Focusing Your Screenplay Theme, Structure & Characters

Focal Points By Ray Morton

One of the most common flaws that I find in many of the scripts that I read is a lack of focus - a misplaced emphasis on the wrong elements in the wrong places at the wrong times. This is a problem because movies require focus. Without it, they cannot be effective.

There are several reasons for this: The first is that, unlike novels, which can take as much time as they want to tell their tales, movie have limited amounts of time to unfold. Given this limitation, movies need to make their points as quickly and efficiently as possible. They don't have time to wander. The second is that, because of their expansive nature, novels are free to indulge in multiple characters and storylines, plotless character study, and all manner of narrative diversion, digression, and sidebar. Films, on the other hand, work best when they focus on a single character (or set of characters) in a single story with a strong plot told in a (relatively) straightforward manner. Finally, because they engage readers on a subjective level, novels can use a wide range of techniques - action, description, travelogue, inner voice, etc. - to tell their stories. Because their presentation is objective, movies have a more limited palette - they tell their stories exclusively through action. (By action, I don't mean car chases, although they are perfectly acceptable when warranted. Instead, I am referring to dramatic action - behavior, choices, reactions, things said and unsaid, and, of course, physical action). By definition, action requires precision, economy, and pacing.

www.ThinkHollywood.org

THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.

All of these things require focus - the clear statement of a clear theme and the dramatization of that theme in a well-crafted, tightly constructed plot.

Since the screenplay is the blueprint upon which a film is based, it is the screenwriter's job to begin providing that focus from the very first draft. As important a task as this is, it is one many writers have trouble with. The results of this, unfortunately, are unfocused scripts that, while they often contain terrific ideas, characters, and situations, are often unwieldy, confused, and, at times, incoherent. Such confusion makes these scripts hard to read, understand, and ultimately to care about, which, in turn, severely limits both their commercial and creative potential.

So, in order to help you produce a script that is as sharp and clear as you can make it, I humbly offer the following tips:

Make sure that you have a clear grasp of your theme:

The theme is the central idea that underlines your story - it's the point you want it to make; the lesson you want it to teach; the message you want it to convey. Since the theme is the foundation upon which the rest of the story is built, it's important for you to have as clear an understanding as possible of just what it is you want your piece to say. If you don't know it already, it's important that you take the time to figure it out. Once you've gotten a handle on your theme, write it down in one or two simple sentences on a post-it. (This may sound a little gimmicky, but it requires great skill to distill a complex idea down into such a compact form. If you can achieve that degree of focus in your theme, you will be able to achieve it in your script as well.) Stick the post-it up on your computer (or on the cover of your notebook or across the top of your yellow pad) so that you can refer to it constantly while you are writing. In the same way that the North Star helps sailors stay on course, your thematic post-it will keep you steering true when you are in danger of wandering.

Make sure that all elements in the script reflect the theme:

www.ThinkHollywood.org

Once you know your theme, it is vitally important to then tether all of the script's elements to it. First make sure that your protagonist and his/her arc are appropriate for the theme. In accordance with the basic rules of drama, this usually involves establishing a character that embodies a position that is the exact opposite of the one the theme champions and then have that character journey along a path that will land him at exactly the point the theme is trying to make by the end of the story. For example, the theme of the classic 80's comedy Tootsie is that men need to learn to treat women as people rather than as objects. At the outset of the story, Michael Dorsey, the protagonist, is established as a player who treats women casually and is insensitive to their needs - exactly the sort of person that needs to learn the lesson the theme seeks to impart. In the course of the story, Michael comes to realize just how badly men in general (and, by implication, he himself) treat women. Eventually, he heeds the theme's lesson and begins treating women well. Next, make sure that the plot dramatically illustrates the protagonist's journey (and thus, the story's theme) and that nothing that happens in the story inhibits that journey (and, thus, contradicts the theme - mixed messages may abound in life, but there's no place for them in drama). If your script includes subplots and supporting characters, they should provide some sort of useful amplification or counterpoint to the theme.

Make sure your premise is established early and clearly:

The premise is the dramatic concept from which the rest of the story flows - it's the set-up, the hook, the jumping off point for the rest of your script. Without a premise, a script would have no framework. Instead of being a tightly constructed piece of drama that grabs the reader, thrusts him into a tense and exciting situation and hurtles him along a path full of twists turns and reversals until finally arriving at a powerful, inevitable resolution, a script would instead be nothing more than a long string of loosely-connected events meandering along with no beginning, no resolution, and no ending. For this reason, it is vital that you establish your premise clearly - so we know what the story is about - and quickly so that it can grab us right from the get-go.

Make sure that there is a logical flow to the story:

This may sound like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised as how many scripts founder because their stories unfold in an illogical, haphazard, or convoluted manner. To prevent this, make sure that the events in Act I establish and flow from the premise. Make sure that the complications that arise in Act II flow from the situations that are set up in Act I. (Do not make the mistake that so many writers do and start a whole new story in Act II. If you can't figure out a way to logically complicate the elements from Act I, then you need to set up different elements.) Make sure that the events that occur in Act III resolve the complications that have been developed in Act II and make the thematic point that you want your script to make.

Always focus the plot on the protagonist:

The plot should always center on the lead character and should chronicle his journey. Any other characters should either support the protagonist or the antagonist or else drive the plot. If they do not serve any of these functions, then they should be eliminated. Supporting characters should never have storylines of their own that do not somehow involve the main character.

Avoid extraneous subplots:

Subplots should be included in a script only if they have some sort of direct relevance to or impact on the main characters or the main plotline (i.e., they show another necessary side of a character or they provide some sort of necessary exposition or they set up a necessary plot twist, etc. Notice I keep using the word "necessary"). Irrelevant or unrelated subplots should be avoided at all costs, especially if they focus on anyone other than the main characters. Avoid creating a separate movie within a movie, which often happens when disconnected subplots are allowed to run wild.

Do not let your antagonist hijack your script:

www.ThinkHollywood.org

THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.

This is an especially big problem in action scripts. As antagonists are often much more colorful and flamboyant than protagonists (and so are usually a lot more fun to write), it is easy for an author to get carried away when writing them to the point where the script ends up being more about the villain than it is about the hero. Remember that the antagonist's role in a story is to foil the protagonist, not steal the movie from him.

Keep it moving:

Even a script that has a great premise, a fascinating plot, and engaging, compelling characters can still lose an audience if it goes on too long, wanders too much, or stops too often to smell the roses. It's important to always keep the plot moving and that means you have to be willing to bite the bullet and cut out any bits - jokes, gags, action, dialogue runs, color, and moments - that do not serve to propel the action. This is often a very difficult thing for writers to do because it is often these bits that are dearest to their hearts. But if including them causes your reader to lose track of your story, then you have to heed the old saw and "kill your darlings."

I hope that these tips will help you keep things "in focus."

Good luck and happy writing.

Copyright © 2004/2009 Ray Morton. All Rights Reserved.

Ray Morton is a professional script consultant, story analyst, and also a senior writer and columnist for Script Magazine. His books King Kong: The History of a Movie Icon and Close Encounters of the Third Kind: The Making of Steven Spielberg's Classic Film are both available in bookstores and online and at Amazon.com and other outlets. Morton is available for script consultation and can be reached at ray@raymorton.com.

http://www.movieoutline.com/articles/screnplay_theme.html

www.ThinkHollywood.org

THINK HOLLYWOOD is dedicated to opening the doors to Hollywood and providing world-class services to hand-selected film and television concepts and bringing that material to the screen.