How to Find Weaknesses in Your Script
By Don Bledsoe

The new screenwriter tends to have a love affair with is/her "baby." He's married to every word and nuance he's carefully scripted onto each page. Often, it reads more like a novel than a screenplay and usually it needs a serious rewrite. It's time to get a divorce.

You must not be afraid to hack, chisel or cut-out ANYTHING that does not serve to push the story forward. Sooner or later, you'll write a scene that is just plain good. You're in love again and all is right with the world. Finally, you conclude that it doesn't serve the story as it should. You must get a divorce and hack it out of the script.

Remember: not every story is movie material. Not every story is as fascinating on the screen as it is in our heads. This is especially true of biographical stories. As interesting as someone's true-life experiences are, they rarely translate well to the screen. However, it often makes an excellent bestselling book.

In screenwriting, you only have TWO TOOLS to work with in a screenplay:

DIALOGUE: that characters say

ACTION: a visual description of what is seen on the movie screen

This does NOT include:

* Anything anyone "knows" (i.e. "Ed heard about Jennifer's problem at school.")

* Anything that cannot be photographed (i.e. "Mary loves chocolate ice cream.")

* Anything the audience "knows" (i.e. "This is the same woman we saw earlier at the bar.")

* Any background information (i.e. "John is Tom's best friend.")

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* Any action description that uses '-ing' words. (i.e. "Sue is reading the newspaper." should be "Sue reads the newspaper.")

Here's a common sense approach to self-analysis of your own screenplay:

1. Read some FIRST-RATE scripts!

You need outstanding examples of well-written screenplays against which you can compare your work objectively. I recommend you read at least three, preferably nine, screenplays. Here's the catch: You MUST read them ALL in the same week. Agents and development executives read 35-50 a week on their own time so I know you can read at least three. Don't look at a single page of your script until you've finished reading the scripts you downloaded. Read one (or more) in each of the following categories:

* One in the same genre as yours,
* One that's been made into an OSCAR-winning or nominated movie, and
* One that's an all-time favorite movie of yours.

2. Now: read your script.

It might seem a little different now, but that's GOOD. You're becoming a little more objective.

3. Read yours again: OUT LOUD.

Isaac Asimov: "Either it sounds right or it doesn't sound right."

You might be amazed at how you'll spot those things you know need a little extra attention. They're those things that seem "odd" or don't feel "right" to you when you read it out loud. You might find yourself thinking that certain characters say and do things that don't seem to "fit" their backstory. You likely find this especially true of dialogue. Circle these dialogue passages so you can come back to them later.

4. Act it out.

This is also an opportunity to get actor friends to read your script. If scenes are awkward or don't come across as you intended, they need work. Stage a reading of the script. Make sure all of the actors get a list of the characters they will portray and have someone assigned to all of the lesser, incidental characters. Don't prep them! Let the actor get the information about the character only from the script. If he doesn't get it, neither will an agent, reader or producer; and you need to go back the set-up the character so he DOES get it. During the reading, mark scenes that don't

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work or have the intended impact and come back to them later.

5. Read it through out loud again, but only the ACTION DESCRIPTION.

Movies are a visual medium. If your story isn't visual, maybe it shouldn't be a movie. Did you get lost? Are things vague? Are the scenes not visual? Can you tell what's going by the visual clues? Mark those scenes and come back and flush them out a little more.

6. One more time out loud, but this time only the DIALOGUE.

Do characters seem to drone on and on? Can't tell WHAT they're talking about? Do they talk about things not essential to the scene? Mark these scenes and come back and rewrite them later.

Rule of Thumb: Scenes and dialogue should start at the point where, if you cut out the start of the scene, what follows doesn't make sense any more. This also applies to movies. Many screenplays really start around pages 30-50, which means the writer spent way too much time setting up the story. How do you tell? As you read, it suddenly seems as though you've started a "movie in a movie" and you like it better than the one you started. Time to get divorced. Unsure? Write a second script and see which version you like best.

Writing is Rewriting

Ernest Hemingway: "Don't get discouraged because there's a lot of mechanical work to writing...I rewrote the first part of Farewell to Arms at least fifty times."

Paddy Chayefsky: "I'm not a great writer, I'm a great rewriter."

Good advice from two guys who ought to know.

Long wanting to be in "the business" Don Bledsoe started young producing a short film for NBC while still in high school worked in the Story Department at Paramount Studios at age 19 and later as an actor and makeup artist in film and television in Hollywood. A self-confessed computer geek he took up screenwriting in the early 90's and founded http://www.scriptnurse.com Script Nurse in 1999.

http://www.movieoutline.com/articles/script-rewriting.html

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