



Scared of Studio Pitch Meetings By John Hill

Scared of studio pitch meetings? No problem, if you have P.T. Barnum's gift of gab and the Terminator's self-confidence.

You arrive early at the studio for your pitch meeting. You feel like you're ready. But you really hate pitch meetings. You're a writer, not...a salesperson, or a trained seal who performs. But this is the bread and butter of being a screenwriter: the meetings.

It's not even that you're burning with a hard blue flame inside to write this particular idea...

You're really here to remind this studio executive, that you have some slight business relationship with, that you're still alive and well and available for assignments.

So between spec scripts you write, that you hope he reads, you have to do relationship-maintenance-through-pitching.

Or. They. Will. Forget. About. You. Fast.

So here you are, driving over the studio drawbridge, past the agent-filled moat. You have selected and rehearsed which story to pitch, choosing the one that tells the best, which are the simplest, high concept plot-type.

The security guard at the gate can't find your drive-on pass, so there's that hassle, then tells you your first studio lie of the day: that visitor parking is available. There isn't, so you experience a zen moment, where you're late even though you're early. But the



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executive you're there to meet with, Brad or Sheila, is even later, so you wait. You are asked by the nice assistant if you would like some water or today's trades. You say yes to the trades, even though you're smart enough to have carefully read *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety* that morning so there's no surprises in the meeting. You also have researched the studio's development list, so you know the general topic you're about to pitch isn't already under development. This is sales now, not writing, and a good salesperson does their homework; know thy enemy.

You glance at your watch and wish you'd worn the other outfit you started to wear, the one that says "I'm hip, I'm happening, and I'm not going to get overly dressed up just to suck up to you studio people for a deal." Instead, you chose the look that you hope says, "I'm so talented and successful, I don't even have to dress down," but the shoes for it really hurt.

You ignore the trades and sneak your "leave behind" out of your slim briefcase you always bring but never get into during the meeting. Your "leave behind" is a short (3-5 page) treatment, that, like all treatments, is advertising copy, designed to present and sell your story enthusiastically. It describes the main character, his arc, about a page apiece on each of the three acts, and also, directly offers similar plots that are profitable precedents. You won't get this treatment/leave-behind out, nor tell them you have one, until the end, if they say "let us think about this idea." Then and only then do you offer to leave it. They're eager to get it, since that way, they don't have to remember anything. You're eager to leave it, because it lets you influence on how your story is characterized to their higher-ups, instead of counting on their faulty memory and poor notes.

So you try to scan your own treatment while waiting for the meeting, but you know it cold. You videotaped yourself doing this pitch, timing it, practicing it, until you have the pauses down cold, the ad-libs. You've gotten it down to twenty-two minutes, wishing it could get said in sixteen. You made an audiotape of your pitch that you've been listening to in the car, including on the drive here just now. You know it.



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Finally, as people who must be more important than you rush in and out, the nice assistant says Brad or Sheila is ready to see you. You quickly your leave-behind treatment in your slim, tasteful briefcase and go inside.

"Hello!" Brad or Sheila says, getting up from behind their desk, greeting you warmly. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but there's some things going on..." (Translation: I have the power to make you wait, so I did, just so its clear, I have more important things to do that your meeting.)

"Hey, I understand," you say, and boy, do you understand. No drive-on pass ready, no place to park, keeping you waiting? You understand: they are gods, the studio is Mt. Olympus, you are a peasant of a mortal, and more indignities will follow, including the Taking Of The Calls during the pitch.

Brad or Sheila now gestures for you to sit on their overstuffed sofa which causes you to sink back uncomfortably for the duration, while they take their power chair. Then the Earth must stop turning while Brad or Sheila summon their assistant and describe in great detail the type of tea they are in the mood for, then say, "Ask Mark or Shannon to step in." These are all just little mini-power trips. Brad or Sheila may dream of full studio power and glory someday, but the odds are they'll soon be downsized to indy-prod land as a hustling producer, a niche with its own set of indignities, so they enjoy studio power while it lasts.

Now Brad or Sheila turn to give you their divided attention, plus 4.8 minutes of small talk, while Mark or Shannon joins the meeting. This is a younger person, still a little genuinely nice, who has a pad and pen, and will take notes. You marvel at the thought: there is a training period needed to do Mark or Sheila's job? Finally, The Mystery Person Who Occupies An Undefined

Niche In The Hierarchy also joins the meeting. A quiet, well-dressed person is introduced to you by name, but no mention made of exactly who they are or why they are there, other than to lend an additional Kafka-esque element to the



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proceedings. The problem is, as a salesperson, you now don't know where the lines of power are in the room, so you know who to play to, or why. You briefly recall the old joke. What do you do with an elephant with three balls?

Answer: walk him, then pitch to the giraffe.

"I really liked your script," the giraffe named Brad or Sheila says, and this is the only completely sincere thing to be said here today. You don't get inside the studio walls to pitch ideas to execs unless in fact a good agent has sent over an impressive script you've written and they liked it enough to meet with you to hear other ideas. You say thanks, as the assistant arrives, creating a choreography of who gets which tea or which brand of bottled water. They get all settled in, and stare.

"I understand from your agent you have an idea," Brad or Sheila says.

"Yes, I do," you say. Curtain rises, spotlight is on you, and you now have fifteen minutes to talk them out of \$150,000 for a development deal, i.e., what you now say has to be worth \$10,000 a minute. And your Dad who sold appliances in Kansas City for decades thought **he** had a tough sales territory.

"I'm very excited about a contemporary adventure," you say, launching into your canned pitch, including all the pauses, hesitation, and moments of passion. But you can't sound overly rehearsed. You have to play to their comfort zones, where you're the confused, child-like creative type, and they are the adults in business suits who can lead you out of your confusion.

"Contemporary adventure, good" the note-taking younger Mark or Shannon says, to remind the the other two in the room he or she is there, a power to be reckoned with, and they'd better watch their corporate step. After all, Brad or Sheila is early 30's, while Mark or Shannon is mid-20's. Youth is all in the Dorian Gray world of Hollywood, since the audiences for blockbusters remain young, while the players, kicking and screaming, age.



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You lean forward, eyes aglow, putting energy in your voice, and begin.

"The hero is Joe Six-Pack, average guy, wife, two kids, imagine, say, Collin Farrell. Unemployed construction worker, can't get work, and it's killing him, which is the theme of this story: what unemployment can do to some people, how desperate they can become. He's at a bar, with some buddies, they're joking around, drinking, they ask him if he knows how to swim. He says no. They laugh, fill out some form, have him sign it, and they enter his name in a big nationally promoted contest as a joke. Cut to weeks later, he and his wife are arguing about money. He still can't get work, he's really trying, her job isn't enough, they're now living on one kid's college fund, which just kills him, the other kid needs braces, etc. "

As you're saying this, you try not to be distracted by the fact that the friendly, animated faces in front of you have turned into Mt. Rushmore. This is their game face, when they hear pitches. It's not personal. You resist saying, is this an audience or an oil painting, and you press on, "Then on the national news --"

Phone rings. Forget hold-all-calls if you're just the writer. Brad or Sheila answers phone. Problem on Stage 14. Brad or Sheila mumbles into the phone. The Mysterious Third Person In Every Meeting suggests you continue on without Brad or Sheila. But you're just smart and gutsy enough to instead say, "No, let's wait." And you wait. Brad or Sheila hangs up, apologizes, but your sales momentum is shot. No one remembers where you were.

You must instantly regroup, recap the story, and still sell this puppy.

"So while our hero is economically trapped, bitter, feeling like a total failure, suddenly over the national TV it is announced that he is the winner of an international drawing. He has the chance to be the one contestant in a widely-publicized, and criticized, pay-per-view and special internet live stream event. He has a chance to win one million dollars. All he has to do is go into a special big underwater tank off the coast of



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Singapore, in international waters, where he will fight, to the death, one on one, a great white shark."

You pause, letting this sink in. "A great white shark," Mark or Shannon says, pausing in their note-taking. You nod. "Some crazy Don King-type promoter has set it a live action gladiator-type special. It's Man Vs. Shark, also the working title of this movie. **Average man will fight a great white shark underwater, to the death, for a million dollars.**"

You talk faster. "The media is at his doorstep, his wife says no way, but Collin Farrell realizes that this is his one chance to be a good provider for his family, now and forever. He's scared, but decides he'd better try it. He has to learn how to swim and use scuba gear. The rules are he can use one handheld weapon, knife or spear, but not a speargun. He hires a crusty old shark hunter to help him, and he practices diving in Bermuda, near real sharks. Everyone in his life, wife, kids, says no, don't. Big tension."

You elaborate, telling them the three-act structure, the theme of desperation due to unemployment, his fears, hopes, plus his need to be a man and provide. The deal is that if he dies, his family gets \$100,000, and he knows that means security and college he can't provide while alive. You talk a lot more about the main character's arc, then finish, saying, "And that's idea.

It's ROCKY meets JAWS. But it's really about a character and his inner drive to feel like a good man again, dramatizing how much men want to be responsible breadwinners and heroes to their families, but can't in bad economic times.

The other great thing about this idea is that it's 100% castable for any superstar, any age, from Josh Harnette to Denzel Washington to Harrison Ford. Oh, and there's one hell of a great underwater battle at the end too. Think how exciting the thirty-second trailer can be."

They ask a few off-the-wall questions, but you've learned, even when stumped, to say,



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matter-of-factly, "That's a solvable problem," and not let them pause on negatives. When they offer a plot suggestion, you say, "great idea," whatever it is, acting excited about it, because you want these execs to attach their egos to your story so they'll want it and fight for it at the studio.

But who knows what they're really thinking? You can't tell. They finally say, "Thanks for coming in. Let us think about it, get back to you."

You now offer up the leave-behind, with a certain gosh-and-shucks manner, so you won't seem too slick. They eagerly take it. Handshakes, smiles, you leave, having no idea if they love it or hate it, or what they think of you. Impossible to tell. And you find yourself in the parking lot.

You try to forget that meeting and focus on your next pitch, next week, different idea, different studio. What you really want to do is stay home and write, but to avoid the pitching trail is to avoid being fully pro-active about your career, to risk being forgotten, and to lessen the chances of getting any writing deal.

As for the Man Vs. Shark idea? You're aware it's a little like man vs studio, what you just went through, but you go on with your week. And as for hearing back from Mark or Sheila about it? You wait. You wait for their call, where you could get six-figures and a chance to write a big, life-changing blockbuster, or they could very likely pass on it, plus you may have talked yourself completely off their radar forever too.

You wait to hear from them.

You wait.

And you wait.

And you wait.

John Hill began writing as a professional screenwriter over 25 years ago. His numerous



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credits include **GRIFFIN AND PHOENIX (2006)**, starring Dermot Mulrooney and Amanda Peet and **QUIGLEY DOWN UNDER (1990)**, based on his spec script, starring Tom Selleck, Laura San Giacomo, and Alan Rickman. He has worked on staff as a writer-type producer on **QUANTUM LEAP** and on **L.A. LAW**, where he won an Emmy in 1991. He wrote a regular column for **SCR(I)PT** magazine for 5 years and now teaches writing and creativity at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. One-on-one mentoring in screenwriting is available. He may be reached at Hillwithit@aol.com.

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



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