sometimes, actually, just get on my bicycle and go for a ride. I don't always know where I'm going, so I just ride around and see where I end up. But if I apply that to a script, I might start writing scenes that I don't ultimately need, or I might start heading off with my story in the wrong direction.

So regarding the advice of, "Knowing your ending before you start writing", I would say, know a rough ending and have a general path in mind of which you would like to go down and where it might end. But don't worry too much if you don't have the ending perfectly locked.

It's ok to wander around for a while but don't go getting lost in the woods or veering away too drastically.

A story really is only an amalgamation of 3 things. A beginning, a middle and an end. This is the simple structure of a script. Sounds easy doesn't it, but if you can truly master that, you'll be a Hollywood millionaire in no time. Just ask George Lucas. His Star Wars stories always, pretty much, have clear cut, beginnings, middles and usually explosive endings.

Pages 1 – 30 are considered the beginning. This is where you must set up who your characters are, where they live, what they do and what they want. If you watch virtually any movie, you'll see that after about 25 to 30 minutes, something major happens to start the real story off. This is because the previous pages were used to introduce us to the worlds and characters of this particular story, and then once that is done, something happens to start the **real** story, and this is where we see our hero charge off to try and get what he or she wants.

Pages 30 – 90 are usually the middle pages of the story. This means, this is where your character or characters experience the problems, the obstacles and forces trying to stop him or her getting what he or she wants. This is where the bad guy has the upper hand and controls the mayhem, causing pain and anguish to everyone who gets in his or her way. But by about page 88, there is normally a huge, credible threat to the bad guy's activities and it can only be resolved in a glorious finale.

Pages 90 – 120 is where your story concludes, usually in a huge showdown between characters, and this is where your main character gets what he or she wants, or... totally fails. In these pages everything must be explained and wrapped up in the most entertaining fashion you can devise. The last thing you want is the reader to be left questioning something that you wrote about earlier, but failed to address at the end.

We've all left movie theatres complaining about something that didn't seem to make sense or was left unexplained. Let's not do that. Let's be clear and concise, with all questions answered. Don't be lazy. Leave no stone unturned.

Exposition. This word is a story killer. If you don't know what it means, look it up because you're going to meet this word a lot. I've been married and divorced to this word several times and we're currently going through an ugly divorce.

Exposition is basically a way of conveying information. All films have it, they all have to convey information so the audience or reader knows what's going on, it's just how you hide it that counts. Hide it well and the audience won't ever notice it. But if you make it obvious, it'll stick out like a brunette in a room full of blondes and likely send the audience or reader into a coma. The best example someone ever gave me about exposition is what I always pass on to people when they ask me about it. The worst form of exposition is basically two characters talking to each other about the story. The reason they're doing this is because the writer needs to convey information to the audience or script reader, and he or she does this by having two characters talk to each other just to push the story forward.

It would go something like this. "Oh, no, Michael, if we don't disarm the bomb, the building will collapse directly on top of the dog shelter and all the rescued animals will perish without a chance in Hell of going to a new home."

And then Michael would reply something like, "We must find the bomb and save the animals, we cannot let that building collapse, it's the third time this year that security has been breached, it's about time they hired some real guards."

This is all boring expositional information that is just there to push the story forwards. Nobody really talks like that, and as a writer it's your job to mimic real life, not over the top theatrics that are unrealistic.

Here, Mr. Exposition is busy attacking a story.



But don't let him attack yours.

You need to deliver this information in a more visual way because we go to movies to watch them, not to listen to them. The only place explanatory exposition is allowed is on the radio, because we don't see anything, we can only hear it, therefore explaining everything is the only way we'll understand what is happening, but in cinema you have to show the audience what is going on, which leads me to the next point, the saying, "Show, don't tell".

This is a major rule, so I'll call it rule number 3. And if you forget any of the previous rules, just make a point of not forgetting this one as it's one of the most important ones. There is a saying in Hollywood called, "**Show, don't tell.**"

This means, it's more interesting to show the audience what is going on, rather than always trying to explain everything through boring expositional scenes. In the dialog above, our characters were telling us how security in the building has been breached more than once. Well show us this early on in the film if possible. Show us that the building in question is right above the animal shelter. Set some scenes there. SHOW US what is at stake if the bomb goes off. SHOW US a bunch of puppies in the animal shelter. SHOW US the nice old lady with a crush on one of dogs who only has three legs.

© Glynn Turner

Show us all this stuff, don't explain everything to us. If you were writing a book, you can get away with telling us how a character feels, but in movies you don't have that luxury.

If a character is feeling sick, you can't tell us that in the script's narrative description, because if we were watching the movie, how would we know the character is feeling sick? You have to SHOW us that a character is feeling sick. He or she rushes over to the toilet bowl and gags over it. Then they might down a few glasses of water or swallow some pills. Basically anything you can show us will be much more entertaining than explaining it to us. The cinema screen is huge and I always try to remember that it's huge because it's been made to show us pictures. The radio is for words so it's small, just like a word itself, but the movie screen is for pictures so it's huge. Of course, at some point you do have to explain the story, but do it through showing us things in scenes rather than having boring characters explaining everything to us like we're nothing but a bunch of 2 year olds.

Finally, when you do write a scene in your script, it's easy to become confused as to if you really need the scene or not. Especially as you start writing more and more scenes. You might end up with hundreds of scenes. The best way to really know if you actually need a scene or not is to follow this simple guide.

There are only 2 reasons to ever write a scene. The first reason is to push the story forward. If your scene pushes the story forward, then you need to have it.

The second reason is that the scene reveals something about your character.

If the scene reveals or tells us something interesting about your character, then you need it. If your scene doesn't do either of these 2 things, then why is it there? There is no reason to have it. You can delete it. And do make sure you delete it, because too many scenes that don't mean anything will quickly make your script boring, and we certainly don't want that, we're reading enough of those already, please don't start adding to the pile.

CHARACTERS

Writing interesting, unique characters is critical in any movie script. One of the things we most enjoy when watching a movie is meeting new people. So don't copy, or mimic other characters you've seen and liked, you have to come up with fresh and exciting characters unseen anywhere else, ever. Don't write cliché characters who we've seen a million times or the reader will be bored from the get go. Think of characters you like, and ask yourself why you like them. Why are they so memorable? One of the answers is probably because they are so unique, that's why you remember them so well.

Another might be because of the way they speak. Writing clever dialog is definitely a skill you will get better and better at. Witty, snappy dialog is crucial in letting us know the type of person you are setting up. Long, boring, expositional dialog will do nothing but kill your characters and bore the reader.

Entertaining dialog will stand out and make us want to read more. Standout dialog I tend to remember from past movies has been written by people like Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie. They really have a knack for witty and smart dialog. And I'm sure actors love speaking those words.

The way to improve your dialog is to just listen to the way people speak in real life situations.

George in the office will often speak a lot differently than Phillip down at the sports bar. It's the writer's job to capture the way these people speak and have it reflect in their dialog.

And make sure everyone in your script is a unique, different person. No, 2 people should sound the same. In life, each person is a different individual, from different parents and from different backgrounds and that's how characters should be set up in screenplays.

In a lot of scripts that I read, one of the biggest flaws is that many of the characters all sound the same. And that makes them boring. Think about your own family. Everyone in your family will have different thoughts and feelings about life, death, religion or any subject matter. Older people will think and speak differently than younger people.

If your family all got into a car and went down to the beach, the conversation in the car should be interesting and everyone should have a different opinion about something. If everyone got into the car and agreed with each other about everything, the conversation would be pretty boring. As writers, we're looking for drama. We want to see a car full of arguments and insults and vastly different opinions on everything from the Iraq war to the price of cheese.

Not only does this make a scene interesting, it also gives you a chance to build your characters and let us know what type of people they are. The car journey should be full of shouting and screaming and tears and laughter. Everyone should be different.



Don't write a bunch of boring robots who deliver boring dialog. Create exciting, opinionated, unique individuals who we want to see more of.

One thing that has helped me improve my dialog is that I hang out with a lot of actors. I'm lucky that way because I live in Hollywood and actors are everywhere. Infact, my best friend is a talented actress and another of my close friends is also a wonderful actor. These actors are hungry for great dialog, but without us writers, they have nothing to say.

Obviously, not all of us are surrounded by actors and have the opportunity to spend time with them. So this is where I can pass on what I've learned. Actors are real, living, breathing people with their own thoughts and feelings, they're not just one dimensional robots programmed to speak dialog that is printed out for them and who only exist on a flat cinema screen. Remember, when you're writing dialog and creating characters, you'll eventually be dealing with real, intelligent people who should want to play the part. So compliment them, think carefully about what people are saying and why. If you give actors great characters, then the actors will throw their whole life at the part. I know this because I've seen it with my own eyes.

They'll spend hours and sometimes days or weeks getting the characters little traits down and their behavior patterns believable. But if you write boring, cliché characters that we've seen a billion times before, there is not a lot the actor can do. If it's written boring, it's going to come across on screen as boring. Not even Anthony Hopkins will be able to save it. All this I've learned just by hanging out with my actor friends and I thank them for this valuable lesson. Because of them, I believe I've become better at creating characters on the page. Just remember, characters are real people, not just ink on a piece of paper.

Also, something else I've noticed in a lot of scripts that I've read by professionals is the way that characters are described. There is a brilliance by more experienced writers in how fast they can set up a person and how quickly we get to know them.

However, in most scripts I read, all I usually get when we meet someone new is, "Jim, who is 45 years old and fat, creeps over to the bedside table." To me, that is an utterly boring character description and that could be anyone. When you describe the outside of someone, or just their physical appearance, you don't really give the reader anything about their personality. And if an actor is reading the script, you don't really give him or her a feel for who the person is.

In better scripts that I've read, the character descriptions often jump out at me. When I read them, together with great dialog and a good story, I completely understand why actors like Robert De Niro might want to play the parts.

In the script for Jackie Brown, I read that Samuel L. Jackson's character, "Puts the ool, into cool." I've never forgotten that. I instantly knew this was going to be a great character.

In another script I read, the character was described like this, "Jim is 45 years old and so fat that he's the type of guy who likes to stand next to even fatter people so he looks thin."

It's a much more entertaining way than to just say that Jim is fat. Also, it gives the actor and reader something about who the character really is as a person. Not just that he is overweight.

So remember, the more interesting the descriptions, the more intrigued the reader will be. Limited, cliché descriptions will just put us off and the reader will most likely become bored and put the script down, never to pick it up again.

An Over Excess Of Boring Words

If you write a line using boring words, then guess what, it will read as a boring line. There is no magic that will make the words jump off the page and slap the reader in the face. In order to grab the reader's attention, you have to write in an entertaining and interesting way. I've called this section, "An Over Excess Of Boring Words", because I often read scripts where the same words are used over and over and over again. There is no creativity and ultimately the script just becomes boring. When writing, you must use your imagination and understand the power of a single word. Just one word can change a sentence so much and make it more exciting or more tension filled.

Here is a quick equation for you to remember:

Boring words = death of a script.

Exciting words = script to screen.

We all need to use certain words when we're telling a story, and it's ok to use them once or twice, but don't keep using them, use your imagination and pick other words which have the same meaning but better describe the situation.

To name a few, here are some words that I constantly find being over used:

Walks

Runs

Enters

Exits

Opens

Closes

Eats

Drinks

When you keep using these words, the sentences written around them just become boring. But once you substitute these words for better words, the script as a whole starts reading better.

This is one of those things that actually taught me the power of a single word and here are some examples of how one word can actually change the whole sentence and give the reader or an actor something more to imagine about the character and the mood they are in.

Jake walks into the room. (we have no idea of his mood)

Better alternative words:

Jake creeps into the room. (he could be scared)

Jake slinks into the room. (he could be ashamed)

Jake slumps into the room. (he could be depressed)

Jake marches into the room. (he could be confident)

Jake strides into the room. (he could be angry)

See how changing one word adds a bit more depth to the character. I don't need to give examples of every single word in every situation, and there is nothing wrong with, "Jake walks into the room", but in a 100 page script, Jake might walk into a lot of rooms, and after a while it just becomes boring to read. Be more creative than that. And these days most software programs have a built in thesaurus so you can find alternative and more creative words with the click of a button. A few of the other words that I've mentioned might read a bit better if you can find more interesting alternatives, such as these:

For, runs, instead you could use – dashes, bolts, races, scampers, scoots, sprints.

For, eats, instead you could use – devours, scoffs, gobbles, nibbles, consumes, stuffs.

For, exits, instead you could use – departs, retreats, takes off, splits, withdraws.

All these are just examples of better words to use after you've used the most basic words a few times already. Don't keep repeating the same words.



It's your job to be creative, not your job to be boring. Plenty of other writers already have that job and they're very, very good at it.

Some should even be awarded medals.

This is what most, bored, studio executives in Hollywood actually look like.

Don't let your script cause him the need to start holding his head up.

Be brave. Be bold. Be unique.

The First Draft

This is THE MOST important thing that I learned when writing a screenplay, and it was drummed into me from the start. When you've finally worked out your story, created your characters, typed it all out, lost weight, pulled all your hair out, run out of money, read it aloud, banged your head against a brick wall and corrected all of your mistakes, you most certainly HAVE NOT FINISHED.

Actually, this is where you start.

Well done for getting to this point, but the first time you do get to this point, all you've done is create a blue print for a script you will need to rewrite, tweak and make fixes to so it can truly be ready for the world to read.

Do not print it all out and start taking it to Agents, Actors and Studio Executives straight away. All first drafts usually have a lot of problems, so don't sell yourself short. Don't spend a year writing a screenplay and the moment you finish, print it out and start giving it to everyone left, right and centre. You're bound to have some problems in places. It might be too long, or too short, too predictable or too slow. The characters might all sound the same, or the plot might be confusing.

You only get one chance to show your script to certain people, so don't ruin your chances by giving an important Executive your very first draft, because chances are, he or she won't like it and then you've blown your shot.

What you do need to do at this point, is get some notes. Go out and give your script to a few close pals who you trust. Get those people to tell you what they really think of the story, characters and dialog. Of course, when they give you their notes, it's only their opinion. No one is right or wrong when writing a movie script, which is why it's so difficult to know if what you're doing is going to be good.

So when you listen to people's opinions and get their notes, you can either make changes to your story if you agree with them, or if you don't like the note you can simply just throw it out.

I've found that where this system works best is that if a whole bunch of people give me the same note, then I know I really do have a problem. I'd advise not discarding a note if a group of people are telling you the same thing. If 5 people tell you the end was predictable, then you have a problem that needs changing and improving.



Ask people what ending they'd like to see and how you can make it more exciting and tension filled. If only 1 person makes a comment on the ending, then you can just consider the change, but of course, if another 8 people love the ending, then you can probably discard the 1 note from that 1 unhappy person and just trust the majority.

During this process you also need to be very careful of what I like to call, "The Baloney Factor." A lot of your close friends or family members might not like your script but might not want to break the bad news to you. They might just tell you that it was great and that's the end of the conversation. This is entirely unhelpful to you. There is nothing wrong with people telling you they loved your work, but you must make sure they always tell you the truth because if there is a problem with the script, you really need to deal with it before it goes to the studio people or that high flying Agent. Tell your friends you won't take it personally and it won't hurt your feelings if they dislike something.

The only way they will help you is to tell you the truth and not feed you Baloney. It's crucial they are honest because you really will be able to improve the script with good notes. I'm lucky enough to have 3 or 4 people who I really trust and they always give me honest, accurate notes.

That really is about everything I've learned in Hollywood over the last few years about writing a script.

Thanks for reading and I really hope these basic points help you get started. I hope they've taken you from a point of not knowing anything, to knowing something about where to start.

Good luck.

And happy writing.

Glynn Turner