



## MORE SCREENWRITING CONCERNS

By now you should have read chapter 2 of the *Digital Filmmaking Handbook*. If you have, you should have a much better idea of what goes in to writing a screenplay, and what your finished product should look like. In this essay, you're going to learn more about the concerns a screenwriter faces when confronting all that blank paper. In addition, you'll also read about some of the practical concerns that you'll face when taking your script out into the world.

### TURNING A STORY INTO A SCRIPT

Before you begin writing your screenplay, you'll want to have a good idea of what your story is. (For details on creating and structuring your story, see Chapter 2 of *The Digital Filmmaking Handbook*.) Once you've got your story roughed out, you're ready to turn that story into a finished screenplay.

Your goal at this point is simply a first draft of a shooting script. Don't expect your first draft to be a great, polished work. First drafts are usually very rough and simply serve as a way to organize your ideas so that you can write a more reasonable second draft. Writing a first draft will be much easier if you accept that it is mostly an exercise in structure; a way to get your ideas on paper. Writing is hard, hard work, to make it easier, consider the following issues of "discipline."

- **Get on a regular writing schedule and devote as much time as you can.** Momentum when writing is a very valuable asset. The feel of your characters and the logic of your story is much easier to maintain if you are working on your script as frequently as possible. If you've got the luxury of writing full-time, aim for no less than ten pages a day.
- **Don't look back!** On your first draft, don't spend time going backward and re-writing—that's for later drafts. Instead, keep writing forward. Keep adding new pages and working towards your ending. If you do discover major logical flaws, go back and note them in your script, but try to keep your writing going forward.
- **Don't hesitate to write rough, placeholder scenes and characters.** If you need a scene or character to keep your story moving, just put in anything that makes sense. You can always go back and replace it with something reasonable in later drafts.
- **Pace a lot.** (Actually, this may have no real value, but it works for us.)
- **Ignore everything we've just said.** There is no right or wrong way to write. If the above recommendations help, great! If not, don't hesitate to ignore them and find your own way. If you can only finish by writing one page a week, then do that!



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When your first draft is finished, congratulate yourself! Slogging through that first take is never easy so give yourself some credit.

### **CONTRACTING A SCRIPT**

Of course, you may not be a writer. If you don't feel qualified or talented enough to write a particular script you can, of course, hire a writer. Or perhaps you know someone who's written a great script and you want to produce it. Whatever the case, if you find yourself needing to go elsewhere for a script, there are a number of things to consider.

### **HIRING A WRITER**

Obviously, if you've got a project in mind, you don't have to do the writing yourself. If you're working on a corporate or industrial production, you might have someone in-house who can handle your writing for you. But if you don't, or if you've got a story idea but don't feel you have the writing skills to pull it off, you'll have to hire a writer.

When selecting a writer your first concern, obviously, should be their writing skill. Don't hire someone without looking at their previous work and don't bother looking at anything but previously written screenplays. Writing for the screen is very different than writing for the stage or writing prose. Similarly, try to look at pieces that are similar in tone and presentation to your own project. Just because someone has written a great dramatic epic doesn't mean they're going to be able to write your romantic comedy script or training video.

Also, spend some time talking to your writing prospects. See if you have the same vision of your project and make sure that they're someone you feel you can work with. Depending on your project, the writer you choose may be involved through the entire production. Since this is someone you're most likely going to be spending a lot of time with—a lot of very stressed time—you need to be sure you're comfortable working with them.

Once you've chosen a writer you'll need to negotiate a contract. If the writer is a member of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) then you'll have to start your contract negotiations with the standard Writer's Guild of America contract. If your writer is not a member of the WGA (or if you can't afford the WGA contract) then you'll have to negotiate a contract of your own.

Beginning producers (and writers) should remember that the writer's job does not begin and end with the screenplay. Before the writer begins on the actual screenplay, you're going to want to spend time with him or her developing the story. After this may come a treatment, then a first draft, then more drafts, then a polish (a final pass to tighten up dialog). After you've heard the script read by your cast, you might realize there are weaknesses in dialog or story that



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will need to be re-written. Similarly, once you're actually on the set shooting, you may find more that needs re-writing. The writer's contract (as well as the production's budget) needs to account for all of these contingencies.

As an example, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, the MGM/UA Pictures James Bond movie starring Pierce Brosnan was originally a story about the fall of Hong Kong. After the movie was already in production the studio realized that the release of the picture would coincide with the return of Hong Kong to China. Deciding that this was potentially a bad PR move, the studio ordered a complete re-write of the script even though the cameras were already rolling. It's a credit to the skill of screenwriter Bruce Feirstein that the final script-written under tremendous time pressure--worked very well and was able to incorporate material that had already been shot.

### TABLE READINGS

A table reading, where the cast (or stand-ins) read the script while sitting at a table, can help determine whether or not the dialogue and pacing are working well. You should wait until you're ready for your "polish" before you have a table reading.

Your writer's contract will need to specify such things as a payment schedule for how much will be paid for each step of the project as well as the writer's percentage (if any) of final profits. Obviously, for this sort of negotiation, you'll want to consult a lawyer. Ideally, select an entertainment lawyer with experience in writer's contracts.

### PURCHASING A SCRIPT

As a producer or director, you may not be interested in writing your own script. If you know someone who has a good script, you might want to consider buying it. Or, you might want to consider purchasing the rights to an existing story/novel, news or magazine article, say for adaptation into a screenplay.

When considering a finished screenplay, you have two alternatives: to buy the script outright, or to buy an option to develop the script. An option means that you have, for a limited amount of time, the exclusive rights to develop that script into a feature with the option to buy the script before the option agreement expires. If it does expire, you can choose to renew the option, if all parties agree, which usually requires another payment to the author.

The price and duration of the option is negotiable and there's no rule that says that an option has to cost anything at all. You might be able to convince a writer that the time you'll spend trying to develop the project is worth enough for the option. If you do pay cash, the amount of the option is paid against the final cost of the script. So, if you agree to option a script for \$5000 with an



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eventual purchase of \$50,000, you'll owe the author \$45,000 for the final script.

As with a writer's contract, your purchase or author's contract should specify the writer's role and payments in detail as well as specify the rights you're purchasing (motion picture, sequel, television, cable, video, merchandising, etc.).

### **BUYING A STORY**

There are a zillion stories out there and you can read a lot of them in newspapers and magazines every day. If one of those stories strikes you as being a good subject for a film project, then you can option the rights to that story and set about developing it into a script. Obviously, if you read a compelling story about the Grand Canyon, you don't have to option the rights to the Grand Canyon. However, if you read a compelling story about two one-armed xylophone players getting lost in the Grand Canyon, and you want to develop that specific story, then you'll probably need to consider buying an option from the journalist who wrote the story. To be safe, consult an attorney with experience in this area of copyright law.

### **PROTECTING YOUR SCRIPT**

Once your script is done, there are several things you can do to protect it from theft or copyright infringement. Whether or not you formally apply for a copyright on your work, your script is, technically copyrighted as soon as you write it down. There is little reason to copyright a screenplay unless you're feeling particularly litigious. Registering with the copyright office establishes public records that are often required for successful copyright infringement suits and to collect attorney's fees and statutory damages in the event of such a suit.

The easiest way to register with the Copyright office is through their web site. Though you can't register on-line, you can download PDF files of the appropriate copyright registration forms. Go to [www.loc.gov/copyright/forms/](http://www.loc.gov/copyright/forms/) and download form PA.

If you're on a really tight budget, you can provide yourself with a much more limited form of protection by mailing yourself a copy of your finished script. When the script arrives don't open it! The postmark and sealed envelope can provide a modicum of proof of ownership and date of writing.

### **WRITERS GUILD REGISTRATION**

Whether or not you formally copyright your script, it's worth registering your



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script or treatment with the Writers Guild of America to establish a solid proof and date of authorship. The WGA charges a small fee (\$20 for non-members at the time of this writing) and requires nothing more than an 8.5 x 11", unbound copy of the work with a cover sheet containing the author's full name and social security number. Registration is good for five years. For more details, check out [www.wga.org/manual/registration.html](http://www.wga.org/manual/registration.html) or call (323) 782-4500 for information.

### WIPO

You should also check out the World Intellectual Property Organization, a site available in English, French, and Spanish That provides good general coverage of international copyright information and terms.

## SCRIPT COVERAGE - GETTING A PROFESSIONAL OPINION

Since few producers have the time to read all the scripts that are submitted to them, they frequently employ readers who read scripts and then write a type of script analysis called "script coverage." Coverage includes a synopsis of the script as well as simple information including time period and genre. An estimation of the script's budget (low, medium, high) is usually included as well as a checklist that rates characteristics of the script such as dialog, characterization and so on. Finally, and most importantly, the reader offers their opinion of the script in a few lines and either recommends the script for production or passes on it.

Professional story coverage from a reader can be a good source of constructive criticism from an impartial third party. What's more, you can give copies of the coverage to potential producers when you're trying to convince them of the merit of your project. Unless you've already got a screenwriting agent, the easiest way to get coverage is to find a professional reader and pay them to read your script and do coverage on it. Ask people who work with readers to recommend someone. Another way to get coverage (or at least, an impartial opinion) is to submit your script to a screenplay competition. Some of them will share the comments that were made on your script which will be in the form of traditional script coverage.

**Tip:** If you're pitching a long format project, like a dramatic feature film, try to get your script covered by a professional reader. Hopefully the coverage will be positive and you can include it as part of your pitch. The more prestigious the letterhead on the coverage (i.e. a



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major studio), the better. This will show that even though your script isn't suited to be a major studio project, it's a good script.

One way to get your script covered is to submit it to a development company or studio. Most studios will only look at scripts submitted by a screenwriter's agent. If you don't have an agent, you might be able to get your script covered by submitting it to an agent, on the grounds that you are looking for representation. Whether it's an agent, a studio or a development company, you will then have to ask them for a copy of the coverage. They might say no or merely offer their verbal opinion. The other way to get coverage is to find a professional reader, many of whom are freelance, and pay them to read your script and do coverage on it. Ask people who work with readers to recommend someone. Another way to get coverage (or at least, an impartial opinion) is to submit your script to a screenplay competition. Some of them will share the comments that were made on your script which will be in the form of traditional script coverage.

If you need help finding an industry professional to provide coverage, check out this list of Industry Professionals.

## HOW TO FIND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

There are many resources for finding entertainment industry professionals. These directories are usually updated annually and are specific to a geographic region or city. This list is a jumping off point, if you don't live in New York or Los Angeles, you'll probably have to do some research on your own via local film commissions.

- **L.A. 411, N.Y. 411, The Reel Directory** - an annual "phonebook" for the entertainment industry in Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco respectively.
- **The Screenwriter's Room** - "The Screenwriters' Room has experienced feature film executives who read and consult on screenplays for ALL WRITERS and can provide PERSONAL REFERRALS to agents, producers, and studio executives."
- **The Hollywood Creative Directory** - lists thousands of production companies, including those with studio deals, along with names and titles of executive producers, producers, development executives, story editors, and other key staff members.



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- **The Hollywood Reporter BluBook** - Another annual “phonebook” for the entertainment industry.
- **The Hollywood Agents and Managers Directoy** - a biannual publication listing talent agents, literary agents, managers and casting directors.
- **Breakdown Services, Ltd.** - A company that offers casting services and recommendations for casting directors, agents, and managers. They have offices in L.A., N.Y., London, Vancouver, and Toronto.
- **The New York C/D Directory** - an annual publication of New York-based casting directors.
- **Casting Society of America (CSA)** - an organization of casting directors. [www.castingsociety.com](http://www.castingsociety.com)
- **Hollywood Connection Kit for Macintosh or Windows.** Reference software that lists contact information for Agents, TV/Film Executives, and Talent. Includes on-line updates.

Last but not least, by watching the credits at the ends of movies. Once you have their name, you can try to find them through one of the publications or organizations listed above. They’ll most likely be based in L.A. or N.Y. unless it’s a foreign film.

## SCRIPT CONTESTS

There are a number of foundations and organizations that sponsor annual and semi-annual screenwriting contests. These are great opportunities for beginning screenwriters to get feedback, and criticism and, if all goes well, money or further training.

Almost all screenplay competitions expect to receive scripts written in standard Screenplay form (see Chapter 2 of *The Digital Filmmaking Handbook*) and most offer prizes ranging from cash to intern opportunities on major studio film lots. Check out the following web pages for more info:

**Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting** Sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Offers prizes up to \$25,000!

**Scriptapalooza** Respected screenwriting competition offering prizes up to \$2500.

**National Screenwriting Competition** This year’s judging panel includes Producer/Director Joel Schumacher (*St. Elmo’s Fire*, *Batman Forever*) and offers prizes up to \$2500 cash and possible option offer.

**The Daily Script** Now offering a “Get a Life in Hollywood” screenplay competition.

**The Praxis Screenwriting Competition** Sponsored by the Praxis Centre for Screenwriters.



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**Final Draft's Big Break Screenwriting Competition** Sponsored by the creators of Final Draft Screenwriting software.

**HSC Screenwriting Competition** Sponsored by Cinevision 2000 distribution.

**Peter Stark Screenwriting Competition** In association with the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

Note that there are frequently grants and screenplay competitions offered at a regional level to residents of a particular state or area. A little grant research at your local library can usually uncover a number of these types of contests.

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