Scriptshadow Secrets

500 SCREENWRITING SECRETS HIDDEN INSIDE 50 GREAT MOVIES

CONFIDENTIAL

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The World's #1 Screenwriting Blogger Reveals His Top Tips of the Trade.

FOREWORD

I've spent the better part of a decade reading every major screenplay sold over the past thirty years. I've read over 2,000 amateur screenplays and given coverage on half of them. I've written 1,000 screenplay reviews for my blog, Scriptshadow. I've read scripts for contests. I've read scripts for producers. I even read scripts for fun! All in all, I've read over 5000 screenplays. Now, why would I do such a thing? Aren't people like me sent to hospitals with big, white cushioned walls? Typically, yes. Believe it or not, however, there is a method to my madness. I've been seeking the answer to the biggest screenwriting question of them all: *What makes a script sell?* What is that magical formula that results in a six-figure sale? Writers have been beating themselves up for decades trying to figure this out. And guess what? After reading all these scripts, I finally found the answer.

Want to know what it is?

Great writing.

Hard to believe? Sure. I mean, with studios putting a premium on projects like *Transformers* and *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, how much can Hollywood really value writing? Unfortunately, bad scripts do sell - for a number of reasons we won't get into here. But those sales have nothing to do with you unless you're one of the lucky few who find themselves in the right place at the right time. If Lady Luck isn't on your side, the only thing you have control over is *your ability to write a great script.* If you can do that, people *will* notice you and they *will* buy your screenplay. How do I know this? Because I read everything and I talk to everyone, and the one universal truth I've found is that if material is great, everybody in town will want it.

Here's the problem though: most writers, especially those just starting out, have no idea what "great" writing is. Truthfully, they don't even know what "good" writing is. They believe that if they're tackling serious subject matter where soldiers are dying or characters are crying, that this will somehow translate into an Oscar-winning screenplay. It doesn't. It translates into schlocky melodrama. And I should know. I read these scripts *constantly.*

While every writing medium shares a common language, screenwriting is the most bastardized of these languages, requiring a different skill-set to pull off your story. For example, maybe you want to write the next *Raiders of the Lost Ark.* So you write a script about a guy who travels the world looking for treasure. You're convinced Tom Cruise will want to play the lead. You send the finished script out to a bunch of friends and they all come back with polite variations of, "This is the most boring thing I've ever read. Like *ever.*" You're confused. You're angry. You're hurt. What happened??

Well, was your hero likable? Was he dealing with any compelling internal struggles? Was every scene thrusting the story forward? Did your inciting incident come soon enough? Was there a clear focus to the narrative? Were the secondary characters memorable? Were there enough surprises to keep things unpredictable? Did the story build as oppose to fade? Was the dialogue fun or merely functional? Did your main character have a clear objective motivating him? Failing to address any one of these issues could've tripped up your story and there's no way to prevent that from happening if you haven't studied the unique nature of screenwriting. And while learning all this stuff does take time, a big reason why I wrote this book was to speed that process up.

Unlike other screenwriting books that give you the author's A-Z philosophy on screenwriting, this book is constructed to get right to the good stuff. I wanted writers to be able to pick it up, jump to a chapter, read a few tips, get some ideas for tackling problems in their screenplay, then jump right back into writing. And even better, I wanted to use real movie examples to sell these tips. These other authors ask you to take them at their word. You're not going to see that here. I don't just dish out tips. I show you real-world movie examples so you can see why they work. In short, this is the screenwriting book I wish was available when I first started writing.

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So who is it that's giving you this advice? What's my story? How long do you have? I was seven years into my screenwriting journey when I realized that the current screenplay I was working on wasn't any better than the first screenplay I had worked on. In fact, if I had to be honest, I'd gotten worse. When I first came to Los Angeles, I was fearless and optimistic, a hunter with the Hollywood sign in my sights. That optimism and tenaciousness showed in my work and while I wasn't exactly "good," I was able to get into some pretty big meetings.

Now, almost a decade later, I was scared to even *call* a producer. That's how little confidence I had in myself. As I sat in my apartment comparing my past to my present, I thought: "There's actually a chance that I won't succeed at this." It was the first time I'd faced that possibility and it was one of the hardest nights of my life. I'd given my blood, sweat and tears to

screenwriting. It was only yesterday that I'd arrived in LA ready to start making movies. I'd gone all in on this writing thing.

My screenwriting friends tried to help. One of them, in particular, kept insisting I read screenplays – He promised this was the key to getting my writing up to pro level. I told him I'd read *American Beauty* once and, while I liked it, hadn't gotten much out of it. "No," he said, "You need to read scripts that have sold but haven't been made yet. That way the writing has to work on its own." I resisted, of course. I thought it was a stupid idea. I *watched* movies. Why the hell did I have to read them???   He was so damn stubborn about it, however, that I finally relented.

I picked up my first script and within a night, everything I knew about screenwriting had changed. Every page I read was like a miniature screenwriting course. I don't know what it was, but a certain clarity came over me. Previously, I'd always thought you needed to write *War And Peace* on the page and impress the hell out of the reader with your deft prose and captivating style. These screenplays I was reading, however, were conveying the story in the simplest terms possible, telling me what I needed to know and nothing more. The story was the star. Not the writing.

Reading screenplays quickly became a drug. With every script I read, I learned ten new things about the craft. I couldn't read them fast enough and begged everyone I knew for more screenplays! First, I was reading 20 scripts a week, then 30, then 40! Within three months, I'd learned more about screenwriting than I had in the previous seven years combined.

I started bouncing the idea of a screenplay review blog off a couple of friends. The idea wasn't just to review scripts, but to give aspiring writers access to those scripts, offering them an opportunity to learn the craft through critical reading. That way, they wouldn't waste those crucial early years making the same mistakes I did.

The combination of that attitude and the desire to do something new culminated in Scriptshadow. It started off innocently enough, a lonely Sunday evening writing a review for *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*. I still remember how scared I was of that first entry. Working up the courage to put up *any* piece of writing, even if it was just a script review, was terrifying. There was a part of me that thought, "If this doesn't work, what do I have left?"

So I posted the review. And I waited. For a comment. For some acknowledgment that I'd done something. And it never came. But you know what? There was something cathartic about that post. It taught me that the biggest obstacles in life are always the self-imposed ones. These last few years I'd convinced myself I couldn't write anymore. Not just scripts, but anything! And here I'd just proven myself wrong. Sure, it was only a 1000-word review. But it was *something*. That was cool. And it made me hungry for more.

I researched blogging and it wasn't long before I found software that tracked your site traffic. I installed it and discovered that 40 people had visited my blog that first day. 40 people! These were 40 people who had never read a single thing I'd written before! As the days passed, that number grew. 75 visitors. 150. 250. 400. Within a couple of months, I was getting 1,000 unique visitors a day!

Soon after that, major websites began linking to my script reviews, sites I'd been reading for years! The next thing I knew, *Wired Magazine* called, wanting to do a piece on Scriptshadow. I began receiving e-mails from agents and producers wanting to talk about the site. As of this printing, Scriptshadow is about to be featured in both The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. Wow!

It wasn't all sunflowers and panda bears though. Some bloggers and industry folk didn't like what I was doing (and still don't). They thought I was hurting the industry. But the industry was changing. Scripts had moved from hard-copies to digital. Niche-blogs were popping up everywhere. The minutia of every industry was being dissected and the entertainment industry was no exception. For years, this information was private. You needed to be "in the club" to get it. I didn't think that was fair. Not when these screenplays held the source code for how to become a great screenwriter. I felt the little guys deserved access to that information too, not just the big guns making $500,000 an assignment.

Which leads us to today. Scriptshadow is almost four years old now and has evolved from just a screenwriting review site to a full-blown screenwriting resource. I've spent the better part of this year converting my tiny little blog into an honest-to-goodness website and it's the first in a series of moves to build the biggest screenwriting community on the web. We haven't even come close to taking advantage of social media's impact on screenwriting and I want to keep pushing that. I also want to continue creating easy-to-understand resources for screenwriters because there aren't many out there. I've tried to do that on the site every day but unfortunately all that information is spread out. Finally, with this book, it's all in one place.

However, before we get to all those fun screenwriting tips, we're going to need to agree on some basic screenwriting principles - the nuts and bolts of how to put a script together. The good news is, I'm going to make this section as simple and painless as possible. In fact, I'm going to teach you how to write a screenplay in one chapter. That's right: *one chapter*!

Technically, you could finish this chapter and get to work, but here's why you shouldn't:

There's no universal template for writing a screenplay.

Anybody who tells you differently is lying. Every genre has its own eccentricities. Every writer has his or her own voice. Every story has its own challenges. There are things that every story has in common (a beginning, a middle, and end, for example), but there are so many other variables in play. A screenwriter's knowledge and mastery of those variables will determine how interesting and enjoyable his or her story is. This book will teach you all of those variables. But before we learn them, we need to learn the constants first. So let's get started.

STRUCTURE

Whenever you write a screenplay, you're *telling a story.* A lot of writers forget this, and it's funny because we tell stories *every day.* When you have a few beers with your buddies and share how you asked that intern out? You're telling a story! When you replay the amazing three-run homer your son hit at T-ball? You're telling a story! When you're giving your professor an excuse for why you didn't finish your homework? You're telling a story! A screenplay is just another venue to tell a story.

In order to tell an entertaining story, though, one that's going to keep your audience on the edge of their seats, you need to understand structure. Structure places the key moments of your story in the spots where they'll create the most dramatic impact. Ignore structure, and your story will have no rhythm, no balance. It might be front-loaded or back-loaded, choppy or unfocused. For example, in the story about your son's three-run homer, if you jump straight to the home run, your story will be short and anti-climactic. With good structure, you set the stage for that home run over time, leading to an exciting climax.

The structure you'll be using for almost all of your scripts is the 3-Act Structure. Don't be intimidated by its fancy moniker. All it means is that there are *three* phases to your story: a "Beginning," a "Middle," and an "End." Or, if you want to take the training wheels off, a "Setup," some "Conflict," and a "Resolution." If you're going to write screenplays, then you'll be writing 90-120 pages of story contained within this basic 3-Act format.

ACT 1 (20-30 pages long)

Act 1 introduces your hero then throws a problem at him. That problem will propel him into the heart of your story. Let's say our story is about a guy desperate to ask out a beautiful intern who works at his office. To start your story, you might show your hero staring longingly at the intern from afar. He may even text his buddy: "No more messing around. I'm asking her to the Christmas party *this weekend*!" Soon after, you'll write what most screenwriters refer to as the "inciting incident," which is a fancy way of saying, the "problem." A great example of an inciting incident happens in the movie *Shrek,* when the fairytale creatures move into Shrek's swamp. This is the "problem" to which Shrek needs a solution. In our story, it might be when our office dude learns that it's the intern's *last day at work*! In other words, this is his last chance to ask her out!

This inevitably leads to our hero having to make a choice. Does he stick with his old life (never taking any chances) or man up and go for the goal (ask her out)? Well, we wouldn't have a movie if the hero stayed put, so your character always goes after the goal. In *Shrek,* this moment occurs when Lord Farquand tells Shrek that if he rescues the princess, he can have his swamp back. In our office story, it might be as simple as Office Dude deciding he's going to ask Gorgeous Intern out *today.* He knows she always makes copies at 11 o'clock. So he spiffs himself up and heads to the copier room.

ACT 2 (50-60 pages long)

A lot of people get confused by Act 2, so let me remind you of its nickname: "Conflict." Act 2 is the act where all the resistance happens in your story. Your hero will encounter arguments, setbacks, physical battles, insecurities, broken relationships, obstacles, their past, the protective best friend, killers, guns, car chases, and 80-foot lizards – basically, anything that makes it harder for them to achieve their goal. The more things you throw at your character, the more *conflict* he'll experience. And conflict is what makes your story fun to read!

In addition to this, every roadblock, every obstacle, every setback, should escalate in difficulty. Start small and keep building. In our office story, maybe our office character stops outside the copy room, takes a deep breath, checks his reflection in the window, practices the big question a couple of times, then opens the door. He finds Gorgeous Intern, but, lo and behold, she's talking to Sammy the Office Stud, who has her doubled over with laughter. Oh snap! Obstacle encountered!

Pages 55-60 in your script are referred to as the "midpoint." The midpoint is important because it's where your story turns. Whatever the first half of your story was about, the midpoint will shift it in a slightly different direction. By doing this, you keep the story fresh. So in our office story, maybe the midpoint is the fire alarm going off, forcing everybody to evacuate the building. This will place the second half of your story in a new environment - *outside.* If you want to use a real movie example, the midpoint of *The Godfather* is when Michael kills the Captain and Sollozzo at the restaurant. There are a million different scenarios you can write for your midpoint, but something needs to happen to give the second-half of your screenplay a slightly different feel from the first-half. Otherwise, the script feels repetitive and the reader gets borrrrrr-ed.

The pages after the midpoint and before the third act, form what I call the "Screenwriting Bermuda Triangle." It's where screenplays go to die. What often happens is that writers run out of ideas in the second act and start scribbling down a bunch of filler scenes until they can get to the climax. Filler scenes are script-killers and will destroy everything you've worked so hard for.

If you follow proper structure, however, you should be able to navigate the Bermuda Triangle. After the midpoint, keep upping the stakes of your story. Make the problems bigger and more difficult for your character. In our office story, maybe it's freezing outside, so everyone is pissed-off when the fire alarm sounds. To make things worse, the gorgeous intern is now cuddling up with Sammy the Office Stud to stay warm. That's when the boss hits us with a bombshell: if they can't get back inside within the next 20 minutes, he's calling it a day. Ahhhh! Our hero now has 20 minutes to ask Gorgeous Intern out or lose her forever!

As the pages tick away in this section, so too should the attainability of your character's goal. The closer we get to the climax, the more dim your hero's chances of achieving his goal should get. In our office story, perhaps a car splashes water over our hero's suit, ruining his appearance. Or even worse, a rumor spreads that the company is downsizing next week and his job is on the chopping block. It looks like all hope is lost. This is often referred to as your hero's *lowest point* and will signify the end of the second act. We might even see Sammy the Office Stud nudge Gorgeous Intern towards his car where they can "warm up," as our hero watches on hopelessly .

ACT 3 (20-30 pages long)

The final act of your screenplay is really about your hero's inner transformation, which is complicated, so we'll discuss it later in more detail. In short, after your hero reaches his "lowest point," he'll experience a rebirth, finally realizing the error of his ways. If he's selfish, he'll see the value of selflessness. If he's fearful, he'll find the strength to be brave. He won't have completely transformed yet, but this realization will give him the confidence to go after the girl or take on the villain or look for the treasure *one last time*.

In our office story, our hero realizes that his whole life has been a series of missed opportunities because he's been afraid to take chances. I call this the "epiphany moment" and it signifies that your hero is ready to take action. Our office hero straightens up, barges through the group, CHARGES after Gorgeous Intern, spins her around, and plants a big wet one on her. She, Sammy the Office Stud, and all the coworkers stare at our hero in shock. He can't believe it either. He's done it! He's won over the girl of his dreams! That is, until - CRACK - a hand smacks him across the face. "Asshole!" the intern shouts, grabbing Sammy the Office Stud and stomping off. Our hero stands there, alone, and watches her leave. The End. Hey, I never said this had a happy ending!

Now, it's important to remember that this is the most basic way to tell a story. Set up a goal, have the protagonist encounter obstacles on the way to that goal, then he either succeeds or fails. But as you'll see over the course of this book, movies have taken this template and mutated it into hundreds of variations. For example, there are movies with multiple protagonists. There are movies where the story's told out of order. There are movies that repeatedly redefine what the goal is. These are all advanced techniques and before you attempt them, you need to know the basics. We've just reviewed the basics of structure. Now let's take a look at the basics of storytelling.

STORYTELLING

Goal Stakes Urgency

A while back I realized that many of the best screenplays I read had something in common. The heroes were always after something. Failing to achieve that something had consequences. And time was never on their side. This realization gave birth to a simple acronym that can improve any story you tell: GSU (which stands for Goals, Stakes, Urgency). How is it that these three little letters can do so much for your screenplay? I'm glad you asked!

Goal - You want your hero *going after something* in a story. That "thing" is typically referred to as a "goal." Why is it so important to have a goal? Because characters with goals *move stories forward*. As long as your character is pursuing something, he'll be running into challenges, encountering situations, and bumping up against other characters. Those are the things that make movies fun! Not to mention, if someone's going after something, we'll want to stick around to see if they get it. When a character doesn't have a goal, he doesn't have anywhere to go. So he sits around and becomes boring, taking your story with him. So give your character something to pursue. Maybe he's after a girl. Maybe he's trying to stop a bomb. Maybe he's trying to solve a murder. Maybe he's trying to win the heavyweight championship of the world. Maybe he's trying to defeat the aliens. Maybe he's trying to build the biggest online social network in history. Give your main character a goal and I promise you your screenplay will come alive.

Stakes - Once you have a goal, you can establish what it means for your character to achieve that goal. The more the outcome affects your character, the more will be at *stake*. And the more that's at stake, the more invested your audience will be. So in the case of the movie *Shrek,* what does Shrek value more than anything? His privacy! He wants those animals out of his swamp! Therefore, the stakes for achieving his goal (he must save the Princess), are very high: if he fails, he loses his privacy. Amateur screenwriters tend to ignore stakes. They never write the "losing the swamp" part, instead sending Shrek directly off to save the princess. I'll ask these writers, "Why does he go after the princess?" And they'll answer, "Because that's what happens in these movies. The hero saves the princess!" Errr…yeaahhh, but it still needs to *make sense*! The character still needs to gain something by attempting to save the princess or lose something by not attempting to. In other words, there need to be STAKES attached to the goal. If there are no stakes, we won't care whether the hero succeeds or not.

Urgency - One of the biggest problems with amateur screenplays is that they're slooooooow. The writer doesn't infuse enough *urgency* into his story, turning the script into a Tempur-Pedic mattress with goose-down pillows. And yet, adding urgency is one of the easiest things to do. You simply impose a time limit on your character's pursuit, or what I like to call a "ticking time bomb." If the goal isn't achieved by a certain time - BOOM - your hero loses everything. In some cases, ticking time bombs are specific: Jim Carrey in the movie *Liar Liar* must figure out how to lie before his trial later in the day. Other times, ticking time bombs are general: in the movie *Saving Private Ryan,* for instance, the squad must find Ryan before he's injured or killed. If, however, there isn't an URGENT reason for your character to achieve his goal, your story will suffer from a case of the slowsies. Ticking time bombs are just one way to add urgency to your screenplays. We'll talk about other methods later.

MINI-GOALS

We've just discussed the "G" in GSU. A strong character goal will drive most of the stories you tell (e.g. defeat Apollo, kill the shark, get back to the future). But what should your hero do in the meantime? If he only chases a single goal for a hundred pages, we're going to get bored. We need some detours, some subplots, some short-term objectives. In other words, we need a series of *smaller goals* to get us to the big goal. I call these "mini-goals."

Remember those old RPG video games? *Final Fantasy*? *Zelda*? *Metroid*? The goal behind those games was to either save the princess or defeat the big boss. That goal drove the entire story, right? But before you could do that, you'd have to go off on these mini-quests first. And at the end of each mini-quest you'd be awarded a new power or a new weapon. After completing 20-30 of these mini-quests, you'd have enough power and weapons to tackle the final boss (and save the princess!).

Screenplays follow a similar model. Your hero has a giant goal. But before he can reach it, there are a bunch of smaller goals he must complete first. These "mini-goals" aren't much different from the mini-quests in video games. Let's look at the movie *Back To The Future* as an example. Marty finds out his main goal at the end of the first act: he has to get back to the future! But before he can do that, he has to find Doc (Mini-Goal 1)! Once he finds Doc, he has to get his mom to fall in love with his dad (Mini-Goal 2). And to do this, he must get his dad to ask his mom to the school dance (Mini-Goal 3). As

long as there's an immediate task (goal) for your character to accomplish, your script should move along at a brisk pace. Ignoring mini-goals and only focusing on the big picture will turn your script into one of those big fat tractors you get stuck behind on the highway. Trust me. I see new screenwriters making this mistake all the time.

Oh, and goals? They shouldn't be limited to your protagonist. They should extend to *every character* in your screenplay. The love-interest should have a goal. The best friend should have a goal. The villain should have a goal. The more people you have going after things, the more characters will clash with one another, and that's when it gets fun! Clash equals conflict and conflict equals drama and drama equals entertainment.

But there's more (yes, I know I sound like an 80s infomercial)! Goals should be used for individual scenes as well! Every scene you write, the characters in that scene should have a goal. When Jerry Maguire gets fired by his rival, Bob Sugar, he has a clear goal: keep all his clients. So he starts calling every athlete on his client list to make sure they stay with him. Bob Sugar also has a goal: to STEAL all of Jerry Maguire's clients.

Sometimes goals will be big and sometimes they'll be small. But in most good screenplays, goals are what keep the energy up and the story alive. So get ready, because I'll be bringing up goals A LOT in this book. I promise you - PROMISE YOU - if you recognize the power of goals, your scripts will be a thousand times better (and easier to write). And you're going to need that. Because the devil known as dialogue is going to make your life a living hell.

DEMYSTIFYING DIALOGUE

Dialogue is the most frustrating part of screenwriting because it's the least teachable part of screenwriting. The best dialogue writers all say the same thing: "It just comes naturally to me." Well thanks a-freaking lot! That sure helps us talentless hacks. The scariest thing is that most aspiring screenwriters (especially beginners) think dialogue is easy. To them, all you need for snappy dialogue is "to write the way real people talk." Unfortunately, dialogue doesn't work that way. Think about it. The average coffee house chat with your buddy is 45 minutes long. The average coffee house movie scene is *two and a half* minutes long. How in the world do you cut out 42 and a-half minutes from a conversation and still make it natural?? Clearly you have to make some adjustments. The good news is that if you follow some simple guidelines, you can swing the dialogue odds in your favor. What follows are seven steps I've learned that improve screenplay dialogue.

1. Structure the scene around a character goal - One of the big reasons for lousy dialogue is rambling characters. Characters keep talking and talking and talking ABOUT NOTH-ING! Can you blame us for getting bored? Here's a trick. Find out what the primary character wants in the scene (his/her goal), and let the dialogue evolve from that. So if Mandy's goal is to break up with Charles, we have a pretty good idea of what the dialogue needs to be. If you're just sitting your characters down to see what they'll say to each other, however, expect a lot of bored readers. Scene goals focus (and therefore streamline) dialogue.

2. Set up your dialogue ahead of time - A lot of people think great dialogue rolls off the fingertips. The truth is, the best dialogue is a result of what the writer did *before the scene ever took place*. Let me give you an example. If Lisa and Jane are talking about Lisa's upcoming wedding, the dialogue is going to be pretty boring. But if in an earlier scene we saw Jane sleep with Lisa's fiancé, that same discussion about the upcoming wedding will be captivating. Sam meeting his potential father-in-law could make for some okay dialogue. But if ten minutes earlier Sam's fiancé told him she'd never marry someone her father doesn't approve of, then that same dialogue will keep us glued to our seats. So if your dialogue is weak, look for things you can setup *before* the scene to bring the dialogue to life.

3. Conflict - Conflict is your dialogue wingman. Without him, you're the creepy loner at the bar. The reason conflict is so crucial is that it prevents your characters from easily getting what they want. Which means they have to work for it. And that's where dialogue comes alive, when people have to work for things. Dialogue between two satisfied people is like watching a tree grow. The key is identifying the force that will get in the way of your character's goal and building the scene around that. Let's use that example above where Mandy's trying to break up with Charles. Maybe right before she's about to do it, Charles' adorable little sister joins them. Mandy's her idol and she's *elated* to see her. How is Mandy supposed to dump Charles now? I'm guessing the conflict the sister brings is going to make this dialogue a lot more interesting than your basic one-on-one break-up scene.

4. Stakes - I figured this one out recently. My favorite dialogue scenes tend to happen when there's a lot on the line, because if there's a lot on the line, then every word each character says *matters*. Take the famous dinner-table scene in the movie, *Meet The Parents*. The reason the dialogue works so well is because the stakes are heightened. Greg is desperate to win Pam's father's approval. He knows if he doesn't, she might not want to marry him. This means that every sentence uttered has major consequences. If Greg says one wrong thing, he could lose the love of his life. Contrast this with a similar

Thanksgiving dinner scene in the sequel, *Little Fockers* (the third film in the series). In that scene, *nothing* is at stake. This forces the writers to try and make things funny with juvenile, cheap humor (here comes the swearing grandma!). The scene feels desperate as a result. Had the stakes been higher in the scene, the dialogue would've been richer and more suspenseful.

5. Subtext - There are a few ways to create subtext, but the kind that leads to the best dialogue, in my opinion, is dramatic irony. Now, I'll get more into dramatic irony later, but the idea behind it is you want to give one of the characters in your scene a secret. If Theresa just found out she was pregnant, and she's having dinner with her husband, that scene is going to be laced with subtext. If Julie secretly likes Tom and the two get stuck in a bathroom during a party, anything they talk about (Math class, bird watching, dinosaurs) will have subtext, because we know Julie's secret. It's such a simple device. Just give one character something they're hiding and the subtext writes itself.

6. Off-the-nose dialogue - Stay away from on-the-nose dialogue. If you're going to have your characters speak like soulless automatons who respond to everything literally, then go write *Transformers 9*. Human beings talk *around* things. They play with language through slang, sarcasm, exaggeration, manipulation, and evasiveness. In other words, they talk *off-the-nose*. Just the other week, after going through a rough patch, I said to my lady friend, "Maybe we should take a break." But what I was really saying was, "I need some confirmation that we're okay. Say "no" to this so I can confirm that." This approach extends to ordinary conversation as well. If someone asks, "Are you thirsty?" don't have the other character answer, "Yes. Could you get me some water?" That's the definition of on-the-nose. Have them say something less direct, like: "No, my lips always dry up and bleed like this." In most situations, your characters will not say exactly what they're thinking.

7. Know your fucking characters (kyfc) - The more you know about your characters, the more specific and original their dialogue will be. In the movie *There's Something About Mary*, there's a scene where Mary's roommate, the old woman, asks Mary if her date is cute. Mary replies, "He's no Steve Young" (Steve Young is a famous Forty-Niners quarterback). Now this may not seem like an earth-shattering line of dialogue at first glance, but here's why it's a good line of dialogue: it's *specific*. It's something *only Mary would say*, because she's a Niners fan. How did the writers know she was a Niners fan? Because they dug into her past and did a character biography about where she grew up, how she grew up, what her life was like. Most young writers don't do this homework and when the same question is asked of one of their characters, the response is something general like, "He's all right, I guess." General is BORING. And the less you know about your characters, the more of these *general lines* you're going to write, leading to a great big fat *general* screenplay. Get to know your characters. The more you know, the more specific their dialogue will be, and the more real they'll seem.

THE 8 SECRETS TO A GREAT CHARACTER

When people ask me, "What's more important, story or character?" I come back at them with this question: "What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your favorite movie?" Almost all of them answer with the *name of the hero*. If that doesn't convince you how important character is, I don't know what will. And that's part of why screenwriting is so frustrating: you can nail GSU, you can have the best structure in the world, your dialogue can be sharp, your characters can be goal-oriented, but your screenplay can still suck. Why? Because your characters are boring. Or muddled. Or average. Or thin. Or cliché. Or unlikable. It comes down to this: Who cares if your hero achieves his goal if we don't care about your hero??

Coming up with compelling, identifiable and memorable characters is one of the hardest things to do in screenwriting. It's usually the last thing a writer learns before he breaks into the business. But I have good news for you. I have an 8-step starter kit that's going to flesh out your characters for you. You'll still need to add that unique quality *only you* can provide them with, but these building blocks will add enough complexity and depth that at the very least, you'll have the foundation for a solid character.

1) **Root-for-ability** - If we're not rooting for your hero, we're not interested in your hero. And if we're not interested in your hero, we don't care about their story. So you have to give us a reason to root for them. This is one of the primary mistakes beginners make. They create unlikable or middling protagonists who don't exhibit any qualities that would make someone want to watch them. There are a number of ways to make your character "root-for-able," and I'll get into a lot of them later, but one of the easiest ways is to make them "likable." If we *like* your character, we'll want to follow him. For example, you can make your character selfless (e.g. *Forrest Gump*), you can make your character love their son unconditionally (e.g. *Liar Liar*), you can make your character brave (e.g. Jake Sulley from *Avatar*). Once we *like* a character, we'll *root* for that character.

2) **A Fatal Flaw** - A fatal flaw is your character's defining weakness, the thing that's held him back his entire life, and when it comes down to it, the thing that makes him human. Sure, your character may be battling the bad guys, but he'll be way more interesting if he's battling something inside himself as well. In the movie *Up In The Air*, George Clooney's fatal flaw was his inability to connect with others. That's why it was so easy for him to fire people. That's why he had meaningless

sex. That's why he barely talked to his family. That's why he gave seminars promoting isolation. Once you establish a fatal flaw, you can execute your character's transformation over the course of the story, culminating in them overcoming that flaw. For Clooney's character, it came when he ran to Alex's (the love interest) house at the end (he finally cared about someone!) to tell her he wanted a relationship. The fatal flaw is the cornerstone of character depth, so you definitely want to include one if possible!

3) **Relationships** - One of the easiest ways to explore a character is through the people around him, or more specifically, via the relationships he engages in. Now remember, perfect relationships are boring. So the trick is to build a problem into every relationship so that you have something that needs to be resolved by the end of the movie. If you do this right, your audience will want to stick around to see if the characters overcome their issues with one another. Using *Back To The Future* as an example, Marty must resolve relationship conflict with his mother (who's in love with him), his father (who has no backbone) and even Doc (whose impending death he must reveal to him). It's hard to explore characters without including the other people in their lives. So make sure all of the relationships in your hero's life are interesting and unresolved!

4) **Backstory** - One of the tricks to making characters feel real is convincing the reader that they existed before the script began. That's backstory. It's the character's entire life leading up to the moment where your story begins. There's a catch, however: all backstory in your screenplay must be *story-relevant*. In other words, backstory should only be revealed if it relates to important plot points in your movie. Sure, your character may have spent a year in Asia hunting wild mushrooms, but if your story isn't about hunting wild mushrooms, we don't give a crap. In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, Will reveals to Sean (Robin Williams) that his dad used to beat him. The reason this backstory is revealed is because Will must face it later in order to overcome his flaw (he's afraid to open himself up to others). If Will had instead talked about his childhood trips to the zoo with his mother, it would have told us something about him, but not something that had any relevance to the story. The point is that we need to know your hero existed before the movie started, so you want to include the occasional, *plot-relevant* piece of backstory.

5) **Life Goal (your character's dream)** - If you really want insight into who a person is, ask them what their life goal is - what they want to do more than anything in the world. This information often defines a person (just like wanting to be a successful screenwriter defines you!). Forrest Gump wants to be with Jenny. Lester Burnham wants to feel free again. Marty McFly wants to be a rock star. This won't always come up in the script (I don't know what Ferris Bueller's life goal was), but even if it doesn't get mentioned, you*, the writer,* should know it, as it will inform many of your hero's choices.

6) **Secrets** - The secrets we keep define our private side, the side we don't allow the world to see. This side is often more interesting than the side people *do* see, which is the reason you should know your characters' secrets. In some cases, these secrets will define a character (maybe they're a killer) and in others, it will haunt them (maybe they were raped). I'm not sure you can write an interesting character if you *don't* know their secrets. Michael Fassbender's character in *Shame* hides his sex addiction. Cole in *The Sixth Sense* hides his ability to see dead people. Lizbeth Salander from *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* hides the way she obtains information (via hacking). Secrets are like the jalapeño poppers of character depth: they can really spice things up.

7) **Characteristics, quirks, clothes, personality traits, vices, grooming** - The Joker always licks his lips. The Terminator always wears a leather jacket. Hancock always drinks. Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro) in *Meet The Parents* loves cats. One of the big problems I see with amateur characters is that they don't stick out. There's nothing memorable about them. A common reason for this is that the writer never adds those eccentricities, those details, those final touches that make a character rise above the page. Granted, this stuff is icing on the cake, but cake is pretty boring without icing.

8) **Essence** - Essence is the least definable trait there is, and yet the most important in bringing your character to life. In my experience, you find essence by figuring out your character's life story. Where they grew up, their relationship with their parents, their high school experience, when they lost their virginity, their financial status, their vices, their social status, the most influential relationships in their lives, their favorite things to do, their least favorite things to do, what they were doing two weeks before your story began. You want to know your character's life JUST AS WELL as you know your best friend's life, because it's only when you know every crevice of your character that you can make them act, speak and feel like a real-life individual. And yes, it does take a lot of time to figure this out. But if you're writing a movie that you hope people will be watching 50 years from now, I don't think it's too much to ask that you spend 30 hours going back and figuring out your hero's entire backstory.

TERMINOLOGY

You understand structure. You understand GSU. You understand dialogue. You understand character. I'm sure you're saying, "Let's get to the good stuff already!" I mean, you've learned more about screenwriting in the last chapter than most aspiring screenwriters learn in their entire lives. But as much as I'd like to send you into the screenwriting fridge of dreams where all those delicious lesson-treats await you, there's terminology you need to learn first. Without a working knowledge of these terms, you'll be lost at sea. So gather up what remains of your attention span and hang with me for just a little while longer!

Theme - Theme is the overriding message you're trying to convey throughout your story. Without it, your tone will be inconsistent, your story thin, and your script forgettable. Themes are actually a big part of our lives. There's a theme to our meals (A burger, fries, and a coke have a theme. A burger, artichokes and orange juice do not). There's a theme to our style (a sport jacket, slacks, and tie have a theme. Shorts, no shirt, and suspenders, do not). There's a theme to our gardens, our music, our décor. Anywhere where there's creation, you'll find a theme. Scripts are no different. There needs to be a central idea (a "theme") that everything revolves around. The theme in *Star Wars* is one of belief (Luke must *believe* in the force and *believe* in himself). The theme in *Up* is about moving on (Carl must learn to let go of his wife and open up his heart to new relationships). Different writers like to tackle theme in different ways. Some, with a question, others with a statement, and some, with only a word. Whatever the case, having a theme in your screenplay keeps the thousands of variables in your story in the same orbit.

Obstacles - An "obstacle" is anything that gets in the way of your hero achieving his goal. Obstacles are awesome because they generate conflict. And since we want lots of conflict in our movie, we want lots of obstacles! In *Meet The Parents*, the goal is for Greg (Ben Stiller) to win over Pam's father, Jack (Robert De Niro). But along the way, Greg loses his luggage, Pam's perfect ex-boyfriend shows up, Greg loses Jack's cat, Greg breaks the bride's nose, and Greg destroys the wedding reception. These obstacles prevent Greg from achieving his goal. Obstacles are really one of your best friends as a screenwriter because the more of them you throw in, the more interesting your story tends to be. If the journey's too easy, we're gonna get bored.

Conflict - Does everyone in your script get along? Is the outside world kind to your characters? Do your characters skip through your story with nary a worry? Yeah, then your script has no conflict. And one of the quickest ways to Boringsville is a lack of conflict. Conflict refers to two opposing forces clashing with one another in an attempt to find balance. This could include your hero battling another character (John McClane and Hans in *Die Hard*), your hero battling himself (Ryan Gosling's character in *Drive*), or your hero battling nature (Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*). It could even entail all three of these things at once. And don't forget that conflict extends beyond the obvious. It can include passive-aggressiveness, unrequited love, lack of trust, lack of self-control, a secret one's keeping from the world - anything where there's an imbalance. This is one of the most powerful tools in screenwriting so you're gonna be hearing about it a lot.

Exposition - Exposition is plot information, character information, and setting information. Basically, it's the boring stuff the audience needs to know in order to understand the story. When a character says, "You need to go to Joe's house to get the hard drive while I raid the taco truck for the secret recipe, then we'll meet back at Scoville Park at midnight to take on Dargatron," *that's* exposition. Because exposition is so boring and intrusive, it's your job as a writer to make it as invisible as possible. The best screenplays never feel like there's any exposition. And it's a writer's adeptness at hiding the exposition-monster that achieves this effect.

Motivation - Characters don't go after things (goals) without a purpose. There must be a motivation behind their pursuit. So whether they're looking for some peanut butter or trying to save a princess, they must have a reason (a motivation) for doing so. Also, one's motivation must match the stakes of one's pursuit. In other words, one only needs to be hungry to look for peanut butter. But there must be something huge on the line if a character is going to risk their lives. That's the trick with motivation. It has to feel logical in order for us to believe that the character would do whatever it is they're doing.

Plot point – "Plot points" refer to any point in your script where a key plot-related event occurs. A plot point in *Return Of The Jedi* might be when Princess Leia releases Han from the carbon freeze, or when they defeat Jabba The Hut at the Sarlac Pit, or when they sneak past the Death Star to go down to Endor. Any moment that pushes your story through a major barrier can be considered a plot point.

Protagonist - A fancy way of saying the "hero" of your tale.

Antagonist - The main person (or thing) preventing your hero from achieving his goal. Most of the time, your antagonist

will be the villain. But it could just as easily be the weather, as is the case in the movie, *The Perfect Storm.*

Irony - Irony is a fancy word for saying "the opposite of that which is perceived." A priest who murders. A pianist who's deaf. A clown who's depressed. Audiences LOVE irony. Therefore you should try and incorporate it into your concept, characters and plot as much as possible! The most powerful king in the world is tasked with giving the most important speech in history….yet he can't speak (*The King's Speech*). Irony is your best friend. Use it wherever you can!

Set-ups and payoffs - One of the more enjoyable aspects of screenwriting is setting things up and paying them off later. A set-up can consist of a line ("You complete me") a song ("In Your Eyes" in *Say Anything*) an action (when Mr. Miagi teaches Daniel the Crane Kick and he uses it to win the final fight in *The Karate Kid*) or dozens of other things.

Backstory - As we discussed earlier, backstory can refer to any part of your character's past. Like exposition, it's intrusive unless used sparingly and invisibly.

Spec script - A spec script is any script a writer writes where he isn't getting paid. The idea with spec scripts is that you write it in hopes of selling it once you're finished.

Assignment - An assignment is when someone pays you to write material. There's no gambling here. You get paid no matter what. Assignments make up the majority of work in Hollywood. Once you write a spec script that people around town enjoy, you'll start getting offered assignment work.

SPECIAL ALERTS

There are certain tools that are so essential to crafting an excellent story that I'll be bringing them up repeatedly as "ALERTS." These are tips you'll see over and over again, used in a myriad of different ways. Consider these the bread-and-butter of great scripts, the closest thing you'll find to magic screenwriting beans.

Conflict - There are so many types of conflict in storytelling that you could write an entire book on the subject. For that reason, I'll be highlighting truckloads of conflict examples.

Set-Ups and Payoffs - Most great movies have skilled set-ups and payoffs. I'll highlight the more impressive ones I've run into over the years.

Urgency - So many movies apply urgency to their story. This is why pro screenplays zip along while amateur scripts feel like they never left the starting gate. I'll point out how a lot of these movies use urgency to their advantage.

Irony - Again, irony is a screenwriter's best friend! You should always be looking to add irony to your concepts and characters. I'll be highlighting the key movies that use it.

Show Don't Tell - This is a big one. Film is a *visual* medium. For that reason, it works best if you convey something through an *image* or *action* as opposed to a *line of dialogue*. If Don hates Wesley, don't have Don say, "I hate you, Wesley." Have him spit in Wesley's drink when he's not looking.

Dramatic Irony - Earlier I said dramatic irony was when one character in a scene was aware of something that the other character was not. I'm going to expand that definition. Dramatic Irony is when *the audience* is aware of something that one or *all of the characters* are not. That something might last the entire movie or it might last a single scene. Let me give you a couple of examples. If Frank and Jessica are conversing over dinner about their day, it'll probably be a boring scene. But if we know Jessica's poisoned Frank's drink, that same conversation becomes quite interesting. If we know the killer's waiting for Helen inside the house, watching her arrive will be terrifying. But if you don't give us that information, her arrival carries no tension whatsoever. As you can see, with a couple of simple changes, we can make scenes a thousand times better. Which is why I'm going to be highlighting the heck out of this awesome tool!

Exposition/Backstory - Exposition and backstory are so hard to do well. I'll be showing you a bunch of examples where writers incorporated them exceptionally.

Midpoint Shift - As mentioned earlier, the midpoint shift is the moment in a movie where a shift occurs to make the second half of the film slightly different from the first. This shift prevents the film from getting repetitive/one-note/boring.

Always Works - That's right. There are certain scenarios that always work in storytelling. I'll be highlighting these magical carpets of awesomeness wherever I can.

Likability - Making sure your protagonist is likable is one of the easiest ways to rope in a reader. And it's a smart choice. If we're not rooting for your character, we don't care what he does, which means we don't care about ANYTHING ELSE in your screenplay. So I'll be highlighting the scenarios where writers slyly make you fall in love with their characters without you even realizing it! Sneaky bastards.

Stakes - If the consequences to your protagonist's actions aren't big enough, we'll lose interest in him/her quickly. If the consequences of a scene are weak, we'll lose interest in the scene quickly. Anything in your movie where there isn't a whole lot at stake is likely to be boring. So I'll be pointing out where writers have upped the stakes to keep you glued to your seat.

Scene Agitator - A great way to juice up a scene is with something I call a "scene agitator." The scene agitator introduces a distracting element that makes things a little (or a lot) more difficult for your hero. The agitator could consist of a person, a noise, the time, the weather, a secret, or any number of things. If Joe is having an argument with his wife, a scene agitator might be their daughter, who keeps popping in to ask them to kill a spider in her bedroom. This is such an awesome way to bring a scene to life!

LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN

Congratulations, you have graduated from Basic Training at The Scriptshadow Academy. E-mail me your address and I'll send you a trophy. Actually, that's not true. I hate going to the post office, and buying thousands of trophies would negate the profits from this book. But I *will* be proud of you. Which is way more prestigious than some cheap trophy. Oh, one last thing. *Everything you're about to learn is malleable.* There are no absolutes in art. It's always possible to do it another way. But the information I'm giving you has been gleaned from over 5,000 screenplays. I've seen every story imaginable. I've seen every choice imaginable. So I know the stuff that tips the scales in your favor. And this is it. It's time. Are you ready to learn the secrets to writing a great screenplay?

ALIENS
Written by: James Cameron (Story by Cameron and David Giler & Walter Hill) (Characters by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett)

Premise: Set decades after the first film, *Aliens* follows a team of high-octane marines as they investigate a recently colonized planet where all the colonists have mysteriously disappeared.

About: There's a reason I have three James Cameron screenplays featured in this book. The guy is a seriously underrated screenwriter. He understands structure, tension, suspense and conflict as well as any screenwriter in the business. And he's a master at writing action sequences. Could he be better with dialogue? Sure. But the thing about dialogue is you don't have to be great at it if you can construct a scene that's inherently dramatic, and Cameron definitely knows how to do that. Want further proof of Cameron's skills? Word is he wrote *Aliens* in less than TWO MONTHS! How somebody could've written, arguably, the best action film of all time, in 60 days, is beyond my capacity of understanding. But that's Cameron for you. And that genius is why I'm breaking down his masterpiece, *Aliens*.

TIP 1 - **Get into your story FAST** - One thing I constantly see in beginner scripts is writers who take waaaay too long to get into their story. Four, five, six scenes go by before we even get a whiff of what the story is about. In *Aliens*, we rescue Ripley, they ask her what happened, Burke tells her they lost contact with the colony, and that's it. <u>We're on our way to kick some alien ass!</u>

TIP 2 - **Introduce your characters with a DISTINCT, REVEALING ACTION** - Here's a little-known fact: we form 90% of our opinion about a character when we first meet them. If they're pigging out, we think of them as a pig for the rest of the movie. If they're lying, we think of them as a liar for the rest of the movie. That first action has such an impact on the reader that it's imperative you introduce your character with traits or behaviors representative of who they are. So in *Aliens*, when the marines wake up from hyper-sleep, Vasquez immediately starts doing pull-ups. We know she's the badass. Sgt. Apone pops a cigar in his mouth. We know nothing fazes this guy. Private Hudson jokes about the floor being cold. We know he's the joker. There's so little time to convey characterization in a script that you HAVE to take advantage of that moment when they're first introduced.

TIP 3 - **The power of Contained Thrillers** - A contained thriller is any story where you place your characters in a confined location and pit them against an opposing force. *Alien, Aliens, Saw, Cube, Panic Room, Buried, The Shining, The Others*. These stories are naturally dramatic because conflict is built into the make-up of the genre. Translated? This is a great genre to write in because it's hard to screw up.

TIP 4 - **Characters need to be DOING SHIT in contained thrillers** - The worst thing you can do in a contained thriller is have your characters sit around talking. Always have them *doing shit*. Always have them *exploring a plan*. In *Aliens*, they have Bishop going after the remote controller box, they're boarding up the doorways, they're looking through station maps to explore their options. These characters are always *doing shit* to better their situation. If your characters are waiting around to be munched up by monsters, your script is going to suffer the same fate. There's always going to be a slow scene or two (Ripley taking a nap with Newt), but the majority of the time, your characters should be *doing shit*!

TIP 5 - **In action movies, it is imperative that your main character be as active as possible!** - How does Ripley, the lowest person on the totem pole, become the *de facto* captain of this squad? By being ACTIVE. While watching the marines secure the base, Ripley grabs a headset and makes them check out an acid hole. When the marines erroneously believe the base is secure, Ripley challenges them. When the Captain has a meltdown, Ripley takes control of the tank-car and saves the soldiers herself. Always look for ways to keep your hero active. If they're sitting in the background, allowing other characters to dictate the story, we'll lose interest in them quickly.

TIP 6 - **Your "Popcorn Movie" should still have a deep compelling hero!** - The reason *Aliens* has stood the test of time while summer films like *The Mummy Returns* and *Transformers* have not, is because the hero actually has DEPTH, or more specifically, a *fatal flaw*. Ripley's fatal flaw is her lack of trust. She doesn't trust this mission. She doesn't trust Burke (the lawyer). She doesn't trust the marines. She doesn't trust Bishop. She overcomes this flaw at the end of the movie when she enlists Bishop to wait for her while she goes after Newt. If you want your popcorn movie to become a classic, we need to make an emotional connection with your main character, and the easiest way to do that is to give them a fatal flaw.

TIP 7 - **Bonding moment** - In these ensemble action movies, it's recommended you write a "bonding moment" between the characters. This moment establishes the emotional connection between the characters so that when they start dying, we feel those deaths affect the others. Without a bonding scene, we never get the sense that the characters know or care about each

other. Cameron writes a nice bonding moment when Bishop puts Hicks's hand on the mess table and does the famous knife-trick while the rest of the marines watch on and cheer.

TIP 8 - **Change your character to a female** - Sometimes a character just isn't working, no matter what you do with him. I've found that one of the easiest ways to bring a male character to life is to change his gender. That's right. All the things that seemed cliché before seem fresh and new now, because now they're being done by a girl. We'd seen plenty of male heroes kick ass before *Aliens*. But Cameron changed the ass-kicker to a woman and just like that, the whole action formula was turned on its head.

TIP 9 - **Contained Thrillers are easy to sell** - I'm not sure there's any easier genre to sell (outside of comedies) than contained thrillers. A group of characters, a confined space, something chasing after them. You still have to come up with a fresh spin on it, but if you do, you can start printing money.

TIP 10 - **Payoffs work best when you're showing, not telling** - *Aliens* has one of the best payoffs ever (Ripley emerging in a giant mechanical loader to challenge the mother alien: "Get away from her you BITCH!"). Why does that payoff work so well? Because we SHOW Ripley operating the loader earlier, instead of someone TELLING US she can operate it. To drive this point home, pop in *Aliens* and skip to the scene where Burke visits Ripley after they've found her ship. "I heard you're working the cargo docks. Running forklifts and loaders and that sort of thing?" he asks. I bet you don't remember that line. That's my point. If *that* would've been the only setup to Ripley using the loader, we would've been like, "How the hell does she know how to use that thing???" We had to SEE HER use it for the classic payoff to work.

TIP 11 - **Avoid urgency during the "Discovery Phase"** - Usually in horror films, there's a "discovery phase," where your characters first enter the "haunted house." Because of the danger and tension and uncertainty involved, you want to milk this sequence as much as possible. It's actually the one time you DON'T want urgency. In *Aliens*, we experience this phase when our characters first get to the colony. We see them discover the acid, the alien tunnels, and then the bodies. Even though there's no urgency here, it never feels slow because there's so much anticipation building up about what they're going to find.

TIP 12 - **Shit needs to GO WRONG in your movie** - Never have things go well for too long in your screenplay, especially in the action, thriller, sci-fi, or horror genres. Shit needs to be going wrong ALL THE TIME, like in *Aliens*. They're attacked when they first get there, the rescue ship crashes, Burke deceives them, the aliens break into their makeshift fortress, Newt is kidnapped. Make sure things are constantly going wrong in your story to keep it exciting.

TIP 13 - **If you're going to write a sci-fi script, keep it simple** - The scripts readers dread the most are sprawling unfocused sci-fi opuses. Why? Because we have to remember names like Joran and Heeblestruck and planetary systems like Frumblestation and Nebulison. My personal experience has been that if you want to sell sci-fi, keep your concept easy to understand. Look at how simple *Aliens* is: "Marines travel to a planetary base to destroy an alien threat."

<u>**STAND BY ME**</u>
Written by: Raynold Gideon & Bruce A. Evans (Story by Stephen King)

Premise: Set in 1959, a group of young friends go off on a journey to find the body of a dead boy.

About: I picked this movie for a few reasons. First and foremost, it's a great screenplay. There's an honesty to the story that you just don't see in movies anymore. Second, it's hard to find a movie that explores the power of childhood friendship better than this one. And third, it's a simple story: four friends go off in search of a dead body. Writers need to remember that not every story needs to be *Inception* or *Chinatown*. A lot of great movies have shockingly simple plots. *Stand By Me* is one of the few films that if I come across it on cable, I *have* to stop and watch the whole thing. That's how much I admire the screenplay.

<u>TIP 14</u> - **Give your main characters names that start with different letters** - When a reader reads a script, it's hard for them to keep track of who's who (especially early in the script when a lot of characters are being introduced). For that reason, if you name one character "Chris" and another "Chad," there's a good chance we're going to mix them up. So start your main characters' names with different letters. Here we have Vern, Gordie, Teddy and Chris.

<u>TIP 15</u> - **ALWAYS WORKS** - Have your villain take something personal away from your hero. Not only does it make us love your hero (we feel sorry for him), it makes us hate your villain (for being extra cruel). In *Stand By Me*, bully Ace and his crew take Gordie's hat away from him and start tossing it around. Because we established earlier that this hat was given to him by his since deceased brother, it really hits home when he's begging for it back. If that hat had just been any old hat, this scene wouldn't have been nearly as impactful.

<u>TIP 16</u> - **In an ensemble piece, make sure each character is DISTINCT!** - Remember, the reader doesn't have the luxury of faces when he's reading a script. So if your characters read too similar, they'll blend together. Therefore, you have to make sure each character is distinct. In *Stand By Me*, we have the crazy kid, the cool kid, the goofy kid, and the smart kid. We never get these guys mixed up.

<u>TIP 17</u> - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - In order to establish that Teddy (Corey Feldman) is crazy, he stands in front of an oncoming train, wanting to get hit. The friends have to physically pull him away at the last second. We don't need any words here. After this action, we know Teddy's crazy.

<u>TIP 18</u> - **Use rituals to sell friendships** - Friendships are tough to get right on the page. They don't work unless we truly believe these pretend people have known each other forever. A great way to sell this is to give the friends little rituals they have with each other. In *Stand By Me*, we have the pinky swears, the "skin it" handshake, the "goochers," the tall tales ("Sick balls!"), and the songs they sing. Without these rituals, we don't buy these four being close.

<u>TIP 19</u> - **STAKES ALERT** - Ahhh, the famous "sick balls" scene. Early on, the boys are lounging around the junkyard when the topic of "Chopper the Junkyard Dog" comes up, a local canine legend with the talent to bite down on men's testicles when he hears the command, "Sick balls!" Later, when the kids are running from Chopper, the stakes for making it to safety are much higher than normal. If they get caught, they lose their manhood! This same scene wouldn't have played nearly as well had the stakes not been set up ahead of time.

<u>TIP 20</u> - **Consider having a character verbalize the theme of your script** - Often, when a writer tries to subtly convey his theme, it doesn't come across. For that reason, some writers like to have one of their characters state the theme at some point. The theme in *Stand By Me* is about cherishing the friendships in your lives, because you never know when they're going to end. So in the final voice-over, we hear an older Gordie say: "As time went on we saw less and less of Teddy and Vern, until eventually they became just two more faces in the halls. It happens sometimes. Friends can come in and out of your life like busboys in a restaurant."

<u>TIP 21</u> - **In period pieces, PAINT THE PERIOD!** - I read too many period pieces that have no unique identifiers to that time period. Uhhh, if that's the case, why not just set your script in the present? So if you're writing a movie like *Stand By Me*, which is set in the 1950s, there should be references to the Korean War and the Russians. We should hear songs by Fats Domino or Chuck Berry. Marlon Brando better be on the marquee somewhere. If you don't sell that decade to us, we're not buying your movie.

<u>TIP 22</u> - **POWER TIP -** MELODRAMA = MONODRAMA - As Stacy Menear, one of my favorite young writers, told me, "melodrama" is really "monodrama." In other words, it's "hitting the same emotional beat over and over again." The best

films are the ones that take you through a range of emotions. So with *Stand By Me*, we're happy (they're singing songs), terrified (Sick Balls!), exhilarated (barely escape being hit by a train), and sad (Gordie dealing with the death of his brother). Make sure to mix up the emotions in your script. Avoid monodrama!

UP
Written by: Bob Peterson & Pete Docter (story by Peterson, Docter and Tom McCarthy)

Premise: A reclusive old man ties thousands of balloons to his house in an attempt to fly to South America, a trip he once hoped to share with his now deceased wife. Instead, however, he must share it with an annoying eight-year old stowaway who's set on becoming the man's friend.

About: The great thing about Pixar is how much emphasis they put on story. And it shows in the final product. Their movies have some of the best box office holds from week to week of any movie out there, and that's a direct reflection of the screenplay's quality. I also love Pixar's emphasis on showing and not telling. The first 45 minutes of *Wall-E* is a silent movie. The first 10 minutes of *Up* is a silent movie. You'll find that if there's a choice between showing the action or telling us about it, Pixar always shows it. There is no better studio to study screenwriting from than this animation giant.

TIP 23 - **The power of outlining** - Pixar outlines the crap out of their scripts. And they're not the only ones. Almost every professional writer I talk to outlines extensively. The most common approach to an outline is a 10-20 page breakdown of the story, with a few sentences breaking down each individual scene (you'll have 10-15 scenes in your first act, 30-35 in your second, and 10-15 in your third). You can certainly write without an outline, but it almost always results in an unfocused, wandering, badly structured story.

TIP 24 - **Don't worry about outlining if you're a beginner** - Uhhh, did I just go insane? Didn't I *just* say it's essential that you outline? Yes, when you actually *know what you're doing*. But if you're still figuring out what an inciting incident is and what page the first act ends on, outlining will result in paralysis by analysis. For those first few screenplays, just write and have fun. When you begin to get a feel for structure, THEN start outlining.

TIP 25 - **Don't write an animation film as a spec screenplay unless you're using it as a writing sample** - I hate to say it, but you can't sell animation specs. I've seen it happen maybe three times in my life. I'll tell you what these animation companies like, though: *good storytelling*. So prove you can tell a great story that's well-structured and has strong characters, and you might find yourself in their story department. Screenwriter Michael Arndt, who wrote *Little Miss Sunshine*, was called on by Pixar to write *Toy Story 3*. *Little Miss Sunshine* was a fabulously structured script with extremely memorable characters, so it's no surprise Pixar sought him out.

TIP 26 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - Pixar shows the entire life of Carl and Ellie in the opening 10 minutes of the movie with nary a word of dialogue. Study this sequence religiously to see how good writers substitute images and actions for words.

TIP 27 - **Raise the dead, at least for a minute or two** - It's hard to dig into a movie character's past and not find a death or two. These poor guys seem to get stuck with a lot of death in their lives. But don't slap a mourning protagonist into your script and assume everyone's going to sympathize with him. Instead, *let us meet* the person they're grieving over. By doing so, there's a MUCH BETTER chance we'll sympathize with them. Imagine *Up* without the magical opening sequence of Ellie and Carl getting to know each other. Would you still care as much that Carl made it to Paradise Falls? Of course not. We're rooting for him specifically because we knew Ellie ourselves.

TIP 28 - **In any "buddy" journey, the secondary character should have a goal too** - An easy way to spot an amateur script is thin secondary characters. Prevent this by giving your secondary character a goal as well! Carl's not the only one going after something in *Up*. Russell (the boy) is trying to get his final Wilderness Explorer badge, the one for helping an old person. That's his goal and motivation throughout the entire film!

TIP 29 - **Die, Table Scene, Die!** - Avoid scenes where characters are sitting and talking at tables. Unless your table scene has TONS of conflict in it (i.e. the breakfast scene in *Training Day* or the dinner scene in *Meet The Parents*), it will be boring. Trust me. I read these scenes all day long. Instead, have your dialogue scenes revolve around going somewhere or doing something. Or just put your characters in a unique location. Only sit them down at a table as a last resort. As I look back at *Up,* I remember only a single scene where the characters are at a table (when they dined with Charles Muntz, the villain). That isn't by accident. Any good writer knows to keep away from tables unless there's no other option.

TIP 30 - **IRONY ALERT** - The central relationship in *Up* pairs a man who doesn't want friends with a kid who's desperate for friends.

TIP 31 - **URGENCY ALERT** - *Up* has one of the most original ticking time bombs I've ever read. The balloons holding

the house up are running out of helium! So they've only got a couple of days left to get to Ellie's cliff. A lot more original than a digital clock with a countdown timer.

TIP 32 - **There's no success without risk** - A great screenwriter once told me that you have to take risks in your writing. If you play everything safe, the best you can do is write a perfect *safe* screenplay. Pixar took a HUGE gamble creating a kid's movie that centered around a senior citizen. They also took a huge risk with *Wall-E*, giving us no dialogue for the first 45 minutes of the film. If you want to write something truly great, you have to take risks!

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK
Written by: Lawrence Kasdan (Story by George Lucas and Philip Kaufman)

Premise: An archeology professor with a flair for adventure must find the fabled Ark Of The Covenant before the Nazis, who plan on using it to make their army invincible.

About: Somebody once said to me, "You know, Raiders isn't a very good screenplay. But it's a great *story*." I asked him what he meant by that and he pointed out that Indiana Jones doesn't have any effect on the events in the movie. Whether he's in the film or not, the Nazis still get the Ark and open it. He went on to point out that no film produced today would ever allow their hero to be tied up for the climax of the movie. I thought about that for a second. It did seem weird. I mean, compare that to *Star Wars*. The hero blows up the damn Death Star! THAT'S active! What's even more baffling is that Indiana Jones is one of the most active characters in movie history BEFORE that climax. I guess in a weird way, that stew of oddities somehow morphed into a five star meal, because let's be honest: this movie is awesome! And despite what my friend says, there are PLENTY of awesome things to cheer about in *Raiders* and I'll be more than happy to point them out to you.

TIP 33 - **The power of the active protagonist** - At some point in the evolution of screenwriting, a buzz phrase was born: the "active protagonist." This refers to the hero who makes his own way, who drives the story forward instead of letting the story drive him. If you're looking for a character in cinema history that embodies this persona, look no further than Indiana Jones. In the very first scene, it's Indiana who goes after the gold idol. And then it's Indiana who goes off to pursue the Ark. It's Indiana who seeks out Marion. It's Indiana who heads to Cairo. It's Indiana who searches for the Staff of Ra. The "active" protagonist is the key ingredient for a great hero and ESPECIALLY a great *action* hero.

TIP 34 - **Clarity is the key to great action sequences** - Raiders has some of the best action sequences ever put on film. A huge reason they succeed is because of CLARITY. Each sequence starts out with a clear objective (a "goal") that the protagonist must achieve. Indiana goes after the gold idol in the cave. Indiana must save Marion in the bar. Indiana must find a kidnapped Marion in the streets of Cairo. Indiana must destroy the plane before it leaves with the Ark. We don't get action sequences with this kind of clarity in most of today's movies and they suffer for it. Look at *Iron Man 2* for example. Can anyone tell me what the hell that car race scene was about? We have no idea, which is why we're checking our watches instead of sitting on the edge of our seats. Create a clear objective in your action scenes so we can easily follow along.

TIP 35 - **Convey to your audience how difficult the goal is** - You want to convey to the audience just how big and important and impossible your hero's goal is. The reason for this is that the more impossible the audience finds the task, the more doubtful they become that the hero will succeed. And doubt? It creates intrigue. There's a quiet little scene in Raiders right before Indiana heads out where his boss reminds him what finding the Ark means. "Nobody's found the Ark in 3,000 years. It's like nothing you've gone after before." It's a small moment, but it's a reminder of just how *impossible* this task is!

TIP 36 - **Introduce a character's secret strength early, then have them use it to save themselves (or someone else) later on** - Midway through the film, Belloq has kidnapped Marion and is trying to seduce her with some liquor. And guess what? We're smiling. Because we remember Marion's opening scene where she drank everyone under the table. So as the two get drunk, we know Marion has the upper hand. Always give your character a secret strength and pay it off later!

TIP 37 - **Not every rule applies to every story** - Part of becoming a great screenwriter is learning when the rules apply to your story and when they don't. One of the commonly held beliefs in screenwriting is that your hero must "refuse the call" before he goes on his adventure. So when Luke's given the chance to join Obi-Wan on his quest, he backs down, saying, "I still have to work on the farm." Indiana Jones, however, never refuses the call. *And Raiders is a better movie for it.* The thing we like so much about Indiana is how brave he is. If Kasdan had manufactured a "refusal of the call," (Indy: "But I have to stay here and teach. I have a dedication to the university.") it wouldn't have felt right. Screenplays are unique that way. Different stories have different requirements. So if it feels like you're forcing a rule into your screenplay, you probably are.

TIP 38 - **Give a great intro to your female lead** - I can't tell you how many male screenwriters screw this up. You need to put just as much thought into your female introductions as you do your male introductions! Raiders offers up a perfect example of this. Indiana Jones has one of the greatest introductory scenes ever. If you don't give that same dedication and passion to Marion's entrance, she's going to disappear. That's why we have this great drinking competition scene followed by a gun battle. Marion is badass, swallowing rum from a bullet hole in the middle of a life or death battle! Now that's a female intro!

TIP 39 - **If you have a boring talky scene, use suspense to spice it up** - Every once in awhile, you need characters to discuss shit. You need them to explain plot points or provide backstory. Which is fine. But since talky scenes get boring,

you need a way to keep the reader entertained. So why not add some suspense? After arriving in Cairo, there's a scene with Indy and Marion walking through the city that helps establish their relationship. If this were the only thing going on, the scene would be boring. BUT… while they're walking around, Kasdan cuts to various bad guys getting in position to attack them. This adds an element of suspense to the scene that instantly eliminates any potential boredom.

TIP 40 - **How to move on from death in a film** - In real life, you spend years mourning a death. In movies, you only have minutes. So how do you show a character move past a death quickly and still make it seem believable? Here's a tried and true method: follow the death with a quick 1-2 page mourning scene. After that, throw your hero into danger. The mourning shows they care and the danger tricks the audience into forgetting about the death. In Raiders, after Marion "dies," Indiana sits in his room, sulking, then gets a call from Belloq. The dangerous Belloq questions Indy on what he knows, followed by the entire bar pointing guns at him. And guess what? We've just completely forgotten about Marion's death. That's how easy it is. This exact same formula is used in Star Wars. Obi-Wan dies, we get a quick mourning scene on the Falcon, and then BOOM, tie-fighters attack them.

THE BOURNE IDENTITY
Written by: Tony Gilroy and William Blake Herron (based on the novel by Robert Ludlum)

Premise: A man wakes up in the middle of the ocean with no memory of who he is or how he got there. His situation gets much worse, however, when he realizes the CIA is trying to assassinate him.

About: A lot of teachers will try and warn you away from the amnesiac protagonist. They think it's played out and hokey. I think it's one of the more compelling situations you can put a character in. I mean, imagine waking up and having no idea who you are. THAT'S a situation! I think what they're really saying is, "Don't write a another *cliché* amnesiac movie." And I agree with that. Like anything in screenwriting, you have to come up with your own unique angle. An amnesiac who learns he's a CIA agent being hunted by the very agency responsible for his situation is a great setup. I'm actually not the biggest Bourne fan, but I admire what they did with the franchise and I liked how much Damon and Liman (the director) emphasized character development in the films. We got into the protagonist's head in a way a combined 23 Bond films never did.   So I think it's a good script to study for that reason alone.

TIP 41 - **Learn to love the chase** - A character being chased is one of the most powerful storytelling engines you can add to your script. Having your characters on the move with someone constantly on their tail is, put plainly, *an exciting situation*. You'll see the chase in a bunch of movies in this book. *Star Wars, Empire*, *The Fugitive, Goonies, The Matrix, Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and of course here in *The Bourne Identity*. If you do it well, "the chase" is one of the easiest ways to add excitement to your script.

TIP 42 - **A chased character must still be an active character** - If your hero ONLY runs away and never fights back, the audience will turn on him. They want their hero to take the initiative at some point, make his OWN way, go after his *own* goals. In this case, once Bourne understands the situation, he goes after the very people chasing him. Talk about active. Now *that's* a character I wanna watch!

TIP 43 – **Know more about your subject matter than I do** - This is a HUGE one as I see it all the time in amateur scripts covering the FBI, the CIA, police, the government, etc. If I sense that I know more about the CIA than the writer who's *writing a CIA script*, the script is dead to me. The reader should NEVER know more than the writer about his subject. So you better research, read books, make Wikipedia your home page – whatever you have to do. But make it clear you are an expert on whatever you're writing about.

TIP 44 - **Assignment work is where all the money is** - Young writers believe that the quickest way to riches is to sell a screenplay. While doable, selling a screenplay is still really difficult! Where screenwriters make the truckloads of money is by writing projects for others. Therefore, the way to break into this industry is to write something great in the genre you love. If people like it, they'll start hiring you for assignment work for those kinds of movies. So if you like Bourne movies, write a thriller-on-the-run script!

TIP 45 - **Every character in your script should be motivated** - We covered this in the opening chapter. Characters should never do something because you, the writer, need them to do something. They should do things because *it makes sense for them*. So Marie (Franka Potente) doesn't help Jason Bourne because the writer needs a way to get Bourne out of the city. She helps him because she's desperate for money (established in the scene prior) and he offers her a bunch of money. For the record, money is a great motivation for characters. It works in most situations.

TIP 46 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - The Lockbox scene. It's been done a million times before, and it will be done a million times more, because it *always works*. Give your hero a key to a mysterious lock box. There isn't a single person in the audience who won't want to find out what's in that box. I promise you. We see that scene early on here in Bourne.

TIP 47 - **For maximum conflict, always put your hero in the last place he wants to be** - This is a *stupendous* screenwriting tool. Where does Jason Bourne have to go for that lockbox? Not some rinky-dink post office on the outskirts of Hicksville. How about a heavily guarded government building in the middle of the city! Talk about *the last place you want to be* when the government's chasing you!

TIP 48 - **As of this writing, thrillers are the 2nd highest-selling genre on the spec market** - This is because thrillers are inherently cinematic. You have action, tension, suspense, mystery, and urgency all wrapped into one. So this is a great genre to choose if you're looking to sell a script.

TIP 49 - **Reinvent a model** - One of the best ways to sell a spec is to take a well-established film model and add a new twist

to it. *The Bourne Identity* took the James Bond model and added amnesia and a darker tone. Those tweaks were enough to make the Bourne franchise fresh to the movie-going public. They were so successful at doing this, in fact, that the very franchise they tweaked, James Bond, ended up tweaking their own franchise to mirror Bourne's!

DISTRICT 9
Written by: Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell

Premise: In the near future, an alien race resides in the slums of Johannesburg. When a plucky bureaucrat tasked with relocating the aliens accidentally gets exposed to their biotechnology, he quickly finds himself turning into one of them.

About: What I liked about *District 9* was that it turned the alien invasion premise on its head. We're used to the aliens coming down to earth and kicking *our* asses. I can't remember any movie where aliens arrived and we enslaved *them*. That may be one of the most important lessons you learn in this book. *Don't resort to repeating stories you've already seen.* Look for opportunities to twist things around and approach the idea from a new angle! But *District 9* didn't stop there. It also added a documentary element. No wonder this film felt so unique. That's why even though it had no stars and took place in a country half of America didn't even know existed, audiences still flocked to it. *District 9* is living proof that audiences *do* want fresh ideas.

TIP 50 - **You are God** - You determine how we feel about everyone and everything in your screenplay. Take advantage of that. In *District 9,* the *very first shot* of the movie is inside the alien ship, with the aliens huddled together, cowering, malnourished, and terrified. It's three seconds of screen time and yet it sets the tone for how we perceive the aliens for the rest of the film. *We feel sorry for them.* Without sympathy for the aliens, District 9 doesn't work. So remember, if you want the audience to feel a certain way, write a scene that *makes them feel that way.* You're God. You can do anything.

TIP 51 - **Try to introduce us to your characters being active if possible** - Introduce your characters *doing* something, trying to achieve something, or in the process of something. That way, your story is always on the move. In *District 9,* we meet Christopher (the main alien) near the end of a search for a power module that will allow him to get back to the mother ship. In other words, he's *actively* trying to achieve something. Way more interesting then introducing him playing chess with his son in their shack.

TIP 52 - **URGENCY ALERT** - The urgency here comes from Wickus (the main character) gradually turning into an alien. That's our ticking time bomb: his alien transformation. Because of this ticking time bomb, he has to help Christopher get him to the mother ship to reverse the effects before it's too late.

TIP 53 - **EXPOSITION ALERT** - The documentary angle is a godsend for exposition. You can line up interviewee after interviewee to tell the audience exactly what you need them to know about plot, characters, and anything else you can think of. Here, the interviewed scholars tell us about how the alien ship arrived, how it broke, as well as how the aliens ended up in the ghettos. If you're using a documentary format, all of your exposition is taken care of.

TIP 54 - **When your character is at his most vulnerable, put him in the place he least wants to be** - This is a more advanced version of "put your character where he least wants to be." The vulnerability makes the scene hit even harder. So after inhaling the poison canister, Wickus is sick, unstable, delirious, and turning into an alien. All he wants is to go home and recover. But what happens when he gets there? *A surprise birthday party!!!* Talk about being stuck in the last place you want to be in at the worst moment possible.

TIP 55 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - The scene where a character must ask for help from someone he screwed over earlier ALWAYS works. So here, Wickus has to go back and ask Christopher for help, the very alien he carelessly kicked out of his home 24 hours earlier. We also see this in the movie *Rocky* when Mick must go back to Rocky and beg him to let him train him.

TIP 56 - **Deus Ex Machina** - If screenwriting had its list of swear words, "Deus Ex Machina" would be at the top of the list. This naughty pronunciation nightmare refers to the moment when your hero is about to be killed, only to be SAVED at the last second by someone else! Beginning screenwriters think this is so clever. But readers hate it. Why? Because it's lazy! The hero gets saved without having to do anything?? It's MUCH more satisfying to see the hero figure his own way out of a jam. So please, avoid deux ex machina moments if at all possible. Having said that, there are a few exceptions, and *District 9* has one of them…

TIP 57 - **Out of the frying pan and into the fire (Deus Ex Machina Exception #1)** - Deus Ex Machina can be used if the character who saves your hero places him in a worse situation than the one he was just in. Near the end of *District 9,* Christopher and Wickus have been captured and are being driven back to the factory, where they'll be killed. But all of a sudden, their truck *is attacked*, allowing them to escape. Wonderful! But oh wait. It turns out the people who saved them are the local gangsters who plan to rip Wickus to shreds! *Not wonderful*! So yeah, our characters were saved, but only to find

themselves in a worse situation than before.

THE PROPOSAL
Written by: Pete Chiarelli

Premise: When a Canadian executive at an American publishing company learns she's about to be deported, she forces her reluctant assistant to marry her in order to stay in the country. Before the wedding, however, she finds herself whisked off to his hometown in Alaska to meet the family.

About: Okay, let's be clear about something. I don't think *The Proposal* is an amazing screenplay. But I included it for a few reasons. First, it was a spec sale. And that's what you're all trying to accomplish - selling your spec! Second, it didn't sell ten years ago. It sold recently (relatively speaking), which means it's relevant to what the market wants. Third, it's traditional. We talk about a lot of scripts breaking the rules in this book. But *The Proposal* is the opposite. It follows *every* rule. In that sense, it proves you don't have to be Alan Ball or Quentin Tarantino to work in this business. Just know how to construct a story within the parameters Hollywood likes and you can thrive. No screenwriting awards are going to be given out here, and there are a few scenes that kinda make me throw up in my mouth, but there's a LOT to learn from *The Proposal* as far as writing for Hollywood.

TIP 58 - **Don't put a "credits sequence" in your script** - Sometimes you'll see production drafts with credits sequences, but you should never put one in a spec draft. I immediately know I'm dealing with an amateur when I spot "Begin Credit Sequence."

TIP 59 - **The "emotionally closed off" character is one of the most dependable fatal flaws in screenwriting** - If you're looking for a "can't miss" fatal flaw for your protagonist, make him/her emotionally closed off, like Margaret (Sandra Bullock) in *The Proposal*. Audiences love watching these characters finally drop their walls and invite others in because it makes them feel good inside. Seriously! This flaw is used to great effect in another screenplay I break down, *Good Will Hunting*.

TIP 60 - **Be creative in trying to sell your script** - There are no rules to marketing and selling your screenplay. Do whatever it takes to get the sale, save for stripping naked and pacing in front of the Paramount lot (not that I know this from experience or anything). Pete Chiarelli actually wrote *The Proposal* using a *female alias,* which turned out to be a brilliant move. Since the main character was a woman (and the genre was romantic comedy), readers felt more comfortable being guided by a woman than a man.

TIP 61 - **STAKES ALERT** - For this setup to work, there has to be something on the line (stakes) for Andrew (Ryan Reynolds). If there are no consequences to him saying yes to Margaret, there's no suspense. So Chiarelli adds the INS Agent character to remind Andrew that if this marriage is fake, he *will* spend five years in jail. Now there are actual stakes attached to Andrew going along with the plan.

TIP 62 - **The Unexpected First Connection** - In any rom-com where the leads hate each other, you'll have a scene, usually around the middle of the script, where the characters have their first "unexpected connection." It's a crucial scene because it sets up the start of your characters falling in love. Without this scene, it'll feel like your characters started liking each other out of nowhere. In *The Proposal*, it's when Andrew and Margaret are getting ready for bed and Margaret admits to liking Rob Bass and DJ Easy Rock. Andrew tricks her into believing he doesn't know who they are in order to get her to sing their song. She does, making a fool out of herself, and he admits it was a trick, resulting in a shared laugh. BOOM - the characters have their first unexpected connection - a launching point for them to fall in love.

TIP 63 - **Change your relationship dynamic over the course of your screenplay to keep it fresh** - You don't want ONE CHARACTER to be dominant the entire time in a movie relationship. That gets boring. Mix it up. Notice how Margaret starts off calling the shots, but when Andrew realizes she needs him, *he* starts calling the shots (at one point demanding she get down on one knee in front of the entire city and ask him to marry her). Many rom-coms will shift the control in the relationship several times during the movie.

TIP 64 - **BACKSTORY ALERT** - This is one of the better backstory scenes I've read. In order to prepare for the U.S. Immigration Test, Margaret and Andrew are forced to tell each other their entire pasts while flying to Alaska. We get all this extensive backstory on each character but barely notice it because it's hidden inside an important plot point (the upcoming test).

TIP 65 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - Whenever you have a rom-com where the couple is pretending to like each other, you need the scene where they're forced to kiss each other in front of others. I know it sounds cheesy. God, do I know. But it *always*

works. Here, Margaret and Andrew have just arrived at Andrew's family's house where a party is taking place. In the middle of the party, Grandma Annie makes an announcement that she wants to see the bride and groom kiss. To keep the charade up, they have no choice but to oblige. And even though this is a goofy Sandra Bullock-Ryan Reynolds rom-com, by God, the scene works!

TIP 66 - **The Trigger** - Just like real people, characters don't become the way they are by accident. There was a trigger early on in their lives that made them that way. Make sure you cover that story somewhere in your script. Margaret's tough exterior stems from her parents dying when she was 16 years old. A lot of young writers don't know their character's trigger, and as a result, their characters feel thin.

TIP 67 - **URGENCY ALERT** - The ticking time bomb here is their wedding, one of the tried and true ticking time bombs in romantic comedies (and regular comedies - we see it in *The Hangover* as well).

THE PIRATES OF THE CARRIBEAN: CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL
Written by: Ted Elliot & Terry Rossio (based on a story by Elliot & Rossio and Stuart Beattie and Jay Wolpert)

Premise: A young blacksmith must team with an infamous pirate, "Captain Jack Sparrow," to save the love of his life, who's being held by a band of undead pirates.

About: What's interesting about this film is that during its development stages it was considered anything but a guaranteed hit. The last half-dozen pirate films had plunged to the ocean floor faster than the Titanic, and pretty much anyone writing a pirate spec was labeled a lunatic. Well, that is until the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* franchise made over three billion dollars at the box office. This taught me that there's no such thing as a "dead genre." It might be dormant. It might be in a slump. But nothing's ever completely dead. So if you want to break out with a big hit, look to resuscitate dormant genres and sub-genres. For example, it's been awhile since *Frankenstein* was updated. It's been awhile since a good submarine flick has come out. The trick is figuring out when these genres are ripe for a comeback.

TIP 68 - **LIKABILITY ALERT 1** - Jack Sparrow is selfish, conniving and untrustworthy. Therefore he needs a big "likable" moment so that we root for him. To achieve this, the writers go with the tried and true "save someone's life" scene. But here's why they're making a million bucks and you're not (yet). It wasn't just anyone Jack saved. It was someone we knew and adored - Elizabeth Swan (Keira Knightly). The added weight of saving a pre-established character (who we liked) guaranteed we'd like Jack. Had it been some nameless damsel in distress, we probably wouldn't have found the moment powerful at all.

TIP 69 - **LIKABILITY ALERT 2** - Have the bad guys condemn your hero for a good deed - This is *such* a great way to get us to love a character. We've just watched Jack Sparrow save someone's life. And how is he rewarded? By being told he'll be hanged! That's not fair! An audience will *always* root for people who get screwed. Cameron used this exact same device in *Titanic*. Jack saves Rose from falling off the boat, then nearly gets arrested for it. We see it in *Jerry Maguire* as well. Jerry tries to change his company for the better with a mission statement. As a result, he gets fired.

TIP 70 - **The power of the MacGuffin** - In any big adventure movie, it's great to have something that everybody wants -- a "MacGuffin." If there's something everybody wants, then all of your characters will be *active* in pursuing it. Here, it's the gold coin. In *Star Wars,* it's R2-D2 (who's carrying the stolen Death Star plans). In *The Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, it's the Ark. Remember, action-adventure films need a lot of *action* and *adventure* and an easy way to achieve this is to have everybody chasing a MacGuffin.

TIP 71 - **Nobody answers questions the same way** - An easy way to improve your dialogue is to make sure each character has their own vocabulary and unique way of speaking. For example, when our villain asks Jack Sparrow if he's made himself clear, Jack doesn't say, "Yes." He says, "Inescapably." Ask Martin Lawrence in *Bad Boys* the same question and he might have said, "Fuck you!" To get the hang of this, ask your five biggest characters a question (i.e. "How are you feeling today?"). Each character should answer differently.

TIP 72 - **The essence of a character description** - Although it's not required, I find that some of the best character descriptions ignore physical traits and focus instead on the character's *essence*. For example, Norrington (the man who wants to marry Elizabeth) is described as "Royal Navy to the core." Another character is described as "born old." Notice that these descriptions don't detail any physical traits (i.e. "wrinkled forehead and tired eyes"), yet we still have a great visual of them.

TIP 73 - **MIDPOINT SHIFT** - *Pirates* has a great and memorable midpoint shift. We learn that all the pirates are ghosts!

TIP 74 - **Use underlining in screenwriting like you would a close-up in a movie** - Underlining in scripts is used to tell the reader that <u>this here is important, so remember it for later</u>. Keep in mind that readers read fast, oftentimes skimming through action paragraphs. So if you have something important you don't want them to miss, it's a good idea to underline it. On page 41, we see this underlined: "<u>Where they enter the moonlight, Koehler's wrist and hand are skeletal</u>." It's an important detail, hence the underline. Just remember to use underlining sparingly or else it loses its effect. It's only used about five times in *Pirates*.

TIP 75 - **POWER TIP** - Are your characters "dialogue-friendly?" - Try as you may, try as you might, you're always limited to the vocabulary and personality of the characters you've created. Will (Orlando Bloom) is never going to say anything *that* interesting. He's not that kind of character. Jack, on the other hand, has something interesting/funny/witty/weird to say every time he opens his mouth. That's why almost all dialogue scenes with Jack jump off the page. He's "dialogue friendly."

If the dialogue in your script sucks, you may want to see if you have enough "dialogue-friendly" characters.

TIP 76 - **Replace your cliché character trait with an unexpected character trait** - Whenever you create a character, try to give him *at least one* trait that goes against what you'd normally expect from that character. Jack Sparrow, for example, is a pirate. We have many preconceived notions about pirates. They're mean. They're nasty. They're rude. Jack, on the other hand, is bumbling, goofy, and awkward. That's so…not pirate-y, which is why it's so genius. It makes Jack's character *unique*. This is one of the quickest ways to create a memorable character, so use it often!

TIP 77 - **"A character who wants something badly and is having trouble getting it."** - If your story ever gets boring, if it's ever in need of a seeing-eye dog, go back to the title of this tip. Take a look at Pirates. That credo is what makes the entire movie work. Jack Sparrow comes to town to get a boat but *he has trouble getting it*. Jack and Will try to save Elizabeth, but *they have trouble saving her*. The pirates attempt to end the curse, but *they have trouble ending it*. If you don't have characters that want something badly, but are having trouble getting it, you probably don't have a movie.

TIP 78 - **If a character doesn't have a flaw, give him something from his past he's trying to resolve** - Not every major character has a fatal flaw, but every major character should have something they're trying to resolve before the story is over. An unresolved issue from one's past is a nice substitute for a fatal flaw. Here, Will must come to terms with the fact that his father was a member of the very people he despises most: *pirates*.

GOOD WILL HUNTING
Written by: Ben Affleck & Matt Damon

Premise: A young degenerate MIT janitor finds himself working with the school's star professor after he solves an unsolvable math problem. In order to accelerate his progress, the professor encourages him to work with an equally gifted but unstable psychiatrist.

About: One of the biggest mysteries in the screenwriting universe is whether Matt Damon and Ben Affleck really wrote *Good Will Hunting*. We know the script was originally a thriller about a blue-collar genius recruited by the government. But once the big guys in Hollywood got their hands on it, they encouraged Matt and Ben to drop the thriller angle and focus on the characters. As the script got closer to production, the producers started hiring a bunch of A-list script doctors to do passes on it, cleaning up those first-time writer mistakes. Script doctor passes happen to every script, right? So the question here is, what exactly got changed and how much? Was it just a simple clean-up job or did they knock the house down? People have approached me from both sides of the argument, including some who claim to have worked on the script themselves. But you know what? I don't care. This is one of the best screenplays ever written. Some of the scenes and dialogue here are unparalleled. So I don't care who wrote it. I'm just glad it was written!

TIP 79 - **Character-driven scripts rarely sell without a hook** - Guys, you can't write some "deep" character driven drama and expect it to sell. These movies don't make enough money for producers to take a chance on them. However, you CAN sell a character-driven drama *if you have a hook*. The easiest place to find a hook is through irony. *Good Will Hunting* follows the story of a *genius janitor*. The movie *Juno* follows a *pregnant teenager*. *The King's Speech* follows *a nation's speaker who can't speak*. The perfect ironic concept can make even the smallest idea feel big.

TIP 80 - **Even the tiniest characters should have a storyline** - I know I'm dealing with a professional when even the smallest characters have something going on. Professor Lambeau (the math genius who teaches Will) has a study aid who becomes increasingly jealous of Lambeau fawning over Will. This tiny choice made a nearly invisible character memorable. Try to do this with every character in your story. Make them memorable, even if it's in some small capacity.

TIP 81 - **EXPOSITION ALERT** - Therapy sessions are one of the easiest ways to convey backstory and exposition. Whereas someone saying "Tell me about your father," is TERRIBLY on-the-nose in a normal scene, it's a legitimate question in a therapy scene.

TIP 82 - **Start a relationship on a lie** - Lying means hiding, and whenever a character's hiding something, you get all sorts of juicy subtext in your dialogue. Nowhere does this work better than when you start a relationship on a lie. As the relationship grows, that lie will weigh heavily on the liar, putting more and more stress on the relationship until it's ready to pop. We see this with Will and Skylar (the love interest in *Hunting*). Will tells her he lives in a nice place, has a giant family and lives a perfect life. As they grow closer and Skylar pushes him for details, we see Will's lie eating him up, dominating every moment they spend together. It eventually gets to the point where he pulls away from the relationship because he can't handle it anymore. Imagine if Will had been straight up with Skylar and told her the truth right away. Their relationship would've been boring as hell. It should be noted that this same device is used in Ben Affleck's, *The Town*, as his relationship with the female lead is also built on a lie.

TIP 83 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - This is one of the best likability scenes I've ever read. The setting is a Harvard bar. Will's friends are being embarrassed by a pretentious Harvard jerk. Will sticks up for his friends (audiences LOVE characters who stick up for their friends) and puts the Harvard bully in his place (audiences LOVE when characters stand up to bullies), outsmarting him at his own game (audiences love when heroes outwit villains). If you don't love Will after this scene, you're a very cold individual and hate puppies.

TIP 84 - **Good dialogue comes from characters talking AROUND their issues, not ABOUT their issues** - Oh boy, I can't tell you how BORING it is when characters discuss their *issues*! You might as well take a power saw to my skull. Instead, have your characters talk AROUND their issues. Look at Will. He talks around his issues with Skylar (lying about his past). He talks around his issues with Sean (avoiding any meaningful feedback). He rarely says anything of substance to Professor Lambeau. That's when dialogue is most interesting. So talk AROUND it. Talk under it. Talk over it. *But don't talk about it*! Not unless it's absolutely essential and there's no other way for the scene to go.

TIP 85 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - The unconventional mentor. Audiences LOVE the unconventional mentor, the unorthodox teacher who does things his own way. Here we see the unconventional mentor in Sean (Robin Williams), who's about the only therapist in the world who will choke his patient to get his point across. We see it with Mr. Miagi in *The Karate Kid*. We

see it with Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back.* We see it with Woody Harrelson in *The Hunger Games.* This character type is gold.

TIP 86 - **Good dialogue is almost always steeped in conflict** - If you don't have *some* element of conflict in a scene, your dialogue will probably suck. Look at some of the best scenes in *Good Will Hunting.* Will challenges the bully in the bar (conflict), Will and Sean spar in their therapy sessions (conflict). Chuckie (Ben Affleck) argues with Will that he needs to be doing something bigger with his life (conflict). Take conflict out of the picture and the dialogue becomes ten times less interesting.

BIG
Written by: Gary Ross and Anne Spielberg

Premise: When a young boy makes a wish to be "big," he wakes up the next morning to find his wish has come true. He now resides in the body of a 30-year old man.

About: The body-switch/body-change movie is a comedy staple. You can knock it all you want, but they're never going away. A big reason why is because actors love them. Think about it. How many opportunities does an actor get to pretend they're a little kid? Or how many opportunities does the "straight" guy get to play the "goofy" guy? Take *The Change-Up*, for example (which, even though it bombed was actually a good script — no, seriously!). When would Jason Bateman ever get to play an irresponsible sex-crazed pothead other than in a body-switch movie? So keep the body-switch movies coming boys and girls. Just make sure they're as good as *Big*!

TIP 87 - **Mine your premise** - The whole point of writing a high concept movie is to exploit the premise. So in a movie like *Big,* you better be looking for every potential "boy in a man's body" joke you can come up with. One of my favorite moments in *Big* is when Adult Josh has to fill out a job application for an interview.   He takes one look at the page and is baffled. It's a foreign language to him. So what does he do? He leans over and peeks at another guy's application, attempting to cheat*,* which is *exactly what a kid would do*. Whatever your high concept is, you have to mine moments like these as much as possible.

TIP 88 - **Comedy is the top selling genre in the spec market** - This is where most of the spec sales originate. However, the pros know this, and therefore the competition is stiff. Being funny isn't good enough. You have to be an expert with story, structure, character, dialogue, theme, etc. Don't think you can bring your B-game to this genre and get rich. The most common type of bad script I read is lazy sloppy comedies. So make sure to put as much effort into your comedy as you would your 12th century period piece. I'm serious.

TIP 89 - **If you don't have a ticking time bomb, have a finish line** - Not every movie has a bomb that blows up in 72 hours. So if you don't have that ticking time bomb scenario, at least tell us *where the finish line is*, because the audience subconsciously wants to know when the story ends. In *Big,* when Josh asks the city where the carnival wishing machine was moved, he's told it will take them six weeks to get an answer. Those six weeks become the time frame and "finish line" for the movie.

TIP 90 - **The "Reverse Obstacle"** - Your job as a screenwriter is to throw obstacles at your hero – to make it difficult for them to achieve their goal. So what's the deal with *Big*? Josh lands a job, gets promoted, makes a ton of money, and gets the girl. Only *good* things happen to Josh. No obstacles. Why? Well, Josh's goal is to *get back to his old life*. Therefore, all these things happening to him *are* obstacles, just in reverse. The better his life gets as an adult, the harder it'll be to go back. In other words, obstacles are relative to your hero's situation. In some cases, something good happening is actually something bad.

TIP 91 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - *Big* is one giant dramatic irony scene. We know something all the other characters don't: *that Josh is a kid in a man's body.* That's why every scene is so funny. When Josh is playing on the big piano with his boss, for example, we know why Josh is so good at it (because he's a little kid!). To demonstrate the power of dramatic irony, imagine all of the scenes in the movie, except now the characters *do* know that Josh is a kid in a man's body. Hmmm, not so interesting anymore, is it?

TIP 92 - **Trailer moments** - Try to have two or three "trailer moments" in your screenplay, a scene or an image that's exciting and perfectly encapsulates your movie. You need these moments so that a producer can visualize and think, "If I put this in a trailer, people will want to see this movie." Tom Hanks on that big piano sold *Big.*

TIP 93 - **Misunderstanding = great comedy** - This is a comedy staple. Create a scene based on a misunderstanding between two characters, then exploit the comedy within that misunderstanding. Near the middle of the movie, Josh takes his co-worker, Susan, home. As they get to the door, we establish what each character wants. Josh wants to have fun like any kid would at a sleepover. Susan, however, thinks they're going to sleep together. Here's the dialogue that follows...

Susan: "I don't know if we should do this yet."
Josh: "Do what?"
Susan: "I mean, I like you and I want to spend the night with you…"
Josh: (surprised) You mean sleep over?"

Susan: Well…yes."
Josh: "Okay, but I'm gonna be on top."

Neither of them are aware of what the other *really* wants, and that's where the comedy comes from.

AVATAR
Written by: James Cameron

Premise: Many years in the future, a crippled marine is flown to the far-off moon of Pandora to operate an "avatar," a genetically created copy of the local "Na'vi" race. Although his job is to collect information to be used against the Na'vi, he soon finds himself sympathizing with them, as well as falling in love.

About: *Avatar* is an unconventional choice for this book. I would not hold it up as one of the best screenplays around, but Cameron shows, 25 years after *Aliens*, that he still makes the best popcorn movies in Hollywood. However, here's the real question when it comes to Cameron: how do his films make so much damn money? What's his secret? It's actually not that complicated. He writes films for the male *and* female audience. He brings in big time special effects to lure in the boys and a love story to lure in the girls. And when his movies are pure action, like *Aliens* and *The Terminator*, he'll make the lead character a woman - another trick to cajole the female audience into the theatres. Most writers and producers only focus on getting the dudes to show up and have lost countless gobs of money as a result.

TIP 94 - **The Jumparound Device** - Certain stories are complicated due to their size and scope. The "jumparound device" helps you navigate these stories via a guide, an operator of sorts. You wouldn't need this in a movie like, say, *Rocky*. But you'd need it in a movie set a hundred years in the future on another planet that takes place over an extended period of time. The jumparound device in *Avatar* is Jake Sulley's video diary. With it, we can jump across huge chunks of time, with the diary helping bridge the gaps. Without the device, we would be constantly lost. There are many jumparound devices available: Voice-over (*Braveheart*), a separate storyline (*Titanic*), a person reading a book (*The Princess Bride*). If people tell you your story is too complicated, consider adding a jumparound device.

TIP 95 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - This was one of my favorite "show don't tell" moments of 2009. When Jake Sulley rolls out onto Pandora for the first time, a huge vehicle passes him. Lodged in that vehicle's tires are *big colorful arrows*. In that moment, even though we haven't seen the enemy yet, we understand the situation. We're in a war with some unique and big-ass aliens. And all it took was 1/8 of a page to show us this.

TIP 96 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - We naturally sympathize with anyone who's suffered a tough break in life, such as a handicap or disability. For that reason, when Jake Sulley shows up in a wheelchair, we immediately root for him.

TIP 97 - **Your hero needs a STRONG motivation** - Too many amateurs give their heroes weak or trivial reasons for doing what they're doing. So heed this advice: *Your hero's motivation must be as strong as possible.* In *Avatar,* Jake isn't infiltrating the Na'vi to sleep on a nicer mattress. He's doing it to get his legs fixed so he can walk again! *That's* a motivation.

TIP 98 - **The 20-page rule** - If a character disappears for more than 20 pages, there's a good chance the reader's forgotten about them. If it's been 30 pages, they've definitely forgotten about them. If it's beyond that, the character might as well not exist. Some movies, such as Avatar, have a lot of characters coming and going. In cases like these, the writer must keep track of those characters for the reader. If someone reappears after a long absence, write something like, "It's Frank, the man we met earlier at the waterfall scene." It takes us out of the story for a brief moment, but it prevents us from the dreaded: "Who the *hell* is Frank??"

TIP 99 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Romantic relationships thrive when there's initial resistance from one of the characters. That resistance creates conflict, which makes for a fun-to-watch relationship. Neytiri hates Jake Sulley from the get-go, locking our central conflict into place.

TIP 100 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - A hero teaming up with a former enemy to take on an even bigger enemy always works. Whether it's Luke and Vader taking down the Emperor, Vin Diesel and The Rock taking on drug dealers in *Fast Five*, or Rocky and Apollo teaming up to take on Clubber Lane in *Rocky 3*. Or here, when Jake nabs the giant (former enemy) Hunter Dragon to take down the marines. Audiences love these scenarios.

TIP 101 - **"Calm Before The Storm"** - Before the third act climax, there needs to be that "calm before the storm" scene for your hero – a breather that adds perspective and gravitas to the upcoming battle (or exam, or tournament, or fight). Here, we see Jake alone, at the Tree Of Souls, desperately asking for help. It's a tiny scene, but it allows the script to take a deep breath before its big finale.

DIE HARD
Written By: Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souza (based on the novel by Roderick Thorp)

Premise: A New York cop visiting his disgruntled wife in LA finds himself trapped in her building when a terrorist group crashes the company Christmas party.

About: What can't you say about *Die Hard*? It's probably the best action thriller ever made. It's certainly the most fun. And it created a brand new type of action hero: the fearless, wise-cracking, every-cop. Unfortunately, in the decades since, writers forgot what made John McClane so memorable. No, it wasn't the catch phrases or the cool stunts. *It was the character*! That's what tickled our film-going tummy. The screenwriters actually CARED about John McClane. They devised a storyline (involving McClane and his wife) that required us to become emotionally invested in him. That extra effort helped us see John (and the others) as real people. That's what amateur writers forget. If you can get an audience to believe they're watching *real* people, then it doesn't matter where you put those people - at the top of a building taken over by terrorists or on a planet eight trillion miles away. Once we're attached, we'll go anywhere with them. Which is a perfect segue to our first *Die Hard* tip…

TIP 102 - **We have to care about your hero!** - If we don't care about your hero, we don't care about your story. It doesn't matter how clever your plot or your dialogue or your 3rd act twist is if we don't care about the person guiding us through it. So make your protagonist likable or smart or clever or honest or loyal or funny or brave or earnest or selfless or any combination of these things. As long as we *care*. John McClane is honest, protective, brave, funny, and defiant. I care about this guy. I want to see him win!

TIP 103 - **We have to identify with the hero!** - You have to find ways for the reader to *identify with your hero*. If we have nothing in common with the guy, we're probably not going to care about him much. John is desperately trying to save his marriage from falling apart. Who hasn't been in that position before, trying to save a broken relationship? I can identify with that. I'm sure you can too.

TIP 104 - **Only include character backstory that's relevant to the current story** - We were talking about this earlier and here's a perfect example of it. All we know about John McClane is that he's a New York City cop and that he's having marriage problems brought on by his wife taking a job in a different city. Yet that's all we *need* to know about his backstory because that's all that's relevant to the plot. Would it be interesting to find out John survived a plane crash when he was four? Sure. But it's not relevant to the plot so who cares?

TIP 105 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - What's the moment we fall in love with John McClane? <u>When he sits up front with the limo driver</u>. This is a regular guy, *just like us*. One of the best "likable" moments I've read. And all they had to do was change the seating arrangement.

TIP 106 - **Rarely should characters reveal their own backstory** - It ALWAYS feels false when characters, unprovoked, start talking about their pasts. If John, out of nowhere, tears up and reveals, "When I was five, my dad used to bring me out to a field and beat me. I wanted to run away but I was scared he would do the same to my sister…" I would force you to melt my brain with a waffle iron before he finished. Avoid this if at all possible. How do you avoid it?

TIP 107 - **Have another character force backstory out of your character** - An excellent way to handle backstory is to have another character force it out of your hero. Take the limo scene in *Die Hard* for example. We need some exposition/backstory on John's marriage before he gets to the building. Instead of McClane bringing it up himself (bad bad bad!), it's *our limo driver* who pries it out of him. "You mean you thought she wouldn't make it out here and she'd come crawling on back, so why bother to pack?" "Like I said Argyle, you're fast," John replies. BOOM, we understand McClane's marriage situation and it's all because the *other character* forced it out of him.

TIP 108 - **URGENCY ALERT** - Every action movie should have a ticking time bomb. But that doesn't mean a big flashing clock with "120 minutes" left on it. Try and look for alternatives – less obvious choices that are more creative. Here, the ticking time bomb is the seven locks to the computer safe Hans is hacking into. There are no clocks, and yet still, a clear ticking time bomb is in place. Very clever.

TIP 109 - **Remind us what your hero's fighting for** - In 110 pages, it's easy for the reader to forget what the hero's fighting for. In this case, McClane is trying to save his wife. If, then, we don't see his wife for sixty minutes, we forget what the point of it all is. In *Die Hard,* near the midpoint, John's wife goes to Hans and asks him if she can get a couch for her pregnant friend. It's a small and seemingly insignificant scene, but it reminds us what John is fighting for.

TIP 110 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - One of the best scenes in Die Hard is when McClane runs into Hans on the roof and Hans pretends to be a hostage. Why? Dramatic Irony! *We* know Hans is the villain but McClane doesn't. So we're terrified for him. We want to scream, "John! He's the bad guy! Watch out!" This is why dramatic irony is so awesome. It pulls us in like no other tool can.

TIP 111 - **Your villain should be stronger than your hero** - Make him smarter. Make him more resourceful. Give him an edge. Why? Because *we need to believe your hero will lose*. If we don't, there's no suspense, and without suspense, you don't have a film. Hans is one of the greatest bad guys of all time because he's a worthy adversary. We see his amazing organizational skills. We see him cleverly pretend to be a hostage. We see him trick the FBI into helping him break the safe. We see him keep his wits no matter how many of his men die. This guy is *always* in control. And that's what keeps us on the edge of our seats. We're wondering, how is McClane going to beat this guy???

TIP 112 - **In the final act, STACK THE ODDS against your hero** - In every action script, you want it to get tougher and tougher the closer your hero gets to the finish line. McClane's feet are heavily cut. Hans has taken his wife hostage. McClane's only got two bullets left. The less sure victory is, the more suspenseful the final scene will be.

TAKEN
Written by: Luc Besson and Robert Mark Kamen

Premise: When his daughter is taken while on vacation in Europe, a retired CIA agent must move quickly to rescue her before she disappears forever.

About: *Taken* is a great movie for young screenwriters to study. It has a CLEAR GOAL (find the daughter), high stakes (if he doesn't, she'll spend the rest of her life as a sex slave) and a ticking time bomb (he has 72 hours before she's untraceable). All you need is a great concept and if you follow the same formula as *Taken,* it's hard to screw it up. On top of that, this is a MOVIE. And what I mean by that is, it's not a series of scenes with people in rooms talking about their lives. It's constantly moving. It's nonstop intensity. There's conflict at every turn. That's the kind of thing producers are looking for. *Movies.* Or more specifically, movies that *make money!*

TIP 113 - **In a kidnapping movie, we better like the character who gets kidnapped** - If you want your kidnapping movie to work, we gotta get to know the victim and *like him/her.* That way, we'll actually *care* whether our hero saves them or not.

TIP 114 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - We will ALWAYS like someone who unconditionally loves their child. It may be a cheap device, but by golly it works. Bryan (Liam Neeson) loves his daughter more than anything in the world. And that's the main reason we root for him.

TIP 115 - **Kidnap vs. Revenge** - Kidnap and revenge stories are similar in that they both allow for a strong character goal: find the person responsible. But here's the difference: with a kidnapping, there's a chance the victim *might still be alive.* Not only does this add hope (creating a more positive viewing experience) but it also adds URGENCY. If someone's still alive, that means time is running out to save them! You don't get that in revenge movies, which is why they're usually slower. Take this into consideration the next time you're deciding on kidnapping or killing someone.

TIP 116 - **Use your first act to set up your characters** - The first act is typically used to set up your characters so that when the shit goes down, we care about the people navigating that shit. *Taken* is a great example of this. There is no action in the first 30 pages. We get to know Bryan Mills, we get to know his daughter, and we get to know their relationship. It's for this very reason that we *care* when she gets taken.

TIP 117 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - A helpless vulnerable girl in danger *always works.* That's why so many novels and movies and news stories revolve around kidnapped or missing girls. We are fascinated by girls in peril. As long as you have a unique take and can make it fresh, this is a great device to center your story around.

TIP 118 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - One of the best types of conflict between characters is underlying tension. It's not as obvious as anger or frustration, but what I love about it is it makes slow scenes sparkle. When Bryan comes to his daughter's birthday, he runs into his ex-wife. As the two stand there, you just feel the tension behind their 20-year relationship. Barely anything is said, but boy, does that underlying conflict pull you in.

TIP 119 - **A perfect hero is usually a boring hero** - You want your hero to have flaws, issues, internal conflict, mistakes he's made, vices he can't shake. These are the things that make your hero REAL. What makes Bryan interesting is that he's no angel. He favored work over family for 18 years. It cost him. Now he's trying to play catch up. A hero should never be perfect.

TIP 120 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - Bryan, pretending to be someone else, finds his daughter's kidnapper playing cards with his friends. Since the kidnapper isn't aware of who he is, there's dramatic irony. *We* know Bryan's about to kick some ass. But *these men* don't. The anticipation this creates lights a fire under the scene.

AMERICAN BEAUTY
Written by: Alan Ball

Premise: A suburban man having a mid-life crisis decides to ignore the rules of society and revisit the irresponsibility that defined his youth. Little does he know, the choices he makes will lead to his murder.

About: Some people consider *American Beauty* to be the best spec screenplay ever written. Steven Spielberg was one of the early champions of the script and just like everyone else, wasn't sure what made it so powerful. All he knew was that it worked. My opinion on why it worked was that Alan Ball created eight real living breathing human beings. Not characters. But *real people*. And that's the hardest thing to do in screenwriting, is to create real, believable people. There's no doubt that if you want to study how to write a character piece, *American Beauty* should be at the top of your list.

TIP 121 - **Black Comedies are tough sells** - *American Beauty* is an exception to this rule, but on the whole, black comedies rarely make money. Outside of this film and "The Graduate," can you think of a black comedy that's made a hundred million bucks? Can you name three that have made 50 million? The Black List (a yearly list of the best unproduced screenplays in Hollywood) has given black comedies new life. But know that producers are wary of this genre because of its awful box office track record (the number one Black List script of 2009 was a black comedy called "The Beaver." If the *number one* black comedy script can't do well at the box office, you can see why producers would be wary of them). My advice is only write character pieces/black comedies if readers have repeatedly told you your character-work is *amazing*.

TIP 122 - **In Multi-Protagonist films, try to have a "dominant protagonist"** - Audiences like having someone to relate to and identify with in a movie. So even if your script follows a cast of characters, like *American Beauty,* it's recommended you center the script on a dominant character, like Lester Burnham. You can certainly do it like *Crash* and keep everyone equal, but I'm telling you, audiences get antsy if they don't have that main character to keep coming back to.

TIP 123 - **Stay away from phone calls in your script!** - No phone scenes. If you need to convey a quick plot advancement ("Meet me at the coffee shop. We need to talk.") then a phone call is fine. There are certain story situations that require phone calls as well (i.e. the characters may be in different states). But try to put your characters in front of each other if possible. It's always more compelling. I don't remember a single phone call scene in American Beauty.

TIP 124 - **If you're gonna reveal your ending at the beginning of the script, make sure you leave a few mysteries for the audience to solve along the way** - I see this device a lot: writers telling us how the story ends in the opening scene. If you're going to take this approach, please have a few things left for us to discover! Lester Burnham tells us he'll be dead in a year, but he doesn't tell us HOW. That way, the story becomes a "whodunit?" We're trying to figure out which one of the characters is responsible for Lester's death. Had we seen Ricky's dad kill Lester in the opening scene, what's left to look forward to? You always need mysteries in your screenplay, but especially if you're giving away your ending on page one.

TIP 125 - **Audiences DO care about rich people's problems** - There's a myth that you shouldn't write about rich people because nobody cares about rich people's problems. *American Beauty* proves that if you make your characters' problems *identifiable, universal or relatable,* we'll care about them no matter what tax bracket they're in. Who hasn't felt like Jane, desperate to be liked? Who hasn't felt like Lester, yearning for the days of their youth? Who hasn't felt like Carolyn, trapped in a loveless relationship? Make your characters' problems identifiable and we'll care about them no matter how much money they have in the bank.

TIP 126 - **Write characters that actors want to play** - If I were an actor, would I want to play the protagonist in your script? Be honest. Is the role exciting or challenging enough? If the answer's no, it's time to rewrite the character. Spacey gets to play the sad sack, the reborn optimist, the pot-smoker, the family man, the potential statutory rapist. There's a lot of meat here for an actor to dig into, which makes it a coveted role.

TIP 127 - **Multi-protagonist screenplays tend to have longer page counts** - I advise staying under 110 pages with your screenplay. It's the industry standard for unknown writers. But in a multi-character drama, you're exploring lots of characters in multiple storylines on a deeper level. That takes time, which means it's okay for these scripts to reach 120 pages. But I wouldn't push your luck. 120 is the maximum.

TIP 128 - **Why is the 110 page-count so important?** - People point out that eight of my top 25 favorite scripts (listed on my blog) are over 120 pages. So why do I tell people to keep their scripts under 110 pages? I'll tell you why. One of the biggest mistakes amateur writers make is including pointless, repetitive, or unneeded scenes. When you give yourself a 110 page limit, it forces you to get rid of these scenes and only keep the important stuff, which makes the script a lot leaner (and

therefore a lot better). The guys writing these 135 page screenplays are usually a decade into their careers and know what to do with those extra pages.

TIP 129 - **In drama, comedy is your best friend** - Stalking, death, murder, abuse. These are some of the things the characters in *American Beauty* endure. Yet, the 7th line of the movie is, "Look at me, jerking off in the shower." You need comedy to balance out your drama, or else you have melodrama, which is every reader's nightmare. Why did "Revolutionary Road" (another Mendes movie) not connect with audiences? I can't say for sure, but the fact that there wasn't a single joke in the script didn't help.

TIP 130 - **The Hero's Choice** - The whole point of giving your character a flaw is to challenge that flaw at the end of the movie. This is where we see whether your hero's changed or not. The way it works is simple. At the end of the script, write a scene that directly challenges your character's fatal flaw! He'll either pick the right way (signifying he's changed. Yay!) or the wrong way (signifying he hasn't. Booo!). Lester's flaw is his desire to live a life without responsibility — essentially he wants to be a teenager again. That flaw is tested when he gets a chance to sleep with teenager Angela. He can either go through with it (and remain a child) or resist (and grow up). He chooses not to do it and hence, his character changes.

TIP 131 - **If your hero engages in an underage relationship, make sure the underage character engages him as well** - If you try and write a hero who courts an underage girl, we're going to hate him. If you make the girl just as bad, however (if she's pursuing him just as intensely as he's pursuing her), we'll go along with it. Here, Lester pursues 16-year old Angela, but she's just as interested in him as he is in her, so in "movie-reality," we're okay with it.

TIP 132 - **Surprise the unsurprisable** - Remember, readers have read evvvvverrrrything. They've read so much, in fact, that they usually know what you're going to write before you do. I'm serious. I'm rarely surprised by screenplays anymore. So one of the things a writer must do is surprise the person who can't be surprised. *American Beauty* has its 40-year-old protagonist befriending his 17-year-old pot-selling neighbor, who's dating his daughter, whose underage best friend our protagonist wants to fuck. It has his wife fucking her real estate rival. It has 5-minute scenes with bags blowing in the wind. It has a military closet homosexual who collects Nazi dinnerware and beats the shit out of his son-- who, by the way, houses a collection of voyeur videotapes that stack from floor to ceiling. I can't remember a movie that consistently surprised me with its choices as much as this one.

ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND
Written by: Charlie Kaufman (story by Charlie Kaufman & Michel Gondry and Pierre Bismuth)

Premise: A withdrawn middle-aged man falls in love with a free-spirited woman, only to learn that they were former lovers who paid to forget one another via a memory-erasing service. When the man tries to use the service a second time, he changes his mind at the last second, forcing he and the woman to hide inside his most painful memories so they won't forget one another.

About: This is one of the first screenplays I ever read. I remember thinking to myself afterwards… "Whoooooaaaaah. Is it really okay to write like this? Can you really be that whacked out? Defy the laws of storytelling that much??" Obviously, the answer was yes. But how did Kaufman do it? Well, *Sunshine* may give hope to rule-bending screenwriters everywhere, but Kaufman isn't throwing caution to the wind as much as you think. The man knows screenplay structure better than everyone who's bought this book combined. So while it takes a little more investigating to figure out how he constructed his Mona Lisa, I can assure you he used the same brushes that the rest of us use.

TIP 133 - **What is "voice?"** - In this industry, lots of people will say you need a unique "voice" to succeed. Kaufman is one of the first writers they point to as an example of this elusive quality. But what is "voice?" How do you get it? How do you write with one? Diane Cameron, one of my favorite Scriptshadow readers, gave the best definition of the term I've ever heard: "Voice has to do with how an author interprets the world on the page. It has a lot to do with language choice, the rhythm and flow of words. Sometimes it has to do with the author's point of view (John Hughes) or sense of humor (Shane Black, William Goldman) or the creative dialogue (Quentin Tarantino) or quirky characters (most of the above). If you read a screenplay by an author with a distinctive voice, you will recognize it in other works by that author." That last part particularly clarified it for me. It's so true.

TIP 134 - **Actors and directors are the two biggest entities that make a movie happen** - In this day and age, it's rare that studios buy a script without a director and/or actor attached. So the goal is to write a movie that both of these entities will be interested in. In *Eternal Sunshine*, the lead actor gets to play his character in love, in mourning, as a baby boy, as a forgotten beau, through multiple time periods and unique scenarios. I'd say that's a pretty exciting character to play. Now look at *Sunshine* as a directing gig. You have rooms disappearing, people becoming other people, houses crumbling around you, and time being manipulated. If you truly want to sell a spec script, it's important to ask this question before you start: Will this script attract an A-list director and A-list star?

TIP 135 - **Have your characters do things only THEY would do** - Every character action represents that character. So when they act, have them act in a manner *unique to them*. For example, Clementine isn't the kind of person who goes on a date to the AMC Cineplex. She takes Joel to the drive-thru, parks outside so they don't have to pay, then dubs her own lines because they can't hear the words. Use every character action in your script to sell us on the unique nature of that character.

TIP 136 - **Manic characters are GREAT for dialogue** - Characters who can't shut up are soooo dialogue-friendly. Look at Clementine. She'll tell you about her dream profession (naming hair-dye colors), follow it up with how badly she misses grade school, then finish up by assuring you she's not trying to seduce you, all in one big dialogue chunk. Not only are characters like this fun to write, but actors *love* to play them. And audiences enjoy them as well. You also saw this character utilized in the movie *Say Anything*, when John Cusack played the motor-mouthed Lloyd Dobler.

TIP 137 - **Bond your characters** - In order for a love story to work, we have to buy into that love, which is easier said than done. I've found that a way to accelerate love in the reader's eyes is to have characters sharing something entirely unique together. This legitimizes their love in our eyes because unique experiences accelerate the bonds in our own real-life relationships. This could be Jack and Rose "flying" at the front of the Titanic. It could be Jerry Maguire hiring Dorothy amidst the most embarrassing firing ever. And it could be Roy and Clementine running through Roy's subconscious together (or even enjoying each other's company while lying on a frozen lake). If your characters only do a bunch of things that we do in our everyday lives, something about their relationship won't "pop," and we won't ever believe their love.

TIP 138 - **One of the best ways to get noticed in the spec world is to write a screenplay that plays with time in some unique way** - If you can jump back and forth in time in a clever fashion that stays true to the spirit of your story, the spec market will fall over themselves for you. *Pulp Fiction, 500 Days Of Summer*, *Memento*, *Groundhog Day*, *Source Code*, *Eternal Sunshine*. A lot of these scripts get snatched up because the time jumping variable is instantly marketable.

TIP 139 - **It's a lot easier to sell an average script with a great hook than it is to sell a great script with an average hook** - Hollywood is a concept driven business. Always remember that. So if you ever have to choose between writing a

romantic comedy about two friends (i.e. *When Harry Met Sally*) or a romantic comedy about two people who erase their memories to forget each other, please, for the love of God, pick the second option.

TIP 140 - **The rules are different for unknown and known screenwriters** - Some of you might look at the previous tip and say, "But *When Harry Met Sally* is the greatest rom-com of all time!" And I agree with you. It is. But Nora Ephron had already written three produced movies by the time she wrote that script. Which meant people would read her script no matter what the concept. As an unknown screenwriter, YOU DON'T HAVE THAT ADVANTAGE. As an unknown screenwriter, your concept has to be a selling point. It's the only way someone who doesn't know you is going to choose your script above all the others on their desk.

TIP 141 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Notice how different the central characters are here. Joel is reserved, practical, and responsible. Clementine is boisterous, impractical and impulsive. These two were built to clash, which is what makes their relationship so great to watch - conflict!

TIP 142 - **Differentiate the length of your main characters' names** - Professional readers read FAST, often to the point where they're racing over names. This occasionally results in associating dialogue with the wrong person. A neat way to prevent this is to give your main characters (the ones who speak the most) a long name and a short name respectively. "Jud" and "Esmerelda" for example. That way, even when a reader's speed-reading, they can tell who's who. "Roy" and "Clementine" are easy to differentiate. "George" and "Carla" are a little tougher. This may seem like a small thing, but remember, you're talking about people who read screenplays ALL DAY LONG. Small things *matter*.

STAR WARS
Written by: George Lucas

Premise: A group of misfit characters are tasked with saving the galaxy from a planet-sized space station, which is being used by the dreaded "Empire" to rule the universe.

About: Trying to come up with something new to say about *Star Wars* is like trying to come up with an original opinion about God. But I'll add my two cents on why I believe it's stayed with us for so long. More than any other film in the franchise, the writers (I'm including un-credited writers who helped Lucas) *slaved* over the screenplay. They made sure the story was there. They made sure the structure was there. They made sure the characters were there. There isn't a comma in this script that hasn't been debated. And boy is that evident in the final product. One of the easiest ways to tell how hard a writer's worked is to look for scenes that don't push the story forward. You won't find a single one in *Star Wars*. Every second is essential for this story to work. Well, until Lucas started making special editions. But that's a conversation for another time. Let's stay positive and check out this masterpiece.

TIP 143 - **Sci-fi movies usually need a title card** - Most sci-fi movies have backstory essential to understanding the plot. If you try and space that backstory out, sneaking it into scenes piece by piece via dialogue, you'll find tons of scenes becoming more about backstory than entertaining the audience! For this reason, you should probably open up your science-fiction story with a title card or a voice-over. You see this in the famous opening crawl of *Star Wars*. You see it in *Avatar* with Jake Sulley's voice-over. You see it in *District 9* with the documentary footage. Tell us the important things we need to know right away. That way you can use the rest of the screenplay to focus on the fun stuff.

TIP 144 - **Try to introduce your main character first** - *Star Wars* famously breaks this rule (Luke Skywalker doesn't arrive until 15 minutes into the film), but generally speaking, audiences like latching on to their hero right away. If you don't give them that guide, they start feeling lost, antsy, and confused. Unless you're writing a teaser scene (i.e. Paris gets blown up by a nuke) I recommend your first scene introduce us to your hero.

TIP 145 - **Loners shouldn't be lonely** - The "loner" is a popular character. From Lloyd Dobler to Will Hunting to Han Solo. Characters who live by their own rules are cool! But here's a secret about loner characters: *They're never alone.* Almost all of them have friends. And the reason is simple: you need someone for your loner to talk to. Otherwise, how else do we get to know them? So Will Hunting has his "boys." Lloyd Dobler (*Say Anything*) hangs out with his two girl pals. And Han has Chewie. Try to write a movie where your character has no one to speak to and watch the boring begin.

TIP 146 - **POWER TIP** - Make sure each successive goal in your story gets BIGGER - Most of the amateur scripts I read start out big then fizzle. How do you prevent this? By making each successive goal for your characters BIGGER than the last. This creates a building sensation. In *Star Wars*, the goal starts off small for Luke: go find R2-D2. The next goal is bigger: go find a pilot to take them to Alderaan. The third goal is even bigger: save Princess Leia. The fourth goal even bigger: escape the Death Star. The final goal is the biggest: destroy the Death Star. It's okay to sprinkle in smaller goals once in awhile (like fighting off some Tie-Fighters), but the key plot points must *increase in size*.

TIP 147 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - Remember: *talking* about the Force tells an audience nothing. You need to *show* them the Force. When Vader discusses his plans with the other commanders, a general challenges him. Vader puts a "force grip" on his neck, nearly choking him to death. That one "show" moment tells us more about the force than any line of dialogue could.

TIP 148 - **MIDPOINT SHIFT** - In *Star Wars,* the initial goal is to get the Death Star plans to Alderaan. But when Obi-Wan, Luke and Han arrive, Alderaan is gone! Blown to bits by the Death Star. So the plot *shifts* to saving the Princess and escaping the Empire.

TIP 149 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - A *deceitful* villain - There's something inherently evil about a villain going back on his word. In *Star Wars*, Grand Moff Tarkin (the guy with the skeletal-looking face) tells Princess Leia he'll save her planet *if* she tells him the location of the hidden rebel base. She relents, telling him, and he orders her planet to be blown up anyway. It's one thing to be an asshole, but to deceive someone? To go back on your word? That inspires a different level of anger in an audience.

TIP 150 - **If you want the audience to sympathize with your bad guy, add a villain who's even worse than him** - One of the reasons we kinda like Darth Vader is that he's not the big bad mastermind. He's the henchman. The true bad guy is Grand Moff Tarkin. He's the arrogant, deceitful a-hole. With him taking all the heat, Vader doesn't look so bad. You'll notice that Lucas continued this trend in the sequels, when he replaced Tarkin with the Emperor.

TIP 151 - **Kill a main character off** - If nobody's ever in danger, the audience feels safe. If the audience feels safe for too long, they start getting bored. By killing off a main character, you let the audience know: NO CHARACTER IS SAFE IN THIS STORY. From then on, they know that at any moment, any one of the characters can die, which puts them on edge. That's why killing off Obi-Wan was so effective. After that, we knew that Han, Luke or Leia could be a goner.

TIP 152 - **Sooner or later, your main character has to become active** - Sometimes the nature of your story dictates that, early on, your hero be passive, like Luke, who's initially relegated to following Obi-Wan on his mission. But at some point, your character has to rise up and start doing shit. Luke takes initiative when he comes up with the plan to save Leia on the Death Star. From that point on, he starts making decisions (being active) instead of letting decisions be made for him (being passive).

TIP 153 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - You don't need 17 scenes showing your hero complain to his buddies that he'd rather be fighting the Empire. All you need is him walking up to that mound of sand and staring up at those two suns, high above the planet, wishing he were there. That moment conveys more than 50 pages of dialogue ever could.

TIP 154 - **Deus Ex Machina exception #2** - The second Deus Ex Machina exception occurs when the character saving your hero completes his character arc in the process. Because we're so happy that he's overcome his flaw, we don't notice that our hero's been saved by someone else. So in *Star Wars,* Han's flaw is that he's too selfish. The entire movie, all he cares about is his own needs (getting paid!). So in the end, when he comes back to shoot down Darth Vader before Vader can kill Luke, we don't care that it's a Deus Ex Machina moment because we're thrilled that Han has *finally changed*!

LETHAL WEAPON
Written by: Shane Black

Premise: A suicidal cop is paired with an aging homicide detective to investigate the mysterious death of a young woman.

About: Ahhh, one of the most famous spec screenplays EVER WRITTEN. It brought a then 20-something Shane Black a quarter of a million dollars and ushered in a whole new style of writing: the testosterone-filled, self-aware, blood, guts, and bullets script. I don't know a single male screenwriter who wasn't trying to imitate Shane Black or Quentin Tarantino after this film's release. While that flame burned bright, it also burned fast. Black scored a few more ridiculously large sales, but the town cooled on steroid specs after the copycats killed the genre. The reason they killed it was because they didn't understand what made Tarantino and Black's scripts good. They thought all you needed was a sense of humor and some cool dialogue and you were golden. There was waaaaay more to it than that. These guys cared about their characters. They wanted to get inside of them, learn about them and allow the dialogue to emerge from THAT process, not the other way around. Don't believe me? Pop in *Lethal Weapon*. You'll be shocked at how well rounded the characters are for a buddy-cop movie.

TIP 155 - **Your action writing should have style!** - "Action" is one of those genres that requires a bit of flair in the writing. These scripts are supposed to be FUN to read so your writing has to be fun. Here's a quick paragraph from *Lethal Weapon*: "Riggs removes the gun himself. Steers with his knees. Drops the chambered bullet. Slips out the magazine, works the slide, KA-CHIK -- ! Hands the gun to Murtaugh." That's a lot better than, "Riggs reloads the gun as fast as he can and hands it to Murtaugh."

TIP 156 - **But not too much style!** - Shane's unique style was great back in the 90s, but got stale after it went viral. Here's an example from *Lethal Weapon* you probably don't want to copy: "For your information, gentle reader: The Beretta Belle .9 millimeter handgun offers fifteen bullets in its magazine, and one in its chamber. For you math majors, that's sixteen." Fun? Yes. Annoying to most readers. Probably.

TIP 157 - **Explore a part of yourself in your hero** - I'll be honest, most of the characters I read are boring. And that's because there's no depth to them. A great way to add depth is to explore something in your hero that's affecting you in your own life. By doing this, you use your protagonist as a vessel to work through your own problems, and the byproduct is somebody with depth and complexity. So for example, if you're afraid to take chances in life, write about a hero who's afraid to take chances in life. If you wished you hadn't let that girl slip away, add a storyline that includes a girl slipping away. When you do this, you become more emotionally attached to your characters, and that passion always adds muscle to the story. I suspect pieces of Black can be found in both Riggs and Murtaugh.

TIP 158 - **Avoid using camera directions (PAN, TRACK, CRANE, etc.) in your script** - Shane Black got away with it, but these days, it's a big no-no. Unless I'm reading a writer-director draft on a green-lit film, as soon as I see camera directions, I *immediately* know I'm dealing with an amateur.

TIP 159 - **Why you don't want to be pegged as an amateur** - Most readers are looking for anything that indicates they're dealing with an amateur, because amateur scripts notoriously get worse as they go on. Once a script tallies up enough "amateur" red flags, they can start skimming, which obviously means they've given up on you. That's why little things like *not writing in camera directions* matter. The more of those mistakes you make, the quicker the reader's eyes start skimming.

TIP 160 - **POWER TIP** - Dialogue is 20% words, 80% context - You don't have to be Aaron Sorkin to write great dialogue. You merely have to set up a situation that allows your dialogue to shine. Here's some dialogue from *Lethal Weapon*:

MacCleary: "Go Away."
Riggs: "My name is Riggs."
MacCleary: "Fuck off."
Riggs: "I can't do that. (beat) What's your name?"
MacCleary: "Look, I know all the psychology bullshit, it won't work."
Riggs: "I'm not a psychologist."
MacCleary: "Yeah? What are you?"
Riggs: "Homicide cop."
MacCleary: "You're early. Hang on a couple minutes, you can go to work."

Now without any context, what's your assessment of this dialogue? It's okay, but nothing special, right? But let's see what

happens when I add context. The above scene takes place at the top a building, and Riggs has been assigned to keep the suicidal MacCleary from jumping. Go back and read the dialogue again. It's a lot better, right? That's what you have to remember: *dialogue itself means nothing*. It's the situation you build *around your dialogue* that creates the entertainment.

TIP 161 - **IRONY ALERT** - Speaking of, one of the first tasks for our *suicidal* protagonist is to talk a guy off the ledge *who wants to commit suicide*! Look for ironic scene situations like this wherever possible!

TIP 162 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - Riggs is in his trailer, unshaven, hung over, with a bottle of liquor, crying, a gun in one hand and a picture of his dead wife in the other. He hasn't said a word and we know *everything* about this man. Now *that's* showing and not telling.

TIP 163 - **Buddy cop movies are the third easiest genre to write, outside of contained thrillers and road trip comedies** - That's because the goal is hard-wired into the genre. Your characters are trying to capture the guy who murdered the victim. You still have to find ways to make the story fresh, but since the goal is so clear, it's hard to screw up the structure.

BACK TO THE FUTURE
Written by: Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale

Premise: A high school kid accidentally sent back in time inadvertently sabotages his parents' first meeting. As a result, he must figure out a way to get the two together, a task complicated by the fact that his mother has fallen in love with him.

About: *Back To The Future* is my favorite screenplay of all time. The concept is brilliant. The structure is brilliant. The characters are brilliant. The dialogue is brilliant. The exposition is brilliantly handled. You'd be hard pressed to find a single lazy choice in *Back to the Future*. Strangely, every studio in town rejected the script for years. Why? Because they hadn't cracked it yet. Time travel films are the toughest nuts to crack of all. They usually take until the very last draft to nail because the time travel stuff is so complicated. Robert Zemeckis openly admits that that's the reason the sequels aren't as good as the original. They just didn't have the time to plug up all those holes.

TIP 164 - **POWER TIP** - Concept is king. Before you spend the next year writing your script, *make sure the concept is great*! The worst thing you can do is spend hundreds of hours on a screenplay only to learn AFTERWARDS that nobody wants to read it because the concept blows. This is easily one of the TOP 5 MISTAKES AMATEUR SCREENWRITERS MAKE. So please, please, please, make sure your concept rocks (like *Back To The Future*!) before you start writing.

TIP 165 - **How can you be sure your concept rocks?** - You have to go out and test it. Unfortunately, this is more complicated than it sounds. Asking a friend if he likes your movie idea is like asking your mom if you're good-looking. So instead, mix up your logline with nine other loglines. They can be recently sold specs, dummy loglines, friends' loglines. But make sure they're all solid story ideas. Then ask your friends, without telling them which one is yours, to rank the list from best to worst. If your logline consistently finishes near the top, you've got a good idea. If not? Go back to the drawing board.

TIP 166 - **Another way to know if your concept rocks** - One of the easiest ways to know if you've got a good idea is to pitch it to someone and study their reaction. If they look confused, neutral, disinterested, or their eyes glaze over, you've got a bad idea. If they look hooked, intrigued, and channeled into your every word, you may be onto something. I also find that when someone really likes your idea, they offer up scenes or characters or ways you can go with the story. The more interactive they are, the better shape you're in.

TIP 167 - **We love characters who always need to be somewhere!** - Good stories usually FLY BY. An easy way to accomplish this is to make it so your hero ALWAYS HAS TO BE SOMEWHERE. As soon as he's done with one thing, he needs to get to the next thing. That's one of the reasons *Back to the Future* is so great. Marty *always* has somewhere to be! He has to get to school. He has to get to the mall. He has to find Doc. He has to find his father. This approach won't work for every movie, but if it fits the kind of story you're telling (anything fast-paced) then use it!

TIP 168 - **IRONY ALERT** - Ironic titles usually do well with readers, so use them when you can. *Back to the Future* is one of the best titles of all time because of its irony. "Back" and "To The Future" have two totally opposite meanings.

TIP 169 - **STAKES ALERT** - At first, all Marty needs to do is find a way back to the future. But the stakes are raised dramatically when he accidentally stops his parents from meeting. Now, it's not just about getting back to the future, it's about saving his very existence!

TIP 170 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - One of the best examples of showing and not telling in ANY MOVIE is the "family picture" in *Back To The Future*. In order to convey that Marty's existence is slowly slipping away, he has a picture of him with his two older siblings. Every time he looks at the picture, his brother or sister is disappearing.

TIP 171 - **Don't take scenes off!** - Oh man, one of the most frustrating things I see in amateur scripts is when writers take scenes off. They LOVE writing the mysterious opening scene and the set-piece scene and the fight scene. But all those scenes in between? They just try to get them out of the way. You *cannot do this*. Professional writers don't take scenes off. This is the big leagues. If you want to compete, make sure EVERY SINGLE SCENE is the best scene you can possibly write, like *Back to the Future*.

TIP 172 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Marty desperately needs his dad to believe in himself so he can ask Marty's mom to the dance. George (the dad), has zero self-confidence and is constantly trying to get away from Marty. This imbalance is the main source of conflict in their relationship. Remember that - as long as there's an imbalance in the relationship, there's conflict.

TIP 173 - **The second act should always be working against your hero** - Remember, the second act is called the "Conflict" act. Therefore, you want to throw things at your hero to create conflict, things that stop him or her from doing what he/she wants to do. Marty's mom starts falling for him. Marty's dad won't talk to him. The bully wants to kill him. All of these things create opposition to Marty achieving his goal. They're working *against our hero*.

TIP 174 - **Always go beyond the obvious choice** - One of the keys to becoming a professional writer is not settling for the obvious choice, whether that choice be a concept, a character, a scene, or a line of dialogue. Good writers push past the obvious until they find something unique. 99% of writers tasked with writing *Back to the Future* would've made the time machine a stationary device, like ALL time machines. But Gale and Zemeckis turned it into a Delorean! Not only was this an original choice, but it opened up a whole bunch of other unique choices for them to play with (i.e. 88 miles per hour!).

TIP 175 - **If something feels wrong in your script, it probably is** - It's only appropriate to point this out amidst the perfect screenplay. If something's not feeling right about a character or plot point or line of dialogue, don't ignore it, fix it. The most popular reply I get when I give someone notes is, "You know, I knew that was a problem. I just didn't do anything about it." So don't fool yourself. If it feels wrong, it is.

TIP 176 - **The final unexpected obstacle!** - During your climax, you need one final unexpected obstacle to appear that jeopardizes the mission. As Marty's trying to tell Doc that he dies in the future, a tree collapses on the power cord, separating it from the clock tower! Now Doc will have to fix the cord *while* Marty races to catch the power line!

TIP 177 - **Crash your reader's car** - Writers have this romantic notion that agents and producers read their scripts while kicking back a glass of wine sitting next to the fire. KEEP DREAMING. The more likely scenario is that they're reading your script on their iPad while stuck on the 405. Your job as a writer, then, is to make sure that agent crashes. Have them so engrossed in your story that they can't look up. I'm kinda kidding here, but I'm kinda not. That's the mentality you need to have when you write a script - to make your story *so entertaining* that someone driving a car would rather read it than see what's ahead of them, even if they're going 88 miles per hour!

TIP 178 - **Your climax should be a payoff haven** - Once you hit your final sequence, it's time to pay off all your setups. The band can't play because they don't have a guitarist. Hey, remember? Marty can play guitar! Marty begins to evaporate. Oh, thank God, his parents kiss, saving him! Marty never got his moment to shine as a musician? Now he gets to play Chuck Berry at the prom! Doc dies once Marty gets back to the future, but it turns out he was wearing a bulletproof vest because he read the letter! The ending of your script, and specifically your climax, should be packed with payoffs!

FARGO
Written by: Joel and Ethan Cohen

Premise: When a sleazy car salesman has his own wife kidnapped in order to extort her rich father, the plan backfires when the father wants to deal with the kidnappers directly.

About: *Fargo* is allegedly based on a true story. When you base your screenplay on a true story (or make that claim), you have what I call the "this really happened" advantage. If you go off on a random tangent, the audience goes with you. If something's too coincidental, the audience still goes with you. They assume that no matter how unconventional or unstructured the story, it's okay because "this is how it really happened." Try to pull the same thing off in a fictional piece and audiences start crying foul because "it would never happen that way in real life!" It's a strange dichotomy, for sure. But I think that's why *Fargo* is such an interesting screenplay. It makes some really strange choices (our protagonist, Marge, doesn't arrive until page 30!) and yet you go with it because "that's how it really happened." Despite these weird choices, there are still LOTS of nuts and bolts storytelling lessons to learn from this Oscar-winning script. The Coens may be nuts, but boy do they know how to write!

TIP 179 - **POWER TIP** - Desperate characters are always fascinating because desperate people HAVE TO ACT. They HAVE TO DO SOMETHING. If they stand still, they're dead. Jerry Lundegaard is in so much debt, has stolen so many cars, owes so much money, that he HAS TO ACT. And that desperation is what leads to every cool moment in the film. Nothing can happen without Jerry's desperation. So if you want excitement, *make your character desperate.*

TIP 180 - **URGENCY ALERT** - Here, the urgency comes from Marge investigating the case. She's closing in on Jerry, which squeezes him into accelerating the plan. The Coens use people chasing their protagonists in almost all of their movies, which is why their movies always seem to move well.

TIP 181 - **For some great conflict, place your characters in an environment that is their opposite** - So, if you've written a vegetarian character, you don't want her big scene to happen at Vegan Hut. You want it to happen at the 17th Annual Meat Festival! Conflict emerges naturally from these scenarios. In Fargo's opening scene, the buttoned up Jerry Lundegaard walks into a seedy dive bar. It's the last place he'd go, which is why it's a perfect place to put him.

TIP 182 - **The Pre-Agitator** - A great way to ignite a scene is to inject it with conflict *before it starts*. So in the opening scene of Fargo, Jerry meets with Carl and Gaear to discuss the details of kidnapping his wife. Before Jerry can say a word, Carl points out that Jerry was supposed to be here at "*seven-fucking-thirty*." No, Jerry insists, Shep set it up for "eight-thirty." Carl shoots back that they were told seven-thirty. Before we've even gotten to the meeting, there's a cloud of conflict and frustration in the air due to our bad guys having had to wait an hour. Had the scene not begun with this misunderstanding, it wouldn't have been nearly as good.

TIP 183 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - In the above scene, we learn that Jerry's going to have his wife kidnapped and demand ransom from her father. Note the scene that follows. Jerry gets home to find both his wife *and* her father there, the very people he's deceiving. What would've been an average dinner scene becomes thick with subtext because WE KNOW (dramatic irony) what Jerry's planning to do to these two.

TIP 184 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - The relationships in this movie are packed with conflict. Jerry isn't close with his wife. Jerry's son doesn't respect Jerry. Jerry's father-in-law doesn't like Jerry. Jerry doesn't like him either. Carl (Steve Buschemi) doesn't like his partner. Gaear doesn't like him either. Even the lesser relationships have conflict, such as Shep not liking Jerry or Jerry getting into it with customers. The only one who doesn't have any conflict in her life is Marge, which is probably why she comes off as such a hero.

TIP 185 - **SCENE-AGITATOR** - When Jerry comes in to his father-in-law's office to pitch his parking lot plan, the father-in-law and his right-hand man have set up the office so that there's *nowhere for Jerry to sit* during the meeting. This forces Jerry to squat awkwardly on a sideways chair, throwing off his game just enough to affect his pitch. A small but brilliant scene-agitator!

TIP 186 - **What would the Coens do?** - If you have a scene or section of your script that feels boring, I'm going to give you a great tip. Ask yourself, "What would the Coens do?" The Coens *rarely* make an obvious choice. They treat clichés like cancer, and so should you. Let me give you an example: after Jerry comes home and "learns" his wife has been kidnapped, he calls his father-in-law to tell him. I want you to think about how you'd write this scene. I'll give you a second. Finished? Okay, here's why the Coens are different: We're in another room, listening to Jerry call Wade (the father-in-law): "…Wade,

it's Jerry, I - We gotta talk, Wade, it's terrible…" Then we inexplicably hear him start over again, "Yah, Wade, I - it's Jerry, I…" It's only once we dolly into the room that we realize Jerry is *practicing. He hasn't called Wade yet.* At the end of the scene, Jerry picks up the phone, calls Wade, and we cut to black. *We never hear the actual call.* That's a non-cliché scene if there ever was one and it's the reason you need to start asking yourself this question when you run into trouble: "What would the Coens do?"

TIP 187 - **Hit your hero from all sides** - The more directions you attack your hero from, the more entertaining his journey will be. Take note of all the things pushing in on Jerry here. The father-in-law wants in on the negotiations with the kidnappers (who can't be involved because Jerry's lied to them about the amount of money he's demanding). The kidnappers themselves are demanding more money. The car manufacturer is demanding VIN numbers on the cars Jerry's illegally sold. Marge is bugging Jerry about missing cars on his lot. When you bombard your character from all sides, you create LOTS OF DRAMA. And when you have lots of drama, scenes write themselves.

TIP 188 - **The most basic tool to make a scene interesting** - The easiest way to make a scene interesting is to have two people want different things out of the scene. This creates conflict, which leads to drama, which leads to entertainment. In one of the more notorious (and talked about) scenes in *Fargo,* Marge meets up with her old high school friend, Mike Yanagita. In the scene, his goal is to hook up with Marge. Marge's goal, on the other hand, is to reconnect with an old friend. This is why, even though the scene is arguably the least important in the film, it's still entertaining, because both people in the scene want something completely different.

FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF
Written by: John Hughes

Premise: Ferris Bueller, the most popular kid in school, grabs his best friend and girlfriend for a day of hooky that will go down in history.

About: I love this screenplay. And yet, it breaks one of the biggest screenwriting rules in the book: our main character *never* changes! He *gets away* with his con. Ferris Bueller is the exact same person at the end of this script as he was at the beginning. Try writing that film today and 99 times out of a 100 you're getting a scolding from a development exec: "Your main character needs to learn something over the course of his journey!" What readers sometimes forget, however, is that the hero doesn't have to change as long as one or two of the supporting characters do. You see that here with Cameron and Ferris' sister, both of whom have substantial transformations by the end of the film. There's even a contingent of screenwriters who believe Cameron is the main character in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* because he's the one who changes. I'm not going that far. But it's a great talking point because it gets writers thinking about character arcs, a common component in strong screenplays.

TIP 189 - **Hide backstory inside a threat (or an argument)** - Ferris: "If you're not over here in fifteen minutes, you can find a new best friend." Cameron: "You've been saying that since the fifth grade." – This line may *seem* like an argument between friends. But what Hughes is secretly doing is giving you backstory on Ferris and Cameron, that they've been best friends since the 5th grade. Arguments are great places to hide backstory because we're focusing more on the argument than the information being fed to us.

TIP 190 - **The simplest themes are usually the best** - Stop thinking that your theme has to be some complicated, never-before-theorized outlook on the meaning of life. The best themes are usually simple. The theme for *Ferris Bueller* is: *Seize the day.* That's it. That's what all the scenes and conversations are about. So stop killing yourself over theme and latch onto something simple and powerful!

TIP 191 - **Breaking the fourth wall** - Breaking the fourth wall (when a character speaks directly to the audience) is a risky practice. When it works, like in Ferris, it brings us closer to the character, which in turn makes us like him more. When it doesn't, which is way more often, it feels forced and cheesy, shattering our suspension of disbelief. If I were you, I'd avoid it. The one exception is if you can motivate it somehow. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is a movie about a guy who's friends with everyone. So it only makes sense that he's *friends with you too*, the guy in the movie theater! That's why I believe this normally annoying device worked so well here. That and Ferris' historically captivating charm.

TIP 192 - **IRONY ALERT** - One of the best character pairings I've ever seen is a guy who's pretending to be sick so he can ditch school paired with a guy *who really is sick* and needs to stay home. Talk about irony.

TIP 193 - **EXPOSITION ALERT** - One awesome benefit of breaking the fourth wall is that you can use it to dole out exposition. When your hero's talking directly to the audience, he can tell them that he doesn't have a car, that his best friend hates his dad, how he feels about his girlfriend, all things that would be tricky to convey in conventional dialogue situations. If your character breaks the fourth wall, make sure to mine that sucker for as much exposition (and backstory) as you can!

TIP 194 - **Each character should have a DEFINING TRAIT, something that distinguishes him/her from every other character in the movie** - Ferris is the guy who gets away with everything. Cameron is the guy who's afraid to live his life. Jeannie is the girl who's obsessed with her perfect brother. Ned is the principal who must take down Ferris. What happens when you don't give a character a defining trait? *Sloan.* Ferris' girlfriend. Tell me, what do you remember about Sloan? I'll help you out. *Nothing.* Because Hughes never gave her a defining trait. So make sure you address this with each and every character, or else those characters are likely to become forgettable, like the underwritten Sloan.

TIP 195 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - Audiences love characters who *outsmart the bad guys.* That's why it's so fun to watch Ferris' fake doorbell recording, his fake sleeping contraptions, the fake funeral answering machine message, and his hacking into the school computer system. You have to remember, Ferris Bueller is one of the most likable characters of ALL TIME. And that's because Hughes packs him with all these qualities we love in people. But this is one that never misses. We absolutely idolize characters who *outsmart the bad guys*!

TIP 196 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - Cameron's evil father never appears in the movie. Instead, Hughes makes the brilliant choice to have *Cameron's father's car* represent the father.

TIP 197 - **One of the places where you're allowed to be on-the-nose with your dialogue is the third act** - Before that, for the most part, dialogue should be characters talking *around* their issues (I say "for the most part" because there will be the occasional argument where characters are direct with each other). In the third act, it's okay for characters to finally confront their issues. Cameron gives an entire monologue at the end about how he's tired of his father dictating his life. He's tired of not standing up to him. The scene works because he's finally confronting his demons. Had this same monologue been on page 25, it would've felt laughably on-the-nose.

THE FUGITIVE
Written by: David Twohy and Jeb Stuart (story by Twohy, characters by Roy Huggins)

Premise: Falsely convicted of killing his wife, an escaped convict must investigate and solve her murder, all while avoiding a manhunt led by the country's most fearless U.S. Marshal.

About: *The Fugitive*, in my opinion, is the best thriller ever made. And while it's fairly conventional in places, it also takes some big risks. The central antagonist, Tommy Lee Jones' character, gets nearly as much on-page time as our hero, Richard Kimble. There's no love interest in the movie, which is rare for a major Hollywood release (there actually WAS a love interest, but it was cut at the last second). The thing that really launched this film into the stratosphere though was that it MOVED like no other film you'd seen (essential for a thriller!). There's no time to hang out and talk in *The Fugitive*. There's no time to grab a bite to eat. The main character is single-mindedly pursuing his goal. For that reason, *The Fugitive* is as good as it gets.

TIP 198 - **LIKABILITY ALERT 1** - One of the most powerful sympathy cards you can create for your protagonist is the loss of a loved one. We will always feel sympathy towards somebody who's lost a person close to them. This tool tends to be the most effective if we've met the person they've lost, even if it's just for a moment, like here in *The Fugitive* (Richard's wife is murdered at the beginning of the movie).

TIP 199 - **LIKABILITY ALERT 2** - Another one of the most powerful sympathy cards is a hero who's been wrongfully convicted. There's nothing that boils our blood faster than watching our poor hero suffer for something he didn't do. It's my opinion that this is why Richard Kimble is one of the most sympathetic characters in cinema history. He not only lost the love of his life, but he was wrongly convicted of her death. That's character likability crack right there.

TIP 200 - **No love for the mourning** - A little known fact is that *The Fugitive* originally had a love interest for Richard Kimble (the nurse played by Julianne Moore). In the end, though, they chucked her. Why? Partly to keep the story moving, I'm sure. But also, it's really hard to root for a hero avenging his wife's murder when he's banging another chick. That's why I always say, if your hero loses his wife at the beginning of your movie, be careful about giving him a love interest. It can be done but it's a tough line to walk. And we're probably going to lose respect for him.

TIP 201 - **When your villain is shrouded in mystery for most of the movie, you need a second antagonist** - Remember, the real villains here are the one-armed man and Dr. Charles Nichols. But we don't deal with them until the third act. If you go two full acts without giving the reader an antagonist, you're booking a flight to Boredomville. So the writers here wisely created Samuel Gerard (Tommy Lee Jones). Now you have a "bad guy" for your character to bump up against during the first two acts.

TIP 202 - **Don't be afraid to let your antagonist arc** - We've talked about heroes arcing. We've talked about secondary characters arcing. But we haven't talked about antagonists and villains arcing. These can be the most powerful and satisfying arcs of all, because we like to see "bad" people realize the error of their ways. Samuel's (Tommy Lee Jones) flaw is that he refuses to become emotionally attached to the case. He doesn't care if Richard's guilty or not. By the end of the movie, though, he finally puts his feelings in front of his badge. He cares that Richard is innocent. Yay! He finally changes!

TIP 203 - **Avoid generic "likable character moments."** - Some writers think they can have their hero help an old lady across the street and VOILA, we'll love them for the next 120 pages. Sorry, but readers see right through that. Your "likable character moment" works best when it's a natural extension of your hero. In *The Fugitive,* for example, Richard sneaks into the hospital to patch his wound, and while there, sees a sick boy who's been wrongly diagnosed. Richard correctly diagnoses him, saving his life! What a great LIKABLE character moment. But here's why it works: *Richard Kimble is a doctor.* So the "likable" moment stems organically from his character. The same scene would not have worked had Richard Kimble been, say, a plumber.

TIP 204 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - Whenever you have a character on the run, give him a scene where a policeman stops him, doesn't know our character is the criminal, yet engages him in conversation. Since this is a combination of high stakes and dramatic irony, it *always works*. In *The Fugitive,* this scene takes place at the hospital. A cop spots Richard coming out of the room where he's just stolen some clothes. He asks Richard if he's seen anyone who looks like that fugitive on TV. "Every time I look in the mirror," Kimble replies, before walking away. "Hey!" the cop says. Richard stops. Is he busted? He turns around. Tense beat. The cop points to Richard's fly. It's unzipped. Richard smiles and zips up. BOOM, there you have it. I don't care how many times this scene's been written. It always works!

TIP 205 - **Character Emergencies** - I learned this one from Ben Ripley, writer of *Source Code*. He basically said that if you're writing a thriller, you better place your hero in plenty of "character emergencies." A "character emergency" is when your character is placed in a situation where *he has no choice but to act*. This is what's so great about *The Fugitive*. Richard Kimble jumps from one character emergency to the next (stuck on a bus with a train coming, needing to treat a wound before he bleeds to death, the numerous scenes where Samuel Gerard corners him, etc.). If you're writing a thriller and you don't have a ton of character emergencies, you don't have a thriller.

TIP 206 - **Deliberately write your characters into situations that are impossible to get out of, then figure a way to get them out of them** - I think that's why this movie is so awesome. It has so many "impossible-to-get-out-of" situations. Kimble surrounded in a car tunnel. Kimble trapped at the top of a waterfall. Kimble in a building teeming with policeman. He's always *seconds away* from getting caught. Amateur writers always get this wrong. They create easy situations for their characters to get out of so it's no surprise when they do. Don't be afraid to write yourself into a corner! Make it impossible to escape!

TIP 207 - **Write a scene that rules your bad guy out as a suspect** - In a mystery, the audience is scheming to find out who the bad guy is from the very first page. And they're smart. They usually figure it out. To throw them off the scent, write a scene that rules out your bad guy. In *The Fugitive,* Richard finds Dr. Nichols (who Richard believes is a friend, but is secretly the villain) outside of work. Nichols has an opportunity to turn Richard in right there. But he doesn't. *He helps Richard out, giving him some money to survive*. From that point on, we never suspect Dr. Nichols as the bad guy.

TIP 208 - **Make sure your hero always has something to do in a thriller** - It's easy to get caught up in the chase aspects of a thriller. But don't forget that your hero still has to have *goals*. Richard Kimble needs to get to the hospital to fix his wound, go to city hall to check on a potential one-armed inmate, rent an apartment out of which to base his investigation, go back to the hospital to check out some records, and go to the one-armed man's house to put the final pieces together. Richard Kimble is ALWAYS FOCUSED ON A GOAL. He's never sitting around waiting for shit to happen. This is a HUGE reason for this film's success. The hero is fiercely active the entire time. He isn't just running away.

THE HANGOVER
Written by: Jon Lucas and Scott Moore

Premise: When the best man disappears during a Vegas bachelor party, his hung-over friends must retrace their steps the next day to find out what happened to him.

About: When somebody asks me what kind of script gives him or her the best shot at a million dollar sale, I say, "Write a comedy with a great hook, like *The Hangover*." High-profile comedies are the Reese's Peanut Butter Cups of the spec world. People will always buy them. Especially if you can spin a time-tested idea into something new, like *The Hangover* did. We'd seen the bachelor party thing before. But we hadn't seen the 'day after' approach to a bachelor party before. And to add a mystery on top of that? Never seen that either. If there's anything I want you guys to take from this book, it's that no matter what aspect of writing we're talking about, you need to find a *unique take*, a different way in that audiences haven't seen before. This is the easiest way to get producers, agents, and managers excited about your material.

TIP 209 - **If you don't have GSU in your comedy, you don't have a comedy** - There isn't a genre out there more dependent on GSU than comedy. Let's take a quick look at *The Hangover*. Goal (Find Doug), stakes (if they don't, he misses his wedding), urgency (they have 48 hours before the wedding!). Comedies (not to be confused with romantic comedies) were BUILT for GSU!

TIP 210 - **Think of scenes like a party. You don't want to overstay your welcome** - One of the defining traits of beginner screenplays is scenes that go on *forever*. Stop writing eight, nine, and ten page scenes. Save them for your big set pieces. Your typical scene should be short and sweet, roughly *two pages long*. If you don't believe me, read *The Hangover* and count the pages yourself!

TIP 211 - **If we took away the laughs from your comedy, would you still have an interesting story?** - I can't tell you how many comedies scripts are all comedy and no story. Comedy is GREAT for individual scenes. But it's the STORY that keeps us wanting to read. So it should ALWAYS take precedence. The story in *The Hangover* is still solid even if you take out the laughs.

TIP 212 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - When the guys race to the hospital to see what they were doing there last night, their doctor is busy dealing with a patient, making it difficult to get their questions answered. This plays out much better than had the doctor had all the time in the world.

TIP 213 - **IRONY ALERT** - Stu is a dentist. He wakes up with one of his teeth missing.

TIP 214 - **A comedy should always have a few concept-inspired lines** - You should always be milking clever lines from your premise. For example, this movie is about a group of guys who forget a night. So what line do they toast to before the night begins? "To a night we'll never forget!"

TIP 215 - **The "Designated Driver" character** - Whenever you follow a group of characters pursuing a goal, one of those characters needs to keep everyone focused. I call this the "Designated Driver" character, as he's designated with the task of reminding everybody (both the characters and the audience) about the goal. So in *The Hangover*, Phil (Bradley Cooper) constantly reminds everyone: "Okay guys, we gotta focus. We gotta find Doug." You hear him say this multiple times throughout the movie. He's our designated driver.

TIP 216 - **Dirty your story up** - If your story becomes too comfortable, the reader becomes too comfortable. And comfortable readers are bored readers. And bored readers want to check e-mail. So dirty your story up. When Mr. Chow's men CRASH into our trio's car, it jolts the story in a new direction. When a naked man jumps out of a car trunk, we're anything but comfortable. You gotta shake shit up to keep us on edge.

CRASH
Written by: Paul Haggis & Bobby Moresco (story by Paul Haggis)

Premise: In Los Angeles, over the course of 24 hours, the lives of a dozen flawed individuals intersect in unexpected and powerful ways.

About: You want to start a brawl? Walk into a film-related gathering and rave about the movie *Crash*. Man, do people get their panties in a bunch over this film. The thing is, I don't think *Crash* gets nearly enough credit, despite winning an Oscar. The script takes on one of the hardest screenplay genres there is: the multi-protagonist drama. The lack of a traditional hero to center the story around makes navigating one of these narratives like navigating the Hollywood Hills… blindfolded. Writing these types of screenplays requires an immense amount of skill. You need to create multiple interesting storylines, multiple interesting characters, multiple goals, multiple stakes, and lots of urgency for everybody. And you have to blend it all together seamlessly. That's why I admire *Crash* so much. Paul Haggis and Bobby Moresco are two of the only screenwriters in history to have gotten the genre right.

TIP 217 - **Multi-storyline screenplays require a strong THEME** - Since you're jumping around between so many storylines, you need a thematic constant to connect them all, to keep the storylines from drifting out of orbit. With *Crash,* it's racism. Without theme, I'm telling you, your multi-storyline script will fall flat.

TIP 218 - **Make sure every story in your multi-storyline screenplay is good enough to carry its own movie** - The thing that kills these scripts is that there's always two or three storylines that suck. Writers erroneously believe that if they knock one of the storylines out of the park, then the other storylines can be average. Wrong. Every one of your storylines should be so strong that if they were shown in isolation they would blow the audience away.

TIP 219 - **The three-line rule** - Try to keep your screenplay paragraphs to three lines or less *unless it's absolutely necessary*. In the *Crash* screenplay, you'll find that Haggis, on average, only exceeds three lines once every ten pages. If you do this (keep the writing sparse) readers will love you.

TIP 220 - **Use tight time frames for multi-storyline scripts if possible** - With no clear protagonist and stories that jump all over the place, scripts like *Crash* can be frustrating to follow. To keep them focused, do what Haggis did and add a contained time frame. Crash takes place over 24 hours. You'll see they did this exact same thing with *Dazed and Confused* (another multi-protagonist movie that took place over 24 hours).

TIP 221 - **Prey on a reader's expectations** - To keep readers off balance, show them how unpredictable you can be. One of the best scenes in *Crash* is when Peter (Larenz Tate) and Anthony (Ludacris) are walking through a white neighborhood complaining about the fact that everybody assumes they're gangsters because they're black. At the end of the scene, they pull out their guns and steal a car. We definitely didn't see that coming and it's all because Haggis and Moresco make you THINK you've seen this scene before, and then turn it upside-down. Always be unpredictable in your writing. If you're not, the reader'll be 30 pages ahead of you.

TIP 222 - **Shades of Grey** - A great way to add depth is to add shades of grey to your character. Matt Dillon is racist, selfish, and arrogant, but he also tends to his father who suffers from chronic pain. Since there's more than one dimension to Dillon, we're not sure if we like him or not, which is usually more interesting than if he's a clear stereotype.

TIP 223 - **Block your scenes in interesting ways** - A great way to spice up a scene is to look for unique places to put your characters. Just because you have a bedroom scene doesn't mean one person has to be on the bed and another next to it. Why can't you put both characters *underneath* the bed, like Haggis did with Daniel and his daughter in Crash? It sure made the scene a lot more interesting, didn't it? Bad writers do the obvious. Good writers look at a location and say, "How can I do this differently?"

TIP 224 - **"Cause and Effect" Stories** - Not every movie is goal oriented. Some scripts are what I call "Cause and Effect" stories. These are stories where something happens to your characters (the cause), and they must deal with the consequences (the effect). Here, Rick (Brendan Frasier) and Jean (Sandra Bullock) must deal with the effects of being carjacked. Cameron (Terrance Howard) and Christine (Thandie Newton) must deal with the effects of Christine being sexually assaulted. Farhad must deal with the effects of losing his store. Officer Tom Hansen (Ryan Phillippe) must deal with the effects of leaving his partner after witnessing him sexually assault a woman. The "Cause and Effect" approach is tricky because you're creating characters that are more reactive than active. As you can see with *Crash*, however, if you can make the situations (and characters!) compelling enough, the approach can work.

<u>TIP 225</u> - **Without a clear character goal, your script will struggle to find an ending** - Remember, the benefit of a character goal is that it gives your hero something to pursue (Indiana Jones pursues the Ark). And if your hero's pursuing something, then your ending will show him either succeeding or failing at that pursuit. Consequently, if there's no goal, it's hard to determine where the story ends, forcing the writer to fudge a muddy conclusion. Look at *Crash*. The ending is unfocused, peters out, and is easily the weakest part of the movie. That's because none of these characters had goals. So you've been warned: if you're not using character goals, your ending will suffer.

NOTTING HILL
Written by: Richard Curtis

Premise: A bookstore owner has his life turned upside-down after a chance encounter leads to a relationship with the most famous actress in the world.

About: I love romantic comedies. I probably inherited that from my father, who will watch any romantic comedy no matter how bad it is. I'm serious. He watches Romanian romantic comedies on Netflix with no dialogue. Even if I try to explain to him that there's no romance or comedy in the film, he keeps watching.   Luckily, there are no Romanians in Richard Curtis' movies. The man is easily one of the best romantic comedy writers out there, striking that perfect balance between heart and humor every time out. And while *Love Actually* is pretty damn good, *Notting Hill* is his masterpiece. It's just an amazing screenplay with perfect characters. You can feel the effort dripping off every frame. As one of Curtis' colleagues points out: "Even the restaurant in *Notting Hill* has an arc." And it's true. Curtis' writing is that strong.

TIP 226 - **IRONY ALERT** - Hugh Grant is a travel bookstore owner who's never travelled anywhere.

TIP 227 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - When Anna enters William's bookstore for the first time and the two start talking, William notices a man in the back trying to steal books. This forces William to leave the conversation to deal with the thief. This agitator turns what would've been a straightforward dialogue scene into something a lot more suspenseful (will she still be there when he gets back?).

TIP 228 - **Meet Cute? No. Meet Brute!** - The scene where your romantic leads meet is often called the "Meet Cute" scene because it's supposed to be a cute, breezy, adorable little scene. That's the wrong way to think of it, in my opinion. Instead, the meeting should be complicated, messy, full of doubt and tension, like *Notting Hill*. The above-mentioned scene where Anna walks into William's bookstore is messy, uncertain, and leaves us unsure of whether William will see Anna again. Meet Brute is always more interesting than Meet Cute.

TIP 229 - **Eliminate the boring in-betweens** - After accidentally pouring orange juice on Anna in the middle of the street, William points out that she can change at his flat, which is across the street. Notice how we don't then walk to the house with them. That would be boring. Instead, we cut to them arriving inside. These little in-between moments are usually pointless, so get rid of them and get to the good stuff.

TIP 230 - **For the love of all that is Holy, if you're writing a romantic comedy, DO SOMETHING INTERESTING WITH YOUR FIRST DATE SCENE!** - The first date is the very first time your characters go out. So be different! In other words, do NOT put them in a restaurant or have them go miniature golfing. *Notting Hill* has the best first date scene in romantic comedy history. William heads to Anna's suite for what he thinks will be a date, but ends up arriving smack dab in the middle of the press junket for her new movie. He must then pretend to be one of the critics in order to talk with her. Talk about a *great* idea for a first date scene.

TIP 231 - **To juice up a scene, add a third character** - When two people are unencumbered and free to speak as long as their hearts desire, the dialogue between them is often flat and boring. Add a third character into the mix, however, and bingo, everything comes alive! In *Notting Hill,* when William FINALLY gets in a room with Anna, the public relations guy walks in (third person!), forcing William to ask Anna bogus questions as a pretend writer for "Horse and Hound." This is one of the better uses of the "third character" technique I've seen (and yes, you could also call the public relations guy a "scene agitator.").

TIP 232 - **When you come up with one of those "one-in-a-million" scene ideas, milk it for everything it's worth** - Richard Curtis knew he had gold with the press junket sequence, so even after Will's talk with Anna ended, he kept the sequence going. The publicist forces him to sit down and talk with the rest of the cast, resulting in some hilarious scenes. You might argue these scenes don't push the story forward (and you'd be right), but when you have a scenario this delicious, you *have* to milk it.

TIP 233 - **Never make us wait while your characters exchange technical information** - This is where real life and movies differ. In real life, when you agree to a date, you have to exchange numbers, figure out a time and confirm details. In movies, audiences don't want to sit through all that boring shit. You could waste half a page on it if you're not careful. Instead, keep it simple and quick. For example, a character might say, "I'll get your number from Judy and we'll figure out a time." "Sounds good." And boom, you're out of the scene. Way more preferable than wasting a minute on questions like, "Should I pick you up at 7:00 or 7:30?" The exception to this rule is if the details are an essential part of the plot or a setup to

a great joke.

TIP 234 - **The Power of the Reaction** - One of the BEST ways to reveal character is by putting a bunch of characters in a scene and forcing them to react to something. Since each character will react differently, we'll see how each of them is unique. This is done to great effect in the classic *Notting Hill* birthday scene where Will shocks his family by bringing home movie star, Anna Scott. Honey, Will's sister, freaks out when she sees Anna. Hugh, the brother, is so wrapped up in his own world that he's oblivious to Anna. Max, the brother-in-law, is giggly, but restrained. And Bella, the sister, is quietly impressed.

TIP 235 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - A simple look can be a thousand times more effective than a line of dialogue. When Anna comes over to meet Will's family, there's a moment late in the night where she watches Will lovingly put a necklace on his sister. Anna observes this with a smile, and right there, we know she's falling for him (and not a word is said!).

TIP 236 - **BACKSTORY ALERT** - At the family dinner, the brother decides to give out the last brownie to the person with the saddest story. It allows everybody to tell very specific details about their lives (their backstory!). We don't notice the backstory, however, because it's wrapped up inside a game. Very clever.

TIP 237 - **Add some weight to your rom-com** - I've found that if rom-coms are too light and fluffy, they don't resonate. A great way to prevent this is to add a sad element of real life, something that gives your story a layer of depth. Here, it's Will's sister-in-law, who's in a wheelchair. It reminds us that life isn't a fairytale where everyone ends up happily ever after. This is the real world.

TIP 238 - **Romantic Comedies don't usually have goals** - Romantic Comedies are "question" movies. They're driven by the question: "Will they or won't they get together?" So, technically, it's okay for your characters not to have goals in rom-coms beyond the pursuit of one another.

TIP 239 - **Secondary goals** - But I still recommend secondary goals for rom-com characters. I've found that when characters don't have anything to do besides exist in a relationship, their lives feel thin. I mean, think about all the stuff you do in a week: get groceries, take the kids to play dates, buy a new dress, write that essay, go to the doctor, prepare that work proposal. Why wouldn't characters have these same duties? Anna's goals are her never-ending movie shoots and press junkets. William's goal is non-existent at first, but shifts to finding a girlfriend after Anna leaves him.

INCEPTION
Written by: Christopher Nolan

Premise: A "dream thief" is hired to execute a complicated heist, which involves entering the mind of a successful businessman and convincing him to give the thief's employer a competitive advantage.

About: I have a love-hate relationship with *Inception.* I think this movie does some amazing things, especially with its final act. The way Christopher Nolan plays with time in his universe is awe-inspiring. However, there's no arguing that this is the least thought-out script of his career. The exposition-laden first half feels like a Yale lecture that's gone on an hour too long, deluging us with an endless set of rules and too much Cobb backstory. What I love about *Inception,* however, is that it *makes you think.* It proves that there *is* a mass audience for high-minded entertainment. I'm hoping the surprise success of a film like *Inception* gives studios the confidence to take chances on more challenging material in the future.

TIP 240 - **The "Sit Up" Moment** - Don't worry my writer friends, this tip has nothing to do with exercise. The "Sit Up" moment occurs when a scene is so interesting, so mysterious, so shocking, so compelling, that the reader "sits up" and starts paying closer attention. You want your "sit up" moment to come within the first 10 pages, preferably in the very first scene, so that you hook the reader right away. In *Inception,* we start with a man washing up on a beach, that same man asleep in an apartment, and that same man asleep on a train. I don't know about you, but I'm sitting up and paying attention after that sequence.

TIP 241 - **Explaining sucks** - In general, the longer you have characters explaining things, the more bored the reader's going to get. That's why *Inception* is a bad movie to study if you're a beginning screenwriter. There is a LOT of explaining going on. Try to keep all of your explaining (otherwise known as "exposition") to a minimum. However, there are a few exceptions to this rule, and *Inception* successfully uses one of them…

TIP 242 - **The audience's threshold for exposition is inversely proportional to how cool the exposition is** - The reason the endless exposition in *Inception* doesn't bother a lot of people is because the stuff being talked about is freaking cool! – How to create and navigate an artificially constructed dream world?! That's fascinating stuff! Had the exposition been about, say, how to manufacture lug sockets, I'm pretty sure we would've thrown the script down before page 20.

TIP 243 - **Make sure you love your idea** - You may not realize it yet, but the writing of every screenplay is a *long journey.* It will have ups and downs, close calls and false starts. Before you know it, four years will have gone by and you're *still* working on that *same screenplay.* And then the unthinkable happens. It sells! Yay! But guess what? That's right. Rewrites! Which means more months, more years working on the script. Am I getting through to you? You'll spend a LOT of time on your scripts. That's why it's essential that you *love your idea.* If you only had to worry about a script for a few months, I'd say write whatever you want. Since scripts take forever to perfect, however, I'd ask yourself beforehand: "Is this something I'm willing to work on for the next five years?" If the answer's no, consider another idea.

TIP 244 - **You will hate your idea** - It took Nolan ten years to finish this script. He couldn't figure out how to make it work. This leads us to an important reality about screenwriting: at a certain point, *you will hate your script.* You will despise it. You will want to barbeque it with a gallon of gasoline. The good news is, this is normal. It's part of the process. Fight through it. When in doubt, remember back to when you first came up with your idea. Let the memory of that initial excitement inspire you. If you followed the advice above (MAKE SURE YOU LOVE YOUR IDEA!) then I promise you, your love will return.

TIP 245 - **The AEV (Artificial Exposition Vessel)** - Avoid creating characters whose ONLY PURPOSE is to ask questions so that other characters can provide exposition - Tell me one personal thing about Ellen Page's character in *Inception.* I'll save you some time. You can't. Because there isn't one. Her only purpose is to ask questions so that other characters can explain things. Creating a character who helps the audience understand the plot is fine. But that character must also have purpose, depth, personality, flaws, goals, and backstory. Without those, all you've written is an AEV, which is the real-life equivalent of a robot.

TIP 246 - **"I'm leaving"** - Sitting two characters in a room together is one of the most boring dialogue situations you can write. If you must put your characters in a room, however, here's a trick to spice it up: have one of your characters enter the room just as the other character is *getting ready to leave.* Early on in *Inception,* Arthur (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) comes to Cobb's hotel to talk about the job. When he walks in, Cobb is almost finished packing, hurrying to catch a plane. This simple set-up adds an immediacy to the scene that wouldn't be there if the characters had nowhere to go. Cobb's impending departure adds a ticking time bomb, speeding everything up.

TIP 247 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - Cobb has to recruit Eames (Tom Hardy) at a downtown bar. This could've easily been your standard "two-guys at a bar talking" scene, but Nolan adds a scene agitator: two Cobalt men (Cobalt is Cobb's enemy) watching them from the other side of the room. With this imminent threat of attack, Cobb must not only explain what he needs from Eames, but figure out how he's going to ditch these men once the conversation is over.

TIP 248 - **Science-fiction is a memory hog** - You know that "WHIRRRRR" noise your laptop makes when Firefox starts sucking up your memory? That's the exact same effect sci-fi has on a screenplay. 20-25% of your screenplay will be dedicated to exposition when you write sci-fi. This is due to all the rules and backstory and futuristic shit that needs to be explained (pros call it "world-building"). So make sure if you're tackling this genre, you're willing to put in the extra effort to minimize and hide all that exposition, something I'm afraid *Inception* didn't do.

TIP 249 - **Oú Est Le Villain?** - I don't think you should ever write a movie without a villain. And I DEFINITELY don't think you should ever, EVER write a *sci-fi* movie without a villain! Yet that's what *Inception* did, and I think the movie suffered for it. With no true villain to root against (Marge, Cobb's wife, was about as scary as a toothbrush) the script lacked a true element of danger. I mean imagine if Nolan would've tried the same thing in *The Dark Knight*! So please, folks, make sure you always include a villain!

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK
Written by: Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan (story by George Lucas)

Premise: In this sequel to *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker must train to become a Jedi while Han Solo and his crew must outrun Darth Vader, who believes the rebels can lead him to the young Jedi.

About: Talk about an unconventional franchise sequel! The biggest battle sequence in *The Empire Strikes Back* happens in the first act. We're introduced to an entirely new city in the last 45 minutes of the film. The ending is a total downer. The bad guy wins. What the hell happened to *Star Wars*??? *Empire* has long been categorized as unorthodox, and it is, as evidenced by the examples above. But it may surprise you to know that when you break it down, the engine that powers this story is quite simple: it's basically one long chase movie. In that sense, it's surprisingly similar to *Star Wars*. Once you realize that, the structure isn't nearly as intimidating, and you can see why this movie rocked our Han Solo PJs off.

TIP 250 - **The biggest thing I learned from this movie is that the more powerful the engine of your story, the less structure matters** - *The Empire Strikes Back* does have a wonky structure. There's no true main character. The villain is dictating the action. The first act extends beyond 40 minutes. Yet it has a hell of a story engine: <u>a massive chase</u>. Darth Vader's purpose (to capture Han, Leia and Luke) is so strong that it covers up most of the script's unorthodox underpinnings. Contrast this with any of the *Star Wars* prequels, which had unusual underpinnings as well, but no chase aspect to them, and you can see how advantageous this device is.

TIP 251 - **Intense sequences should always be followed by a "cool down" scene, preferably one with humor** - Audiences need a little rest after an intense sequence. If you don't provide them with one, the movie can feel like a relentless string of action, and that gets tiring. After Luke and Han's close call with the Wampa monster and the freezing weather, we get a funny little scene where Han flirts with Leia, who ends up stifling his advances and kissing Luke. It was a great way to relieve the tension and recharge us for the Hoth Battle.

TIP 252 - **Battle scenes are hard to enjoy if we don't know what's going on** - Surprisingly, very few writers convey the objective of a battle in their screenplay. They think that as long as people are fighting, we'll care. Wrong. *Extended confusion leads to boredom*. So make sure we know what's going on! Right before the Hoth Battle, Princess Leia rounds everyone up and informs them that the goal is to hold off the ground attack while they get the transports away. That's it. That's the plan. Now we can enjoy the battle.

TIP 253 - **Place the devil on your character's shoulder** - One of the most compelling characters you can write is someone who's good but tempted by evil. That inner struggle is one that audiences enjoy because it's one in which they can relate to. We're tempted by evil (albeit, on a smaller scale) every day: We want to skip school. We want to eat bad food. We want to flirt with someone besides our girlfriend. Audiences connect with anybody who's relatable, and temptation is relatable. We see the beginnings of that struggle here with Luke (who's tempted by the "Dark Side"). We see it in *The Godfather* with Michael Corleone. We see it with Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. We see it in *Lord Of The Rings* with numerous characters.

TIP 254 - **Whenever your characters are stuck in a tough situation, make it worse for them** - One of the easiest ways to improve your scenes is to ask the question, "How can I make things worse for my characters?" The worse you make it, the more exciting the scene tends to be. Watch the scene where the Millennium Falcon tries to escape Vader's ship. The easy road would've been to let them jump to light speed. Instead, Kasdan writes in that the hyper-drive *fails*. This puts the characters in a much more precarious situation which requires a much more creative solution (willingly charging into a dangerous mine-field).

TIP 255 - **Love stories are almost always more interesting when characters fight their feelings for each other** - That's why Han and Leia's relationship is so fun. They spend the whole movie fighting their feelings. That's a hell of a lot more interesting than two people claiming their love for one another over and over again (ahem: *Matrix Reloaded* and *Attack Of The Clones*).

TIP 256 - **Flip character expectations on their head** - One of the coolest things Lucas did in *The Empire Strikes Back* was step back and ask, "I'm creating the greatest Jedi Warrior of all time. What is he like?" The first inclination is to make him tall, strong, and fearless. Lucas wisely went in the opposite direction. Yoda is tiny, frail and annoying. Always look for opportunities to flip expectations on their head, especially with your characters!

TIP 257 - **Everybody in your movie should have a strong goal, not just your hero** - Each character should have a goal at all times. Luke tries to become a Jedi. Vader tries to catch Han and Leia. Han and Leia try to escape Vader. Even when the

goals change in Empire, they're still strong. Luke tries to save Han and Leia. Vader tries to lure Luke. Look at every single character in your movie and ask, "What's their goal *at this very moment*?" If they don't have one, give them one!

TIP 258 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - One of the qualities audiences go gaga over is bravery. It's almost impossible to hate a brave character. This is one of the reasons Han Solo is one of the greatest characters of all time. When storm troopers come at him, he mans up and goes after them! When he sees an asteroid field, he doesn't turn away, he goes INTO IT. When a Star Destroyer corners him, he doesn't give up, he turns around and ATTACKS it! Bravery is a surefire way to make us LOVE a character.

BRIDESMAIDS
Written by: Kristen Wiig & Annie Mumolo

Premise: When the maid-of-honor feels like she's losing her best friend to one of the bridesmaids, she does everything in her power to destroy their friendship, which, predictably, backfires.

About: Even if you're a beginner, with the right person guiding you, you can write a great script. Annie Mumolo and Kristen Wiig, the writers of *Bridesmaids,* had never written a screenplay before. They actually went out and bought Blake Snyder's *Save The Cat* to figure out how to write one. Their first draft, by their own admission, was unreadable. So Judd Apatow and his team gave them notes on every draft, shaping up the structure and building up the characters so that 30-some drafts later, they had themselves an awesome screenplay. Some of you might be saying, "30 drafts???" Yeah, 30 drafts! That's the kind of dedication you need if you want to succeed at this craft. You gotta be willing to do the dirty work. So if you can find someone out there who's good with story, who knows what they're talking about, take advantage of it. That extra pair of eyes and experience can push your script to the next level and beyond.

TIP 259 - **Some of the best comedy stems from character** - Anybody can write a fart joke. Or a pratfall. Or drop in the ubiquitous "swearing grandma." For comedy that gets real laughs though, the humor should stem from the characters. In *Bridesmaids,* it's established that Annie (Kristin Wiig) is jealous of Helen (Rose Byrne) because she's trying to steal her best friend, Lillian. The famous "toast-off" scene (Annie and Helen compete to out-toast each other to prove their friendship to Lillian) works so well because it's based on that pre-established dynamic, each woman's resentment towards one another and their desire to prove themselves the better friend.

TIP 260 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - Wiig and Mumolo needed to show how much Annie liked Ted (the a-hole boyfriend played by John Hamm). So they wrote a morning scene in Ted's bed, with Annie sneaking into the bathroom to put on make-up and fix her hair, then sneaking back before Ted woke up. When he wakes, she pretends to be waking up too. Nothing is said in this moment, but boy, does it show us how much Annie likes this guy.

TIP 261 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - An easy way to make a hero likable is to have her get screwed over by someone else. Nobody likes watching someone get hurt, so if we see it, we immediately sympathize with them. We meet Annie waking up in bed with Ted and after an awkward pause, he says, "I really want you to leave, but I don't know how to say it without sounding like a dick." Our heart sinks for Annie in that moment. And from then on, we root for her through everything!

TIP 262 - **STAKES ALERT** - Looking at the last two tips, notice how the second tip doesn't work without the first one. It's only because we *built up the stakes of Annie liking this guy* (showing her slip into the bathroom) that we feel terrible for her when he says to leave. If we don't know how much she likes him, who cares if he tells her to leave or not? That's why it's so important to establish stakes in a scene!

TIP 263 - **Use yours characters' wardrobe to tell us who he/she is** - The right outfit or color can tell us everything we need to know about a character. It's no coincidence that Annie's rival, Helen, shows up at the engagement party wearing a BLACK dress. One look at that dress and we know she's the bad guy. Yet another way of "showing and not telling."

TIP 264 - **Have two good scripts in your genre of choice** - Before you send your script out, make sure you have another (good) script in the same genre. Agents and managers don't like multi-genre writers because it's hard to market them. If nobody knows what your best genre is, how will they know what to hire you for? So, if you write a movie like *Bridesmaids,* it's a good idea to write another comedy! You'll be way easier to market and likely get more work.

TIP 265 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT 2** - Annie has a failed bakery business. Instead of going into some long monologue about it, she and Lillian simply *walk past her closed bakery store* after lunch. It takes one measly paragraph to convey a huge chunk of Annie's backstory.

TIP 266 - **IRONY ALERT** - Annie, who's lost hope in love, works at a jewelry store selling engagement rings.

TIP 267 - **Ironic situations always lead to funny scenes** - When you put your character in an ironic situation, the scene will write itself. Annie's ironic jewelry store job, for example, results in TWO GREAT SCENES: one, when she lectures a happy Asian couple about how love never lasts and two, when she gets in a fight with a teenage customer who can't stop talking about her loving boyfriend.

TIP 268 - **Your hero should hit rock bottom right before the third act** - The idea behind the end of the second act is to

trick your audience into thinking your hero has lost. There aren't any options left. It's the end of the road. We see this in *Bridesmaids* when Annie makes a fool out of herself at the Paris-themed wedding shower and destroys everything in sight, losing Lillian as a friend. Since this is the point at which Annie is furthest from her goal (winning her best friend back), she's officially at rock bottom.

TIP 269 - **Throw salt on the wound!** - After the lowest point, you want two or three "salt on the wound" scenes before the hero gets back on their feet. Here, Annie gets rear-ended by someone, gets yelled at by her boyfriend, then gets in an argument with Ted. After these scenes are over though, she reflects on her mistakes, comes back recharged, and makes one last attempt at her goal (getting her friend back).

TRAINING DAY
Written by: David Ayer

Premise: A young cop hoping to move into the narcotics division is paired with a highly decorated narcotics officer for a day of evaluation. What the young cop soon learns is that this veteran officer plays by a different set of rules.

About: David Ayer announced his arrival as a big paycheck writer in 2001 with his double-whammy offerings of *The Fast And The Furious* and *Training Day*. Talk about a good year! What separates Ayer from a lot of other big-budget screenwriters is that he puts a ton of stock into character. He's gone on record as saying he writes character biographies for all of his main characters, meaning he knows where they went to school, what their family life was like, what their social life was like, etc. He understands that the more you dig into your characters' past, the more real their lives become. That definitely came to fruition in *Training Day*, as Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington) is one of the most powerful movie characters of all time. No doubt Denzel's great performance brought Alonzo to life, but Denzel's performance doesn't exist if it isn't all there on the page first. *Training Day* is also a great script to study if you're a young screenwriter. The premise is simple yet powerful.

TIP 270 - **POWER TIP** - Screenwriting is not a writing contest. *It's a storytelling contest* - Screenwriting is NOT about how well you string words together or the beauty of your prose. It's about how well you tell a story. In other words, if I read five pages of Pulitzer Prize-worthy prose describing a man watering a plant, I'm bored. However, if I read five pages of freshman-level English describing a plant trying to kill a man, I'm excited. Take pride in your description and style, but remember, these aren't English teachers judging your material. They're regular Joes who want to be entertained. *Training Day* is a great example of darn good storytelling.

TIP 271 - **The 5-Page Rule** - Remember, actors aren't coverage services. They don't have to read past page 1 if they don't want to, and if you bore them on that first page, they probably won't make it to the second. Will Smith has a rule where he'll read five pages of a script, and if those five pages keep his interest, he'll read another five pages. If those work, he'll read another five, and so on and so forth until he's bored. I get the feeling most actors read scripts this way – they just keep going until they're bored. So take a step back and look at your script. After every five pages, will the reader want to keep reading? Do you have any five page chunks that are boring? If so, fix them, or you won't get guys like Will Smith and Denzel attached to your movie.

TIP 272 - **IRONY ALERT** - Alonzo is a cop who smokes weed, drinks, befriends criminals, and ignores laws. The corrupt cop is overused, no doubt, but there's a reason it works: irony. Cops are supposed to protect us and follow the law, so we're intrigued when they do the opposite.

TIP 273 - **Determine the right "angle of conflict" in your scene for great dialogue** - We've established that you need conflict for good dialogue. To really hit the dialogue sweet spot, however, you need to find *the right angle* of conflict for each specific scene. When Jake and Alonzo meet at the diner for the first time, Jake wants to impress Alonzo, while Alonzo wants Jake to fear him. *That's the angle.* Everything Alonzo says is said to make Jake feel uncomfortable. Everything Jake says is said to make Alonzo like him. These two "wants" cannot coexist, which is what makes the dialogue so fun. Another angle might have been Jake wanting to know about Alonzo's personal life, with Alonzo refusing to reveal it. Or Jake wanting Alonzo's sympathy about something, but Alonzo not giving him any. Neither of these are very good (or relevant) angles, but they're angles you might've sifted through before getting to the one that worked.

TIP 274 - **STAKES ALERT** - *Training Day* actually starts with a slow scene - Jake and his wife getting ready for his first day at work. However, the scene does a great job setting up the stakes for our main character. By establishing that Jake has a pregnant wife, we know why it's so important that he make it home. If Jake had nobody to come home to, the constant threat of danger during the day wouldn't have had as much impact on us.

TIP 275 - **Didn't I say not to start slow a few tips ago?** - Again, established writers don't have to catch the reader's attention right away because they've already proven themselves. Readers are more patient when they know the writer is good. So many amateur scripts turn out to be terrible, however, that readers just aren't going to be as patient with them.

TIP 276 - **POWER TIP** - If *you're* not telling your story, *we're* telling your story - Beginner writers are notorious for leaving out important information when they write. As a result, the scene they're writing and the scene we're reading are two completely different things. Take the famous diner scene in *Training Day* for example. Imagine writing that scene. In *your* head, the diner may be packed, but if you don't tell us, we may see it as empty. In your head, Alonzo may be reading a newspaper, but if you don't tell us, we may think he's staring at Jake. In your head, Jake may be nervous, but if you don't tell us, we may think he's collected. This is not to say you should write out every detail, but if there's important information in

your scene, *you need to tell us*. If you leave it up to us, we'll guess. And now you're not telling your story. *We are.*

TIP 277 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** – After breakfast, Denzel marches across a busy street without looking, cars honking and brakes screeching all around him. You wanna talk about an action that tells us a character is fearless, arrogant, and tough-as-nails? That's it!

TIP 278 - **You need an original angle if you're going to write a cop movie** - A lot of cop movies look like they've come off an assembly line. Some cop gets shot. Another's got a drinking problem. There's corruption in the department. There's almost always a funeral where two cops have a heated argument. Good grief, kill me now. I liked *Training Day* because it contained the story to 24 hours and focused on a character's first day on the job. I hadn't seen that combination in the cop/crime genre before. That's how you need to think as a writer. "How can I give them something *different*?" ESPECIALLY with genres like this, which have been around forever. So what's your fresh take on your new cop script? If you don't have one, I don't want to read it.

TIP 279 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - This is one of my favorite scene agitators ever: when Denzel challenges Jake to smoke weed, it doesn't happen off on a side street with no one around. Instead, Alonzo *stops in the middle of a busy intersection*, causing gridlock in every direction. There's honking, cursing. Scene agitators everywhere! He then says he's not moving until Jake smokes. You see how a scene agitator can make a scene a billion times better?

TIP 280 - **Is your character good or bad? Don't tell us** - Some of the best characters are characters we can't figure out. One second Alonzo is threatening to kill some suburban kids buying weed, the next he's taking down a rapist. Is he good? Is he bad? We're not sure, but that's why we want to keep reading! Another famous character we love because we can't figure him out is John Locke from *Lost*. We weren't sure who this man was, the good guy or the bad guy, and that's what kept us coming back for more.

JERRY MAGUIRE
Written by: Cameron Crowe

Premise: When a successful sports agent tries to save his industry, he's abruptly fired, forcing him to form his own company with a love-struck secretary and their only client, an unstable self-obsessed wide receiver who's despised by his peers.

About: Is there anybody who understood the eccentricities of relationships like Cameron Crowe in the 90s? The man had a beat on the emotional pulse of America. While he'd done well with under-the-radar character pieces (*Fast Times At Ridgemont High*, *Say Anything*, *Singles*), *Jerry Maguire* was his breakout film. He was no longer writing about the guy at the end of the block. He was writing about the guy who *owned* the block. Not only did Crowe somehow figure out a way to make this A-list sports agent relatable, he also spun the story into one of the most heartwarming movies of the decade. I don't know a single person who didn't walk out of *Jerry Maguire* feeling good about life. And this wasn't a simple screenplay either: the opening 12 minutes is a montage, where our hero essentially arcs before the movie's begun! Later, he gets fired. He then stumbles around unsure of himself for a while, starts dating his assistant, and then the movie morphs into a quasi-romantic-comedy/bromance flick, with us bouncing back and forth between the two. Whenever I look at this thing from afar I think, "How the hell did he make *that* work???" Well, when you get inside the DNA of *Jerry Maguire*, you start to see a lot of sound storytelling principles. Let's grab our microscope and take a closer look…

TIP 281 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - *Jerry Maguire* starts with its protagonist realizing his profession consists of a bunch of blood-sucking-money-hungry assholes. So he writes a "mission statement" to inspire his co-workers to care again, and just like that, we've fallen in love with our hero. Jerry proves that he has morals, principles, and wants to make the world a better place, traits that anybody would love. Remember, the quicker you can make us love your hero, the quicker we'll be invested in your story (because we'll follow people we love anywhere!).

TIP 282 - **The event you're writing about should be the most important moment of your hero's life** - If your movie isn't about the most important moment in your hero's life, don't write the movie. Write about whatever WAS the most important moment in his life, because that's likely to be more interesting. When we meet Jerry Maguire, his entire life has been derailed. He's lost his job, his confidence, his fiancée, and his future. It's never been worse for him than at this moment, which is exactly why this moment is worthy of a movie.

TIP 283 - **Studio types love HEART** - A big problem with a lot of the comedy specs out there is that they don't have heart. They have laughs, yes. A wacky character or two. But the emotion is stashed away in some rat-infested studio apartment in Burbank. Crowe had that 90s winning streak because his characters wore their hearts on their sleeves. They could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. Without heart, your comedy is never going to *truly* connect with an audience.

TIP 284 - **Consider the female and male audiences when writing a romantic comedy** - One of the mistakes rom-com writers make is that most of their work is skewed heavily towards female audiences (*27 Dresses* anyone?). That was Crowe's secret ingredient. He wrote for *both* sexes (just like James Cameron). And *Jerry Maguire* was his coup de grâce. A romantic comedy centered around a sports agent? Demographic utopia! I mean how genius was that?

TIP 285 - **Cameron Crowe is a master of the memorable moment** - Although I have no insight into his process, I imagine that before Crowe writes a script, he sits down and thinks up a bunch of "memorable moment" scenes. The "show me the money" scene. The "I'm not going to FREAK OUT" quitting scene. The late night visit to Dorothy's house. The "Rod-going-crazy-in-the-end-zone" scene. This is what sets Crowe apart from other writers. Next time you write your movie, plot out your own "memorable moments." Try to imagine the scenes playing out on the big screen. You should be writing scenes that audiences will be talking about for years to come.

TIP 286 - **Keep popular culture references out of your screenplay** - There's a scene at Dorothy's house where a drunk Jerry gropes Dorothy's chest, stops, realizes his mistake, and then makes a reference to Clarence Thomas. Let me ask you a question. Do you know who Clarence Thomas is? No? This is the downside of rooting your dialogue in pop culture references. In a few months, that dialogue will be ANCIENT. Keep the pop culture references where they belong: in your Twitter feed.

TIP 287 - **Awkwardness is a rom-com (and comedy) writer's best friend** - Cameron Crowe is a master at exploiting awkwardness. There's a scene in *Jerry Maguire* where Jerry and Dorothy are about to have sex for the first time. Dorothy runs upstairs to get ready, leaving Jerry with her weird male nanny. There's an awkward silence between the two and then the nanny reaches into his bag, hands Jerry something, and says, "Use this." Jerry thinks it's a condom and tries to stop him, but then sees it's a… *jazz tape*, which, strangely enough, makes the moment even more awkward. And yet, during all this, we're

wholly entertained. That's because the scene perfectly depicts the *awkwardness of real life*. Real moments are imperfect and bumpy and unpredictable. Exploit these awkward moments in your own rom-coms and you're likely to find comedy gold.

TIP 288 - **All or Nothing Point** - As you close in on the third act, you want to raise the stakes to their highest level. To achieve this, you need to cross what I call the "all or nothing point." It's the moment when your character cannot go back: he's either going to get it all or lose it all. In *Jerry Maguire,* this happens when Jerry and Rod decide to reject the lowball offer from the Cardinals and play out the rest of the year in hopes of signing something bigger. The problem is, if Rod gets injured, he (and Jerry, and Dorothy, and his family) get *nothing*. That's about as "all or nothing" as it gets.

TIP 289 - **In sports scripts, resist the temptation to make the last game the championship** - Yes, the championship game has the highest stakes, but those stakes are overshadowed by the cliché nature of the choice. Be more creative. Come up with something different. Here, the climax is a nationally televised Monday Night Football game, which gives Rod a huge stage to play on for next year's contract. If he does well, he gets the big money! So the stakes are still high.

TIP 290 - **Nailing the final speech 1** - The big final speech in a romantic comedy should revolve around your theme. The theme of *Jerry Maguire* is that the people in your life are more important than the achievements in your life. So when Jerry comes to Dorothy's house to win her back, that's what his speech is about; he tells her that Rod's game meant nothing to him because he couldn't *share it with her*.

TIP 291 - **Nailing the final speech 2** - The next thing you want in your final speech is a big payoff to an earlier set up. This ALWAYS works and should be a staple in every final speech you write. So here, obviously, it's the famous "You complete me" line that was set up in the earlier elevator scene.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK
Written by: Aaron Sorkin (based on the book by Ben Mezrich)

Premise: A Harvard undergrad invents "Facebook," a social network that virtually links up everyone who joins. In the process of growing the company, he screws over his co-founder and best friend, who later ends up suing him for hundreds of millions of dollars.

About: I have a special place in my heart for *The Social Network*. It's the script that helped put Scriptshadow on the map. Up until that point, everybody was laughing and making jokes at the thought of a "Facebook movie." The project was being butchered from every corner of the Internet. Then, I somehow got my hands on Aaron Sorkin's second draft mere days after he turned it in (I could tell you how, but I'd have to assassinate you) and I reviewed it on the site. In short, I was blown away, along with my website server. Within a few hours, I'd quadrupled my previous traffic high. Every site linked to and quoted from the review. It was a little freaky to be honest, seeing myself quoted. I remember thinking, "That's not a very good quote." Anyway, public sentiment turned around for the project soon after and, as we all know, the script went on to win an Oscar. Am I trying to lay claim to the movie's Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar? Well, yeah, of course. I mean, who is this Aaron Sorkin guy anyway? In all honesty though, it was good to see *The Social Network* win. The best scripts don't always win the Oscar, but in this case, chalk one up for the good guys.

TIP 292 - **Play to your strengths. Avoid your weaknesses** - Sorkin writes way too much dialogue in his movies, but he gets away with it because he's *an amazing dialogue writer*. If someone with average dialogue had tried to do the same thing, his or her script would've been unbearable. We all have strengths and weaknesses as screenwriters and part of being a good writer is avoiding the stuff you're bad at and playing up the stuff that you're good at.

TIP 293 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - While at a party, Mark Zuckerberg needs to talk to his friend, Andrew, about the site, so he takes him outside, where it's freezing. The weather, then, becomes the scene agitator. While Mark throws some ideas at him, Andrew is shivering, uncomfortable, and clearly wants to go back inside. This subconsciously adds urgency to the scene, as we want Andrew to be warm, too!

TIP 294 - **IRONY ALERT** - Mark Zuckerberg has built the biggest "friend network" in the world and he doesn't have a single friend.

TIP 295 - **Relationships are most interesting when they're in transition** - Remember, if everything's fine in a relationship, there's no drama. If Mark and Eduardo are perfectly happy with each other and nothing's changing between them, that's boring. Instead, this is a friendship that's now *transitioning* into a business relationship. And that's what's causing all the drama. That's what starts destroying their friendship. Typically, when two people are in a static predictable relationship and nothing is changing between them, that relationship and those characters are going to put us to sleep.

TIP 296 - **Write a few trailer lines for your indie movie** - Action films have million dollar special-effects shots to throw in their trailers. Cash-poor indies have dialogue. So make sure you have a few trailer-friendly lines in your screenplay. "He was my best friend." "Your best friend is suing you for 600 million dollars." Now THAT'S a trailer line!

TIP 297 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Conflict is everywhere in this movie. It starts with the very first scene, where Mark's girlfriend breaks up with him. This is followed by Mark's jealousy when he sees Eduardo getting recruited by a fraternity. Then the Winklevoss twins try to stop Facebook. Then Sean (Justin Timberlake) tries to push Eduardo out of the picture. The intercutting deposition scenes all feature conflict (Eduardo and the Winklevoss twins suing Mark). Facebook may be one of the most successful companies in history, but the journey was packed with conflict at every turn.

TIP 298 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - Place confrontations in public! At the bar, Mark sees his ex-girlfriend sitting with a bunch of her friends. He walks up to her and asks if they can talk in private. She says, no, let's talk here. Instead of Mark getting to have a quiet comfortable conversation with his ex-girlfriend (borrrrrr-ing), he must have the conversation in front of a bunch of people he doesn't know (interesting!). Whenever someone asks, "Can we talk in private?" make sure the other person says "No!"

TIP 299 - **Never let your character stay up for too long** - There are going to be moments when your character is on a high. That's fine. You need those moments in your movie. *Just don't let them last too long.* Scripts are most interesting when your hero struggles, so let them experience a high, then punch them in the face afterwards. In *The Social Network*, Mark is banging a Facebook groupie in the bathroom one minute (high!), but a minute later his ex is telling him he's a worthless asshole (low).

<u>TIP 300</u> - **Don't cheat your margins!** - Facebook is a long script, something like 160 pages. That doesn't matter if you're Aaron Sorkin. But it does if you're Joe Nobody, and I often see Joe Nobody try to solve his excessive page count problem by setting Final Draft to "squeeze" the text, allowing him to get more lines per page. I'd advise against this because when you do it, every page reads slower, convincing the reader that the story itself is moving too slowly. Solve your large page count problem the old fashioned way: Cut out scenes, characters, and subplots that don't directly push your story forward.

ROCKY
Written by: Sylvester Stallone

Premise: An aging amateur boxer out of Philadelphia has his life turned upside-down when the heavyweight champion of the world gives him a shot at the title.

About: *Rocky* is not only one of the best screenplays ever written, it has one of the greatest screenwriting backstories ever! Sylvester Stallone was a struggling actor trying to find a back door into the business, so he wrote a movie he could star in called *Rocky*. Everybody loved the script, but they would only buy it on one condition: if Sylvester Stallone wasn't in it! That, however, was the one condition Stallone refused to compromise on. He had to be attached to star. So the producers started offering him more and more money to vanish, but he kept declining. It got to the point, according to Stallone, where it was kind of ridiculous. He had never had anywhere close to that amount of money before, so all logic told him to take it. *But* he figured that he'd been living paycheck to paycheck for so long that he could keep doing it if necessary. Stallone held the line and inevitably watched the producers fold. I think it turned out okay for everyone involved.

TIP 301 - **Practice makes perfect, unless it's a sports movie!** - This might surprise you, but there aren't a whole lot of practice/training scenes in sports movies outside of montages. Why? Because straight practice is boring. It's much more interesting to take the protagonist outside the confines of his sport and into the real world. Rocky doesn't spar with anyone. He pounds meat in a meat locker. The Karate Kid doesn't train with the local kids. He paints the fence and waxes cars. You'll find a few straight practice scenes in sports movies (which usually survive on heavy conflict, like in *Hoosiers*), but it's usually better to find something away from the ring. Be creative!

TIP 302 - **Don't write a sports movie on spec unless it's a comedy, based on a true story or a boxing movie** - Although there are exceptions, fictional sports specs rarely, if ever, sell. ☹

TIP 303 - **Mr. Moody Pants** - New drama writers love making their hero Mr. Moody Pants. He's dark, brooding, and rarely says anything. As a result, he's empty, thin and boring as hell! Nobody likes a one-note character, especially one who's moody! So take a tip from *Rocky* and give your dark protagonist <u>some personality</u>. Rocky makes jokes to Adrian. He talks to his turtles. He gives advice to a wayward girl on the way home. He plays with a racketball wherever he goes. Your movie may cover heavy subject matter, but it doesn't mean your main character has to be a bore.

TIP 304 - **Write with an active voice** - While there is the occasional exception, when telling a story in screenplay form you should use the active voice. In other words, don't write: "He proceeds to pummel the man with a flurry of punches." Instead, write: "He PUMMELS the man with a flurry of punches…" Don't write: "He is knocking Apollo off balance." Say, "He KNOCKS Apollo off balance." Keep your writing voice <u>active</u>.

TIP 305 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - Rocky tells a street kid to stop hanging out with losers and go to school. People who help others are instantly likable!

TIP 306 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Conflict is EVERYWHERE in this movie. Whether it's Rocky trying to get a resistant Adrian to go out with him, Rocky getting kicked out of his gym, or Mick begging Rocky to let him manage him. Whether it's clashes with alcoholic Paulie, or Rocky's decade long struggle to become a great boxer-- if you want to see what constant conflict looks like, watch *Rocky*.

TIP 307 - **POWER TIP** - I'm about to give you the most likable character type in all of movies: *the underdog*. Everybody, and I mean *everybody*, loves an underdog. From Daniel-san, to Rocky, to Luke Skywalker, to Neo, to Forrest Gump, to Colin Firth in *The King's Speech*, to Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Everybody loves an underdog. So if you have an idea that incorporates an underdog, write it, because we *will* like your hero.

TIP 308 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - *Rocky* contains one of the best scene agitators I've ever seen. When Rocky takes Adrian to the ice rink for their first date, the manager tells him they're closed, so Rocky pays him for 10 minutes of ice time. As the two skate around by themselves, the manager proceeds to CALL OUT their remaining time. "Seven minutes!" "Five minutes!" "Two minutes!" He keeps interrupting their conversation and puts a lot of pressure on the two to finish their date. This scene is a billion times better than if their first date had been at a restaurant (the death knell of first date scenes!).

TIP 309 - **CONFLICT ALERT 2** - *Rocky* does something rather brilliant: Instead of having a traditional guy-meets-girl relationship subplot, Stallone adds Paulie, who serves as a third wheel. This creates a lot of conflict in Rocky and Adrian's relationship because Paulie's instability and jealousy keep getting in the way. Which is good. Nothing should be easy for your

hero. There should be conflict in front of everything he wants (in this case, Adrian).

TIP 310 - **The final fight (or game, or confrontation, or climax) is rarely about the fight itself. It's about your hero overcoming his flaw** - Rocky's flaw is that he doesn't believe in himself. When he stands toe to toe with Apollo for 15 rounds and BELIEVES in himself, he finally overcomes his biggest weakness.

TIP 311 - **When the movie's over, THE MOVIE'S OVER!** - It's nice to have a scene or two after your climax, but there's a reason the adage "always leave them wanting more" has stood the test of time. In other words, *get out while you're on top*! After going the distance with Apollo, Rocky calls for Adrian, she fights her way into the ring, tells him she loves him, and - BOOM - the movie's over! What's the point of adding anything else?

PULP FICTION
Written by: Quentin Tarantino (story by Tarantino and Roger Avary)

Premise: Told out of sequence and through multiple points-of-view, *Pulp Fiction* follows the misadventures of a pair of hit men who have a knack for finding trouble.

About: If there were ever a case against structure, against the contrived storytelling mechanics of Hollywood, *Pulp Fiction* would be the star witness. It tells its story out of order. There's no central main character. Scenes last up to a dozen minutes at a time. Characters talk forever, and don't always push the story forward. Almost everything I tell you NOT to do in this book, Quentin Tarantino does. *And* he gets away with it. How does he do that? Well, besides the fact that he's a genius, Tarantino is also a great storyteller. Despite the unorthodox way he structures his scripts, he creates interesting characters, he gives them goals *and* there's always urgency. And that's just the beginning. *Pulp Fiction* is Tarantino's Mona Lisa. Let's figure out what makes her smile.

TIP 312 - **Whatever you do, do not try and write the next Pulp Fiction!** - The worst screenplays I read are usually prefaced by: "I'm inspired by Quentin Tarantino." This almost always guarantees that the story will be random, plot-less, and ridiculously overwritten. Worst of all? Even if the writer beats the odds and writes something decent it will still be, "A not-as-good-version of a Quentin Tarantino script." Is that how you want to be remembered? Tarantino is *one of a kind*. If you want to be inspired by him, develop *your own* voice. Be *your own* writer. *Make people want to be the next you!*

TIP 313 - **Don't write a script beyond your ability level** - Every script, like a figure skating routine, has a degree of difficulty to it. The closer you stay to your level, the better chance you have of executing the routine. Just like an amateur skater shouldn't try a triple axle, you shouldn't try a multi-protagonist interweaving time-jumping narrative. If you're just beginning, stay close to the basics: "Guy wants something badly and has trouble getting it." *Taken* is a great example of this (a guy tries to save his daughter). If you start adding jumps and spins and flips and dips to your routine, there's a good chance you'll start making mistakes.

TIP 314 - **POWER TIP** - A genius tool Tarantino uses is the "impending collision." In many of Pulp's scenes (and a TON of *Django Unchained's* scenes, as well as the famous opening scene of *Inglorious Basterds*), it's implied that something bad is going to happen at the end of the scene, which leaves everything beforehand steeped in suspense. We know Jules (Samuel Jackson) is probably going to kill the guy eating the Big Kuhuna Burger, so never once does the conversation get boring. We know it's going to end ugly when Butch (Bruce Willis) and Marsellus Wallace are tied up in that redneck basement, so the long lead-up beforehand shoots by in the blink of an eye. We know Jules is going to square off against Ringo (Tim Roth) in the final scene, so every line of dialogue leading up to it, no matter how banal, is exciting! Imply a collision at the end of a scene and everything leading up to it will entertain.

TIP 315 - **How do you spell "spelle?"** - Every screenwriter goes through that phase early on in their career where they think spelling and grammar don't matter. And if you tell them it does? They go into a full-on attack, screaming something to the effect of, "Well, Tarantino's scripts have tons of spelling errors and he's doing okay!" Here's the thing: one of the easiest ways to tell if a script is bad is if it's riddled with spelling errors. Readers have read enough of these things to know that if you're not putting forth the effort to fix your *spelling* of all things, you're not putting forth the effort to make every scene as good as it can be, every character as good as he can be, every conversation as good as it can be. If you want to be taken seriously, act like a professional and get your script spell/grammar-checked before sending it out.

TIP 316 - **Be confident in your writing** - Readers can sense when a writer's unsure of himself. There's tepidness to their word choices, indecisiveness to their sentence structure, a lack of conviction to their story. It feels like they're afraid that at any second, they'll be exposed as a fraud. Write confidently. Believe in the story you're telling. For all his misspellings and unorthodox choices, Quentin Tarantino owns his pages. Own yours.

TIP 317 - **If you're not a theologian or a priest, don't have your characters spouting out bible quotes** - There is nothing that screams amateur more than writers shoddily ripping out quotes from the Bible in order to make their characters sound "cool." Yeah, it worked for Tarantino, but when amateurs try it, it sounds…well it sounds like they're ripping off Tarantino! Now, if you know the Bible inside and out? If you're quoting a specific line for a specific purpose? If religion is a key component to your story? That's fine. As long as the choice is necessary for the story. However, if you're just doing it because you think it makes your characters sound cool, you're in for a world of reader backlash.

TIP 318 - **IRONY ALERT** - Remember to extend irony into your dialogue. Vincent Vega and Sam Jackson are two ruthless hit men who like to discuss foot massages and foreign cuisine on the way to their hits.

TIP 319 - **Great scenes require legwork** - Great scenes don't materialize out of thin air. They usually require other scenes to set them up. Let's take a look at the famous Jack Rabbit Slim's scene where Vincent and Mia go out for dinner. Everyone loves this scene. So why does it work? It's because earlier, Tarantino establishes that Marsellus Wallace, Mia's husband, killed a man for giving Mia a foot massage. He also shows flirtatious Mia coming on to Vincent. These two elements are in serious conflict with one another. Vincent doesn't want to get killed, but Mia is practically throwing herself at him. We see this build and build and build, until it culminates in the dance competition. If it isn't set up beforehand that Mia's husband kills people for flirting or that Mia's looking for a good time tonight, this is just another average scene.

TIP 320 - **Dinner Party Characters** - You'd be amazed at how many characters (particularly *protagonists*) I read who have zero personality. To make sure this doesn't happen to you, ask yourself: "If I were having a dinner party, would I invite my characters?" In other words, are they interesting? Are they unique? Do they have personality? Would you want to get to know them better? If you're answering "no" to all of these questions, you probably need a more interesting character. I'd invite most of the characters in *Pulp Fiction* to my dinner party (with a "no guns allowed" policy in place, of course).

TIP 321 - **Go against current trends** - One of the reasons *Pulp Fiction* was so successful was that it went against current trends. If you look back to 1994, you'll see films like *The Client*, *Maverick*, *The Flintstones*, *True Lies*, *Speed*, and *The Mask* – all very formulaic movies. With its out-of-order timeline and dialogue-heavy fearlessness, *Pulp Fiction* was unlike anything out at the time. Which is why people ate it up! So approach today's market the same way. *Give them something different*. If the horror market is flooded with torture porn, write cerebral horror. If the action films are too goofy, write one that takes itself seriously. People don't know it, but what they really want is something fresh. It's your job to give it to them.

GOONIES
Written by Steven Spielberg and Chris Columbus

Premise: A group of children on the brink of losing their homes to the town country club find a treasure map that just might be able to save them.

About: To this day, people are still trying to write the next *Goonies*. I know because I've read more "the next Goonies" screenplays than I can count, and let's just say I can imagine Sloth himself coming up with better stories than these writers. Of the half-dozen Goonies-inspired scripts that have sold (one for a million bucks!), it's clear that the only reason anyone bought them was because they were marketed as "the next Goonies," and not because they were actually any good. You wouldn't think it'd be hard. The basic structure for "The Goonies" is practically an advertisement for GSU (GOAL - find the treasure, STAKES - if they don't, they lose their neighborhood, URGENCY - they only have 24 hours). The only unique aspect to the story is the number of characters. You could argue there are as many as ten protagonists in *Goonies*. I'll keep waiting for someone to crack the code, but in the meantime, let's see if we can learn something from the original.

TIP 322 - **Celebrate the tight time frame!** - Movies do best with tight time frames. That's why a lot of movies take place inside a short period of time. Once your story extends past two weeks, it becomes a lot harder to wrangle in. The ticking time bomb in *Goonies* is 24 hours. *The Proposal, Pulp Fiction, Titanic, Training Day, Taken, The Ring, Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Fargo,* and *Crash* all take place in under a week. Again, it's not imperative that movies take place in this contained amount of time. It's just easier to tell the story when they do.

TIP 323 - **Use nicknames to make your characters memorable, especially in comedies** - As we've established, remembering characters is difficult, particularly if there's a lot of them like in *Goonies*. For that reason, give some of your characters nicknames. This seems to work best in comedies, but the right nickname can work in any genre. In *Goonies*, the fat kid is named Chunk. The kid with gadgets is named Data. The kid who talks all the time is named Mouth. This may seem unimportant when you're *watching* the movie, but it's a huge help when you're *reading* the movie.

TIP 324 - **The "Every 15 Pages Rule"** - If something interesting or unexpected or surprising or stake-raising doesn't happen every 15 pages *at least*, your script is probably boring. Some have argued that these days, with audiences exhibiting ADD more than ever, you need to have these things happening every *10* pages.

TIP 325 - **POWER TIP** - The more people who have something at stake in your story, the better - What I loved about *Goonies* was that they expanded the central problem so that it affected *all the characters*. The writers came up with this brilliant device of having the golf course extension cover all the kids' houses. That way, ALL THE KIDS were losing their homes, not just Mikey. Since everyone had something to lose, everyone desperately wanted to achieve their goal (find the treasure)!

TIP 326 - **Think like a producer!** - I want you to imagine for a second that you're a producer. As a producer, your job is to buy scripts you can turn into movies that make money for your company. The reason your company needs money is so it can make *more movies*. Therefore, if you buy a script that nobody wants to make, your company loses a lot of money. Do that a few times and you can take the entire company down. With that in mind, which scripts are you going to buy? Are you going to buy the dark drama about the 20-something who walks around LA pondering life? Or are you going to buy the family film about a group of kids searching for a hidden treasure? Most new writers never ponder this question from the point of view of a producer. And if you don't do that, you won't understand why screenplays are bought. True, movies like *American Beauty* and *Leaving Las Vegas* get made, but that doesn't change the fact that the less marketable the screenplay is, the less likely it is someone will buy it.

TIP 327 - **In any ensemble journey, make sure each character brings a unique skill to the table that pays off later in the movie** - Mouth's (Corey Feldman) dad was a plumber, which pays off in a scene where they bang on the pipes to get noticed. Data is into gadgets, which save his life several times. Chunk's love of candy bars endears him to Sloth. And Andy (Kerri Green) had piano lessons, which saves them in the underground organ test scene.

TIP 328 - **What does "Every scene must push the story forward" mean?** - One of the staple pieces of advice you hear in screenwriting is: "Only include a scene that pushes the story forward." But what does that mean? How do you know if a scene pushes your story forward or not? It's simple: As long as the scene is required for your characters to achieve their ultimate goal, then the scene is necessary. If the scene has nothing to do with the goal, it isn't necessary. In *Goonies,* the goal is clear - find the treasure. Therefore, it's easy to determine which scenes are needed and which aren't. Not surprisingly, this is why scripts with murky goals result in a lot of boring scenes. Since the writer doesn't know what the goal is, he's unsure of which scenes are necessary to push the characters towards that goal.

PRETTY WOMAN
Written by: J.F. Lawton

Premise: A businessman hires a prostitute as an escort for the week while he tries to close a big deal, but their seemingly meaningless relationship blossoms into something neither of them expected.

About: Ah, the power of development. Every once in awhile, they get it right. *Pretty Woman* was originally a spec script titled *$3000* - the amount Richard Gere's character, Edward, offered Vivian (Julia Roberts) for a week of escorting. It was a dark and gritty drama that made Vivian's prostitute character a lot more, well… *prostitute-like*. She was addicted to drugs, swore a lot, and wasn't nearly as cutesy as Hollywood's future golden girl. The studio, however, wanted to re-imagine the concept as a modern day fairytale and paid a bunch of writers to rewrite it. They eventually achieved their goal, yet one of the reasons this movie still resonates today is because some of that darkness from that original draft is still present. No matter how much you pretty it up, this is still a prostitute we're talking about, and you feel the weight of that character in a way you don't in romantic comedies these days. That's what I try and tell people writing comedy or romantic comedy: if you can add just a little bit of darkness, your script will rise above the flat tire fare from which so many other scripts in this genre suffer.

TIP 329 - **URGENCY ALERT** - Edward has a week to close the deal. Hence, that's how long they have to spend with each other.

TIP 330 - **The most effective dynamic in a rom-com pairing is the "uptight/laid back" dynamic** - In almost every relationship, one person is more uptight than the other. Here, Edward is the uptight one, while Vivian is laid back. While cliché, it's a very relatable dynamic, so audiences strongly identify with it.

TIP 331 - **Characters need more than one dimension** - A common mistake I see young writers make is to only showcase *one dimension* of a character's personality - typically their dominant personality trait. So if a character is an a-hole, the writer *only* shows him being an a-hole. If a character is clueless, the writer *only* shows him being clueless. I encourage you to show another side of your character every once in awhile. Edward's uptight, but he's not above smiling and having a good time. He even acts like a goofball occasionally (early on, he can't drive a stick shift, and is openly self-deprecating about it). Be careful, however. Stray from the dominant personality trait too much and the audience may become confused about your character. It's a fine line, but when done well, this tool helps your character feel multi-dimensional.

TIP 332 - **Flip the cliché** - Always look for places to flip the cliché on its head. The cliché thing to do with a hooker staying at a prestigious hotel is to have the staff and guests abhor her. *Pretty Woman* flips that cliché by having its head concierge befriend Vivian.

TIP 333 - **No one waits for dinner in the movies** - You ever eat at a really nice restaurant? It takes a LONG time to get served. In the movies, we don't have a long time. So after your characters meet at a restaurant, find a way to jump to the meal so you can jump to the conversation. In *Pretty Woman,* Edward and Vivian are meeting the owner of the company Edward's buying. As soon as pleasantries are exchanged, Vivian gets up to use the bathroom and we cut directly to the meal where the crux of the business deal is discussed.

TIP 334 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - We establish early on that Vivian never kisses on the lips (she's saving that for the guy she loves). That way, later on, she doesn't have to say "I love you" to Edward. She simply kisses him on the lips. This is one of the more famous uses of "show don't tell" in screenplay history!

TIP 335 - **Divide your exposition up into more than one scene** - One of the telltale signs of an amateur is unloading an encyclopedia's worth of exposition/backstory into a single scene. No one wants to suffer through that, trust me. So instead, break the exposition up *between* scenes. At dinner, Edward brings up that his father died, but he doesn't give her all the details right away. It isn't until later, out on the deck, when Vivian asks him what happened to his dad, that he finishes the story. There's something about splitting backstory up that makes it feel more realistic.

TIP 336 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Here's a great example of how conflict can help a scene. When Edward first brings Vivian back to his hotel, he's hoping to talk a bit and get to know her. But all Vivian wants to do is have sex so she can move on to the next trick. In other words, both of these characters want *different things*, resulting in a fun little dance where she pushes and he resists. CONFLICT!

TIP 337 - **Beware the late-arriving idea** - There's nothing like that feeling of your script finally coming together. The scenes glide into each other. The exposition is smoothed out. The characters finally pop. However, once the clay dries, it becomes harder to make adjustments. For that reason, be careful about adding major changes at the last second. Readers

always spot it. Why? Because while the rest of your script is on its 15th draft, the late-arriving idea is on its 1st draft, and a 1st draft of anything sucks. I don't think it's any secret the "afraid of heights" ending in *Pretty Woman* feels a bit tacked on. While cute, it only has one tiny setup (which is TOLD and not SHOWN) and feels like something everybody thought up at the last second. In other words, it felt like a first draft. So, if you're going to make that late change, try to write 4-5 drafts of it before you send it out there. Otherwise, it'll stick out like a sore thumb.

JUNO
Written by: Diablo Cody

Premise: When a sixteen-year-old girl gets pregnant, she decides to give the baby to an upper middle class couple. But when the couple's relationship starts to dissolve, she's forced to reevaluate her plan.

About: Welcome to one of the most controversial screenplays EVER. Noted blogger Diablo Cody got an e-mail from a Hollywood producer one day asking her to consider writing a screenplay. The result was *Juno,* which before it even got close to production was considered one of the best scripts in town. Although Cody had never written a screenplay before, she got a lot of help from producers. Jason Reitman was then brought on to direct and the rest is history. I can't say I was a fan of *Juno* the first time I saw it, but in subsequent viewings, I've realized that the script is almost masterful in its execution. It's an amazing character study. Like it or hate it, you do not leave *Juno* forgetting about the characters. Since memorable characters are the hardest things to write, you gotta give Diablo (and her collaborators) credit.

TIP 338 - **Juno is a question movie, not a goal movie** - Our heroine, Juno, is goal-less. So then how does the movie work? Well, Cody has substituted a *question* in place of a goal. As long as the question driving your script is interesting, the audience should stay interested. Here's the question: *What's going to happen when Juno has her baby?* Is she going to give it to the couple? We think so, but as the movie goes on, we're not so sure. I still maintain that a character goal is the best way to push a story forward, but if you don't have one, a compelling question can work, as it does here.

TIP 339 - **Dialogue is like salad. It needs dressing** - Salad is healthy. Salad is fresh. Salad gives you energy. Let's face it though, without dressing, salad sucks. Dialogue is similar. It keeps the story moving. It lets you know what the characters are thinking. It gives life to a scene. Without dressing, however, dialogue is boring. So, it's up to you to add a little dressing to make your dialogue taste good. After Juno is kicked out of the hospital, this is what she says: "My stepmom verbally abused the ultrasound tech so we were escorted off the premises." Here's what that line might've looked like without the dressing: "We were at the hospital earlier and got kicked out by one of the nurses." Kinda lame, huh? That's the power of dressing, folks. It adds flavor to your dialogue.

TIP 340 - **Characters should speak differently around different people** - You know how the way you talk changes depending on who you're talking to? For instance, you don't talk to your mom the same way you talk to your best friend. It's the same thing with characters in a screenplay. When Marc (Jason Bateman) is around Juno, he's relaxed and fun. When he's around his wife, though, he's cautious and uptight. Make sure each relationship in your movie brings out a slightly different side of your character. That should help keep the dialogue fresh.

TIP 341 - **Look at me! I can write!** - The area where *Juno* gets the most flak is in those first 30 pages, where characters say things like "oh my blog" and "Preggo my Eggo." The reason this turned off so many people is because it felt like the writer was *trying too hard*. If you're screaming out to everyone: "Look at me! I'm a writer!" prepare to meet some pissed-off readers. Never try *too hard* to impress us. We can tell.

TIP 342 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - There's a LOT of conflict in *Juno.* There's conflict between Juno and Bleeker (he likes her more than she likes him). There's conflict between Juno and Jennifer Garner's character, Vanessa (she's not convinced Juno's going to give her the baby). There's conflict between Marc and Vanessa, who are moving in different directions. There's conflict between Juno and Marc - a forbidden attraction. A big reason why *Juno* has so many strong scenes is because there's conflict inherent in all of its relationships.

TIP 343 - **If you're defending, you're pretending** - It's funny. Sometimes I'll get e-mail queries that sound like this: "I know my first act is a little confusing, but if you just keep reading…" Or, "I know my main character is passive, but…" Look, if you're having to defend your screenplay *before someone has even read it*, it's not ready. Write a screenplay you're proud of. Write a screenplay in which you don't have to apologize for a single thing. Anything less and you're being lazy.

TIP 344 - **Try to know every character's backstory** - The more backstories you know, the better your script will be. If this were Marc and Vanessa's first time adopting (aka zero backstory), it'd be boring. Instead, Diablo gave them a backstory whereby they'd tried this once before and the donor changed her mind at the last second. This tiny backstory shifts the whole dynamic of the film. It gives depth to Vanessa's character (she's terrified of history repeating itself) and that desperation rubs Marc the wrong way, which pushes him towards finding solace in the childlike Juno. By giving your characters backstory, you create a chain of events that open up a series of much more interesting story threads. If your characters' pasts are blank slates, your script is going to be the same.

TIP 345 - **The most obvious location for a scene is usually the least interesting** - There's a really intimate scene in *Juno* where Vanessa puts her hand on Juno's stomach, trying to feel her future child kicking. But it's not how the scene is written. It's WHERE it's written. Cody puts the scene *at the mall*. Think about that for a second. A boring writer might've put the scene in the comfort of a living room. Safe. Sterile. Boring. By placing the scene in the most impersonal place ever, however, the scene JUMPS TO LIFE. Or should I say, "kicks."

TIP 346 - **When you have a question-driven story like Juno, make sure the answer to that question is THROWN INTO DISARRAY late** - This is the whole point of having a question-driven movie: to keep us guessing. As we close in on the finale, you should hit the characters with one last twist that really throws the answer into disarray. Here, it's when Marc decides to leave Vanessa. Juno's plan was to give this baby to a loving couple. If there's no loving couple, what does Juno do with the baby? We're aching to find out, which is why this twist works so well.

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SUPER 8
Written by: JJ Abrams

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Premise: While making a movie, a group of junior high school students living in a small town witness a train crash that may have unleashed a top secret military experiment.

About: Sure, I could've used half a dozen Steven Spielberg movies in place of Abrams' Spielberg homage, but I didn't want *every* movie in this book to be from the 1900s and *Super 8* does a solid job updating the Spielberg formula. I also happen to have a bromance crush on Abrams. He has an incredible knack for knowing what the masses want and is a genius at finding fresh spins on old ideas. *Lost* was a genius concept, and I didn't think I'd ever watch *Star Trek* again until he came around. Does he have some weaknesses? Sure, I mean, *Super 8* is a monster movie where the monster barely affects the plot! I'm not sure Spielberg would've done it that way, but as far as what Abrams did with character? I can't think of a better character-driven summer film that came out in 2011. All around, this was a great effort, and reminded me what it used to feel like going to the movies.

TIP 347 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - *Super 8* starts with a great "show don't tell" moment. To convey Joe's mother's death (Joe is our 14 year old lead), we see a warehouse sign that reads, "Days Since Last Accident." The number "700-something" is replaced with a "0." Afterward, we cut to a wake and, voilá, we realize Joe's mom has died.

TIP 348 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - Early on, we have a scene between Joe and his best friend Charles (the chubby kid). They're talking about a relatively boring subject: how to write screenplays (heh, heh). Knowing this, Abrams has Charles' parents constantly yelling at him from the other room to "get over here!" What could have been a boring talky scene instead gets a jolt of energy since the dialogue is being constantly interrupted.

TIP 349 - **POWER TIP** - To convey that your hero is thinking about someone, create a *physical object* that represents that person. If you don't have something physical to reference when your hero's thinking about someone, it's nearly impossible to convey that they're thinking about them. Here we see it with the mother's locket that Joe carries around. In *Cast Away*, it's the picture Tom Hanks has of his wife. In *The Grey*, it's a letter Ottway's written to his wife. This is a great device for SHOWING and not TELLING.

TIP 350 - **Avoid stereotypes unless you can work the stereotype into the fabric of the story** - I originally rolled my eyes at Alice's (Elle Fanning) alcoholic father. "What a cliché," I thought. We later find out, though, that her father missed work at the factory the day Joe's mom died due to a hangover. Joe's mom was called in to take his place, which resulted in her death. Since the alcoholism was weaved into the storyline, it was easier to accept.

TIP 351 - **Deposit multiple mysteries in the bank for later withdrawal** - The more mysteries you can introduce into your story, the more reasons your audience has to keep reading. This is one of JJ Abrams' specialties. What is this monster? What was the military doing with it? What are these white Rubik's cube things? What is the monster building? Why are all the dogs running away? With all these questions popping up, Abrams gives us a ton of reasons to keep reading.

TIP 352 - **Create romantic moments where the characters don't have to say anything romantic** - Characters heaping globs of love-filled one-liners on each other is a recipe for reader suicide (Star Wars Prequels!). Instead, try to convey said feelings *without* the characters saying them. One of the great moments in *Super 8* is when Joe puts zombie make-up on Alice for the film shoot. Not a word is said between the two, but the way they look at each other, you can feel the electricity between them.

TIP 353 - **CONFLICT ALERT** - Remember, resistance creates conflict! Right from the top, Alice *resists* making the movie with the boys. They have to beg her to do it, and every step of the way, she's trying to get out. This leads to conflict and uncertainty at every turn and is way more interesting than had she wanted to do the film.

TIP 354 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - The day after the big train crash, the entire crew is at a restaurant. Everybody talks about the government cover-up they witnessed. Charles, however, is afraid others will hear them, so he keeps telling everyone, "Shut up. We can't talk about this!" This constant interruption is a great scene agitator, as it adds an element of conflict to the scene.

TIP 355 - **Create multiple obstacles to keep your romantic leads apart** - Look at all the things keeping Joe and Alice apart: her father won't let her be with him. His father won't let him be with her. She doesn't want to help with the movie. Her father is responsible for his mother's death. The army gets in their way. The monster takes her. The more things you can place between your guy and your girl, the more rewarding it is when they finally get together.

TIP 356 - **Don't take a single scene for granted** - The average script has 60 scenes. For a script to be considered "decent" or "good," at least 35 of these scenes must be good. For a script to be considered "great," 50 of them should be good. You want to know how many good scenes I read in the average amateur screenplay? *Three.* That's no joke. In fact, I've read tons of scripts without a *single good scene* in them. So, after you've finished your script, list your 60 scenes and put a check by every one you consider to be "good." Don't lie either. Be honest with yourself. Don't show your script to anyone until at least 35 of those scenes are top notch.

TIP 357 - **How to transition out of melodramatic scenes quickly** - After an emotionally intense scene, it's hard to jump back into the flow of the story. A crying character doesn't start smiling just because the next scene begins. So a trick is to have a surprise of some sort JOLT your characters out of their solemn state. Here, we have a sad scene where Joe and Alice watch old movies of Joe's mother. It's pretty heavy stuff. As soon as the moment is over though, the strange white Rubik's cube thing WIGGLES AROUND on the desk. The two leap up and run over to it. BOOM, the melodrama is gone and we're right back into the story.

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION
Written by: Frank Darabont (based on the short story by Stephen King)

Premise: After being convicted of killing his wife, a man is sentenced to life in prison. He makes the best of it, befriending a quirky cast of fellow prisoners over the years, but as he contemplates the prospect of dying in prison, he entertains speeding up the process and going out on his own terms.

About: Frank Darabont knows his way around a slug line. He's widely considered to be one of the best screenwriters in Hollywood. But when he adapted Steven King's short story, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, he found himself in the elite category of creating a classic. Put simply, *The Shawshank Redemption* might be the best screenplay ever written. And boy does it take some chances along the way. The script is 131 pages long. It takes place in a dreary prison. It's a period piece. There's no love interest. There's no goal for the main character. It's almost as if this movie was designed to become the most boring film of all time. So how in the world did it turn out to be one of the best films in history? These are the screenplays I love breaking down the most, the ones where the writers take a number of gambles and those gambles pay off.

TIP 358 - **No reason to limit yourself to one villain** - There's nothing like the feeling of watching a villain go down. So why stop at only one? King and Darabont create THREE villains for *Shawshank*. The first is Bogs, the rapist. The second is Captain Hadley, the lead guard. And the third is the warden. Darabont makes all of these men so unbearably evil that we will not rest until we see our hero defeat them.

TIP 359 - **Spread out your set-ups and payoffs** - Darabont loves set-ups and payoffs, probably more than any other writer out there. And one thing he'll surely tell you is to never pay off a setup too soon. There needs to be *space* between your set-ups and payoffs. That's because a payoff, in part, depends on the audience forgetting the set-up. That huge hole in the wall behind Andy's poster was set up sixty pages prior (with the rock hammer).

TIP 360 - **Don't coddle your character** - One of the common mistakes new writers make is to be easy on their protagonists. They coddle them. They nuzzle up to them. They burp them. You gotta throw your characters in the shit (sometimes literally, as *Shawshank* showed!). You gotta kick them. You gotta demoralize them. When you do that, you create DRAMA, which is the lifeblood of any good story. Andy's cheated on by his wife, loses his wife, is charged with her murder, is repeatedly raped, is thrown in the hole, and finally, loses the only man who can prove his innocence. King and Darabont have no mercy on Andy and the story is better for it.

TIP 361 - **Sometimes you must lie to your audience** - One of the keys to this movie working is the audience believing escape is impossible. Only then can it pull off its shocking ending. So, early on, when Andy asks Red to get him a rock hammer, Darabont (and King) have Red say, via voice over, "Andy was right. I finally got the joke. It would take a man about six hundred years to tunnel under the wall with one of these." After that, we never consider the possibility of Andy escaping. It's all because Darabont lied to us, so don't be afraid to lie to your audience!

TIP 362 - **Kick the owner** - A lot of writers are looking for that perfect "save the cat" moment, the thing that'll make the reader fall in love with their hero. They forget, however, that an arguably more effective way of achieving this is to "kick the owner." If we see our hero get beaten down (by a character, a situation, or life) we're likely to heap sympathy on him. As I mentioned before, Andy is beaten, raped, put down, shut down, you name it. It's because he gets knocked down so many times (kick the owner!) that we root for him.

TIP 363 - **But make sure they get up with a smile** - Never let your heroes dwell on their misfortune for too long. We HATE characters who feel sorry for themselves. HATE THEM. Andy may go down a lot, but he always gets right back up. Look at the lunch scene after Andy's been in the hole for a month for playing the Italian music over the speaker system. He's smiling. He's just been in the hole for a month and he's SMILING!

TIP 364 - **STAKES ALERT** - When Andy first gets to jail, Captain Hadley beats one of the new inmates to death for crying. This moment raises the stakes considerably because it lets the characters (and us) know that if you push your luck in Shawshank, *you die*.

TIP 365 - **IRONY ALERT** - The warden, who lives by the word of God, is the most criminal man in Shawshank Prison.

TIP 366 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - Andy Dufresne trades tax advice with Captain Hadley to secure 12 cold beers for he and his roofing crew. Let's look at all the ways this makes Andy likable. First, Andy puts his life at stake to speak with the short-tempered Hadley, who nearly throws him off the roof (we love bravery). Second, he always puts his friends first, offering to

help Hadley if he can get them some beers (we love selfless people!). And finally, Andy gives his own share of the beer to his friends (we love kind people!). In combination with the earlier "kick the owner" scene, it's impossible NOT to love Andy Dufrense. A HUGE reason why this movie works so well is because of the intense likability of its main character.

TIP 367 - **The hidden goal** - Earlier I said Andy didn't have a goal. That's not entirely true. I had to learn this from my Scriptshadow readers, but it turns out Andy Dufresne *does* have a goal. *To escape.* We just don't know it because it's kept from us (it's "hidden"). The hidden goal is an option available to you, but it's a risky one. If we're not aware that the hero's after something, we'll assume he's after nothing. Which means for the majority of the movie, he'll look passive. Only the best writers in the world can pull off passive heroes. So be careful when using the hidden goal!

TIP 368 - **Use the hidden goal for surprise endings** - The hidden goal is a great tool if you want a surprise ending. We see it here in *The Shawshank Redemption*, and we see it in one of the other movies covered, *Training Day* (with Alonzo's slick plan to frame Ethan Hawke's character).

TIP 369 - **Your ending is EVERYTHING. Treat it that way** - The ending is the last thing your reader will leave with. So if you knock it out of the park, they're going to get on the phone and tell everyone they know. *The Shawshank Redemption* ends with a seemingly impossible surprise escape followed by two best friends re-coupling under the most unlikely of circumstances. *That's* an ending. I beg of you, don't send your screenplay to anyone until you've made your ending the best it can possibly be!

The 40-Year Old Virgin
Written by: Judd Apatow and Steve Carell

Premise: When his co-workers discover that the 40-year old Andy is still a virgin, they make it their mission to get him laid.

About: Judd Apatow is a unique screenwriter. He basically says "F You" to the harrowed screenwriting conventions, routinely belting out 130+ page comedies, writing scenes that don't push the story forward, and giving bloated subplots to secondary characters. I swear, sometimes Apatow gives his understudies so much time, you start wondering who the real protagonist is (Paul Rudd, anyone?). And yet, his movies are good and everybody goes to see them. Why? Well, for one he's a genius at creating marketable, likable main characters we want to get behind. And while he does give his supporting characters way too much time, the fact that he cares so much about them in the first place puts him ahead of 90% of the comedy writers out there. In the end, all these little eccentricities add up to that indistinguishable quality we call "voice." Apatow may be all over the place, but he's his own person, and he finds a way to make it work.

TIP 370 - **Keep your comedy scripts under 110 pages** - Most comedies should come in between 100-110 pages. Remember, it's comedy. So it has to move fast. How come Judd Apatow gets to write 130 page screenplays then? Because writer-director drafts are always long. The director adds a bunch of junk he wants to shoot but knows he'll cut later. As a script neophyte who's NOT directing your own script, you can't do that. Readers will hate you for adding 20 minutes to their reading time on a *comedy* of all things. It should also be noted that while the earlier drafts of this script were long, the finished-film draft was 112 pages.

TIP 371 - **Supporting characters are people too** - Supporting characters should have backstories and goals and flaws and fears just like your hero. David (Paul Rudd) has marriage problems. Co-worker Jay (Romany Malco) cheats on his wife. Every supporting character in your script should have something going on in his life, or else they're just names on a page.

TIP 372 - **A title is worth a million dollars** - I find that these screenplay titles where the entire premise is stated do great in the comedy spec market. *I Wanna _____ Your Sister*, for example (unproduced, as of this printing), was a hugely popular spec. The thing you have to remember is this: people in this business don't have a lot of time. I don't have anywhere close to enough time to read all the submissions sent to me. So if you can sum up your entire movie in the title? And it sounds interesting? I'll read it. And the more reads you get, the better chance you have of selling your script.

TIP 373 - **Use your protagonist's home to tell us about him!** - Andy has a big nerdy spaceship poster above his bed. He has action figures in his bathroom. Our hero hasn't said a word yet and we already know a ton about him just by looking through his house.

TIP 374 - **MIDPOINT SHIFT** - The midpoint shift in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* is when Andy enters into a relationship with Trish. The first half of the script is the funny stuff with his friends trying to get him laid, and the second half is him dating Trish and becoming a part of her family. It's actually one of the more severe midpoint shifts I've seen in a script and I'm still not sure it works.

TIP 375 - **Stay away from flashbacks…unless it's a comedy** - Flashbacks are notoriously difficult to do right. They grind the story to a halt, they're often superfluous, and you can usually convey the same information in the present. But if the reader's *laughing*, it won't matter. In *Virgin*, we get flashbacks of Andy's "almost-sex" experiences. Also, when he assures his co-workers he leads a rewarding life, we flash back to him playing video games and practicing the trombone. Oh, and note how QUICK these flashbacks are - if you *are* going to do a comedy flashback, keep it short!

TIP 376 - **Beware the unfilmable** - An "unfilmable" is anything in your script that can't be captured on camera. "The air smells like pineapples." "This room used to be owned by Ernest Hemingway." "Joe thinks about his girlfriend Sara." You can't film any of these things. You can film Joe *calling Sara* and telling her that he's thinking about her, but you can't film him thinking about her. So don't write it into your description.

TIP 377 - **Except for comedies!** - Comedy is the only genre that welcomes unfilmables. That's because comedy scripts are supposed to be fun, and the inclusion of unfilmables is fun. For example, on the first page of *Virgin*, Apatow writes, "Andy is doing his morning workout. He works out using equipment he has bought from late-night television." You can't really film that. How do we know he bought it from late night television? Yet it's a funny description and it tells us something about Andy (he's lonely enough to stay up all night and buy stuff from infomercials). Just remember, whenever you break a rule, do it in modesty!

TIP 378 - **Comb every inch of your scenes for jokes** - Comedy is the MOST COMPETITIVE GENRE on the spec market. It's where a ton of spec sales happen, so you owe it to yourself to obsess over every nook and cranny of every scene to find a laugh. There's a moment where Andy's getting ready to masturbate for the first time and he looks over at the side table to see one of his action figures staring at him. He reaches over and *turns the figure away*. It's a small joke, but it's a joke you only find when you're putting every last bit of effort into finding a laugh.

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY
Written by: Nora Ephron

Premise: A story that follows the unique friendship of Harry and Sally, two New Yorkers blind to the fact that they're meant for each other.

About: *When Harry Met Sally* may be the greatest romantic comedy ever written, but it's also the *Pulp Fiction* of its genre. While the average fan thinks it's a standard rom-com, it's actually anything but. Dramatic structure is thrown out the window. Story takes a back seat to non-stop dialogue. The characters, in particular Harry, spend half the movie dishing out observational monologues. You could argue that *When Harry Met Sally* is basically one long *Seinfeld* episode. Yet, while most movies would buckle under a paper-thin story, *When Harry Met Sally* thrives. The main reason for this is that the dialogue is amazing. It's a reminder that no matter how many rules you break, if you can do one or two things perfectly, other problems seem to disappear.

TIP 379 - **The Romantic Comedy Equation** - All romantic comedy scripts should pass one simple test: "We love the guy. We love the girl. We want them to end up together." As long as you have that going for you, it's hard to mess up a rom-com.

TIP 380 - **A ticking time bomb isn't necessary, just recommended** - *When Harry Met Sally* is proof that not every story needs a ticking time bomb. I prefer them because they create urgency, and urgency ups the stakes, which ups the conflict, which ups the drama. And drama is the backbone of entertainment! So then why does *When Harry Met Sally* work without one? Well, in my opinion, it's because the dialogue and main characters are the best EVER in their genre. If that *wasn't* the case, I promise you the lack of urgency would've been a *much* bigger issue. So ditch urgency if you want, but only if you plan on the rest of your screenplay being perfect.

TIP 381 - **The bait and switch** - This scene almost always works. Convince the audience that they know where the scene is going, then pull the rug out from under them at the last second. There's an early scene where Sally, whose new boyfriend drops her off at the airport, spots Harry, whom she hasn't seen since their drive to New York many years ago. The two spot each other and we're thinking, "Oh no, they recognize each other! What's going to happen now??" Harry finally comes over. Sally looks agonizingly nervous. *BUT*, instead of addressing Sally, Harry turns to and addresses *the boyfriend*. It turns out *they* know each other. The old bait and switch is a surefire way to charm a reader.

TIP 382 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - Harry is kind of a jerk. He sleeps with a bunch of women, he's arrogant, and he's inappropriate. So it's important we give him a strong likability moment. At the Giants game, Harry is devastated after learning that his wife has been sleeping with another man and never loved him. Getting dumped will ALWAYS create sympathy from the audience because everybody can relate to how awful it feels to be left by someone they care about (kick the owner!).

TIP 383 - **Quirks help distinguish a character** - In rom-coms, you need little quirky traits that annunciate a character's personality. One of the reasons Sally is the most memorable romantic comedy character ever is because of how she orders food, addressing every single mundane detail. If she doesn't have that quirk, she loses a big part of her character. Do your romantic comedy characters have any quirks?

TIP 384 - **POWER TIP** - Look for dialogue scenes that conflict with your characters' surroundings - This is one of the best ways to make a dialogue scene pop. Harry tells his best friend the depressing story of his wife leaving him…*at a Giants game!* This occurs amongst 60,000 happy, cheering fans. The contrast between the setting and the story is what makes the scene so great. We see this contrast again later, but flipped around, when Sally has an orgasm inside a restaurant. Then we see it a third time when Harry meets his ex-wife while singing karaoke at The Sharper Image store.

TIP 385 - **Going against character for a laugh** - You can pull this off once per script, but that's it. The reason the famous Sally orgasm scene is so memorable is because we'd *never expect it from the uptight Sally.* This scene wouldn't be nearly as funny if, say, Clementine from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* did it, because we'd expect it from her. So go against character for a big laugh, but only do it once. If you do it more than that, people start getting confused about who your character is.

TIP 386 - **If you have your characters running to the airport in the climax of your romantic comedy, do me a favor and join them, then never come back to screenwriting again** - A lot of romantic comedies get stuck with this ending because it's an easy place to end the story, with someone leaving. To avoid this problem, *set up* an important location for your characters earlier in the script. This will allow you to end your movie in the location of your choosing. It's established several times in *When Harry Met Sally* that these two get together at New Year's Eve parties. Therefore, at the end of the film, it's

fitting that he runs to her at a New Year's Eve party.

TIP 387 - **Avoid saying "I love you" in romantic comedies if at all possible** - The words "I love you" in movies are the equivalent of saying "Ca ca poo poo." They have no meaning whatsoever because they've been said a billion times before. Instead, look for clever ways your characters can say the words without really saying them. In *When Harry Met Sally*, Sally says, "I hate you," in the final scene, even though we know she means the opposite.

TIP 388 - **Eavesdroppable** - A good way to measure the quality of your dialogue is to pretend you're a third party standing near your characters while they talk. Is what they're saying interesting enough that you'd want to keep eavesdropping? If the answer is no, the dialogue probably isn't very good. Make your dialogue eavesdroppable.

TIP 389 - **Dialogue kicks ass when you come in late and leave early** - One of the reasons the dialogue is so good in this movie is that in every single scene, we come into the scene late and leave the scene early. When you do this, you avoid giving us the unimportant parts of the conversation. A great example is the Giants game I mentioned above. We come in right when Harry's friend asks Harry about the divorce. We don't start back in the parking lot or while they were getting drinks. We start RIGHT WHEN the most interesting part of their conversation begins. And guess what? The scene ENDS as soon as that topic of conversation is over. We don't listen to them continue chatting about the greatest football teams of all time. Once they're done talking about Harry's divorce, the scene is done.

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OFFICE SPACE
Written by: Mike Judge

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Premise: A frustrated office worker who decides to stop working one day, finds himself moving up the company ladder as a result.

About: Mike Judge doesn't make traditional movies, and *Office Space* is no exception. The story follows Peter Gibbons, a passive hero, whose only real desire is to do nothing. How do you make a movie about a guy who wants to do nothing interesting? Well, that's the thing: the script for *Office Space* doesn't win anyone over with its plot. It succeeds on the strength of its eccentric characters. There's nobody in Hollywood better at building comedic characters than Mike Judge. He gives everybody a distinctive voice, to the point where you're wondering how one person can create THAT MANY individuals. Judge's downfall, unfortunately, is his structure. All of his movies sort of fizzle out at the end, and a lot of that has to do with him focusing on character more than plot. But hey, nobody's perfect, and despite this weakness, *Office Space* is still one of the best comedies of all time.

TIP 390 - **If a character cares about something enough, no matter how mundane, we'll care too** - Peter's goal is to do nothing. What a boring goal, right? Why should we care? Because *Peter* cares, more than anything in the world. Since Peter is so passionate about his goal, we want to see him achieve it. We saw this in *Zombieland* as well: Tallahassee (Woody Harrelson) wanted a Twinkie. A Twinkie is one seriously wimpy goal, but Tallahassee wanted that Twinkie sooooo bad, we wanted him to get it!

TIP 391 - **IRONY ALERT** - Clean-cut office worker Michael Bolton swears like a sailor and loves rap. People always remember ironic characters!

TIP 392 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - Take a character who hates something more than anything, then put him in a situation where he must pretend to love it. One of the great scenes in *Office Space* is when Michael Bolton (who has the same name as the singer, yet *hates* him) comes in for his job review and finds out that the downsizers are HUGE fans of Michael Bolton! Watching Michael squirm and pretend to love the man he despises most in the world is comedic gold.

TIP 393 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - One of the reasons Peter's scene with the downsizers is so good is because we know something they don't - *that Peter no longer gives a shit!* There's nothing they can do or say that will phase him. That's why we get so amped up for this scene: we can't wait to see what outrageous things he's going to say and do and how they're going to react.

TIP 394 - **Set up your stakes ahead of time** - The downsizing meetings in *Office Space* work because the stakes are high: people's jobs are on the line. But that doesn't work unless we've established how much those jobs mean in the first place. So Judge writes several early scenes showing how much everybody at Initech desperately needs their jobs. In doing this, he's establishing the stakes: if they get fired, they have nowhere to go. I'm gonna keep saying this guys: If there's nothing at stake in your scene, we won't care.

TIP 395 - **An angry boss is a boring boss** - A common mistake writers make is creating the "angry a-hole" boss. Unfortunately, that's the most one-dimensional trait you can give a bad guy. Instead, look for a trait that's more dynamic, that makes the audience think more. Peter's boss, Lumbergh, is the most patronizing, arrogant, passive-aggressive son of a bitch you've ever met. Those qualities are much more layered and interesting than a dude who yells at people.

TIP 396 - **Plans going wrong in real life? Bad! Plans going wrong in movies? Good!** - If something big doesn't go wrong with your heroes' plan, you don't have a movie. Peter, Michael, and Samir's plan is to steal tiny percentages of Initech's transactions. The plan goes wrong, however, when a decimal point is shifted and they accidentally steal way more than they were supposed to, guaranteeing they'll get caught. That plot point is what ramps up the story.

TIP 397 - **Deus Ex Machina Exception #3** - If a character accepts responsibility for his mistakes, you can allow a Deus Ex Machina to save him. The ending of *Office Space* has Peter accepting responsibility for the percentage scheme and then going to work to turn himself in. When he gets there, however, the building has burned down (by Milton, the stapler guy). We accept this Deus Ex Machina because our protagonist had learned his lesson and accepted responsibility. Had the fire happened *before* Peter accepted responsibility, it would've been your typical cheap Deus Ex Machina ending.

THE PRINCESS BRIDE
Written by William Goldman

Premise: A mysterious man in black races to save a princess from a group of bandits, only to find himself later teaming up with the bandits to keep the princess from marrying the evil Prince Humperdinck.

About: *The Princess Bride* was written by one of the best and most successful screenwriters of all time, William Goldman. This guy is like the da Vinci of screenwriting. I mean, he sold a script (*Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*) for $400,000 in 1968. 1968! That would equal, like, a billion dollars today! It's even rumored that he ghostwrote *Good Will Hunting*. So, unofficially, he's written two movies in this book. Despite a stellar career that dates back long before this film, however, I still believe *The Princess Bride* is his crowning achievement. There isn't another movie out there that connects with as wide of an audience as this one. Seriously. I've met people who didn't like *The Shawshank Redemption*. I've even met people who didn't like *Star Wars*. I've never met anyone, however, who doesn't like *The Princess Bride*.

TIP 398 - **Whatever your hero has to do, make it hard** - Every task for your hero must be difficult. If it isn't, your reader's getting bored. Trust me. Westley doesn't have to defeat *any* swordsman. He has to defeat the *greatest swordsman in all the land*! He doesn't have to beat up *any* strongman. He has to beat up *a giant*! He doesn't have to outsmart any thinker. He must outsmart *the smartest man in history*! When Westley, Fezzik and Inigo storm the castle, they must do it with Westley half-dead! In the final showdown with Humperdinck, Westley must fight while comatose in bed! The harder the task, the more we'll enjoy watching your hero tackle it.

TIP 399 - **The power of love (no, this is not a joke)** - Love seems to be at the center of a lot of huge movies. It's one of the few things that every single person on earth can relate to. *Titanic, E.T.*, *Casablanca*, *Avatar, The Fifth Element*. Even *The Shawshank Redemption* is a love story about two friends. *The Princess Bride* is essentially a story about how love conquers all. If you want to connect with lots of people, I'd recommend adding some element of love to your story.

TIP 400 - **Unexpected Moments** - Make sure you have your fair share of unexpected moments in your screenplay. Look at all the unexpected things that happen in *The Princess Bride*. Our hero dies! Twice! When the Man In Black and Inigo battle, Inigo tells him he's right handed…only to have the Man In Black tell him he's right handed too! Inigo spends his whole life looking for this great swordsman, the man who killed his father, and when he finds him, the man runs away! Our bad guys eventually become our good guys. Our hero never fights the villain. *The Princess Bride* is memorable because it's packed with so many <u>unexpected</u> moments.

TIP 401 - **Avoid wishy-washy character motivations** - Remember, wishy-washy motivations lead to wishy-washy characters, and there's nothing more boring than a wishy-washy character. Let's look at the motivations in *The Princess Bride*. Westley wants to save Buttercup because she's the love of his life. Humperdinck wants to catch Buttercup so he can become king and rule the land. Greedy Vizzini kidnaps Buttercup for the money. Inigo wants to kill the Six-Fingered Man because he killed his father. Even Fezzik, who you could argue has the weakest motivation, is loyal to a "T," and cares only about helping his friends. Make sure all of your motivations are clear or we'll quickly lose interest in your story.

TIP 402 - **URGENCY ALERT** - The urgency in *The Princess Bride* is two-fold. For most of the movie, the urgency comes in the form of the chase. The Man in Black is chasing Fezzig. Then Prince Humperdinck is chasing The Man in Black. In the last third of the movie, the urgency shifts into a ticking time bomb - the wedding. Westley must get to Buttercup before Humperdinck marries her.

TIP 403 - **Avoid cheap jokes in your comedy scripts!** - Look, I know farting and puking have their place in comedy, but know that they're the cheapest form of humor out there and should only be used as a last resort. *The Princess Bride* is one of the best family comedies of all time, appealing to adults and children, and there isn't a single fart or puke joke in the script.

TIP 404 - **STAKES ALERT** - You may think the famous sword fight between Inigo and Westley is good because of all the witty banter and clever twists. Sure, that stuff's fun, but the real reason this scene works is because <u>the stakes are so high</u>. If Westley loses, he'll never be able to save his true love. If Inigo loses, he'll never be able to avenge his father's death. There's so much on the line here that we can't wait to see who wins. Contrast this with, say, the third *Pirates Of The Caribbean* movie, where we rarely knew what was on the line during any of the sword fights. It's just another reminder of how important stakes are to each and every moment of your story.

TIP 405 - **ENTERTAIN ME DAMN IT!** - Never forget that your primary goal, especially in a comedy, is to *entertain the audience*. Yes, theme is important. Yes, character flaws are important. Yes, symbolism is good. However, none of that stuff

matters - and I mean NONE of it - unless you're *entertaining the reader first*. So yes, make sure all the plumbing is in place, but when you sit back and evaluate each scene, ask yourself a simple question: "Is this scene entertaining?" If it's not, change it.

TIP 406 - **The Impossible-to-Come-Back-From-Scenario** - The biggest thing I learned from *The Princess Bride* is to bring your character down so low that success seems impossible. Take Westley, for example: he *dies*. Our main character DIES! How can a character succeed if he's dead? When Inigo finally fights the Six-Fingered Man, he's given a fatal knife wound to the gut. He's FAILED. Inigo will never avenge his father's death! Buttercup *gets married* to Humperdinck. What?? That can't be possible. She's supposed to be with Westley! By placing our characters in impossible-to-come-back-from scenarios, we'll be desperate to see how they come back from them!

PSYCHO
Written by: Joseph Stefano (based on the novel by Robert Bloch)

Premise: When his mother murders one of the customers, a lonely hotel manager must cover up the crime to protect her.

About: *Psycho* is a movie that's gone down in the screenwriting Hall Of Fame. It makes one of the boldest choices ever put on paper by killing off its main character a third of the way through the script. It then somehow transitions you into rooting for its new protagonist, creepy hotel owner, Norman Bates. I still don't know why I'm rooting for that car to disappear into the lake, when five minutes earlier I was rooting for the dead body inside of it! All of this speaks to what made Hitchcock so brilliant. He defiantly encouraged his writers to go against the grain. If he thought the audience was expecting one thing, he'd make sure to give them something else. That's why you're always on edge in a Hitchcock film. He strings all these unfamiliar moments together and after awhile, you don't know which way is up. *Psycho* is not only Hitchcock's masterpiece, but it's a masterful script as well. Let's see if we can learn a thing or two from it.

TIP 407 - **Break the rules** - This entire book is about tips, tools, lessons and rules, but I want to stress something: the best movies *break rules*. In fact, every movie I love breaks a few rules. It's these storytelling "warts" that make the story unique. *Psycho* breaks the biggest rule of them all: don't kill off your main character. Yet, it's that very choice that makes the film a classic. So break a rule now and then. All I ask is that you *have a reason* to break the rule. Never break a rule for the sake of breaking it.

TIP 408 - **LIKABILITY ALERT** - *Psycho* does something clever. Our heroine steals $40,000 from a guy to open the movie. Robbing an innocent man doesn't exactly endear us to our protagonist, so before she steals the dough, writer Stefano has the man treat her like a piece of meat. He's drooling over her, disrespecting her, acting like a pig. Ugh, we hate this guy! So we're actually HAPPY when our heroine steals from him. Now that's skilled writing. The writer takes a criminal act and twists it around so that we like our character for doing it.

TIP 409 - **Suspense movies put a premium on secrets** - A huge part of any mystery-suspense thriller is the secrets all the characters keep from each other. The more secrets people have, the more interesting their scenes become. In *Psycho,* we start with Marion, who's hiding from Norman that she's stolen $40,000. Later on, Norman is the one hiding from the cops that his mother killed Marion. Later, Sam and Lila are hiding from Norman that they're not really a married couple. The right mix of hidden information can be the difference between a good suspense film and a boring one.

TIP 410 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - When the inspector comes to ask Norman if he knows anything about Marion's disappearance, *we* know that Norman is lying, but the inspector doesn't. This superior knowledge adds a decided pop to the dialogue (as dramatic irony always does).

TIP 411 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - When Marion is trying to buy a new car, there's a cop watching her from across the street. As she works to close the deal, the cop gets closer. And then closer. And then closer. Is he onto her? Is he going to arrest her? Talk about a great scene agitator!

TIP 412 - **ALWAYS WORKS** - Hitchcock perfected this, and it's since become one of the easiest ways to write a good scene. Take a character who desperately wants to get somewhere, then have him/her held up by someone who wants to talk. That's exactly what happens in the car-buying scene. Marion needs to get the hell out of here before that cop gets to her, yet the car salesman is yapping away.

TIP 413 - **If you have a twist ending, write an earlier scene(s) that makes that twist seem impossible**. **Doing so will magnify the twist's impact** - Early on in *Psycho,* we see the mother's shadow in the upstairs window. Later, we hear her arguing with Norman. We never doubt for a moment that the mother is real. This is what makes the ending such a shocker: we were skillfully sold a lie.

TIP 414 - **Never let your guilty party off the hook** - One thing I CANNOT STAND is when writers put their protagonist in a difficult situation then let them off the hook. That's the exact *opposite* of what you want to do. Instead, make things as difficult for your protagonist as possible. Watch the scene in *Psycho* when the investigator questions Norman about Marion. He pushes Norman, catches him in several lies, then *continues* to push him. The scene is among the best in the movie because there's no let up on the cop's part.

TIP 415 - **Avoid "on the nose" villains** - In the original novel for *Psycho,* Norman Bates was violent (he actually decapitates Marion), into gnarly pornography, an alcoholic, fat and unsightly. All of that made for an on-the-nose villain. Hitchcock and

Joseph dialed that back for the script. They made Norman good-looking, well groomed, and almost charming. You remember Norman Bates because he has these qualities that a villain should not have.

THE RING
Written by: Ehren Kruger (based on the novel by Koji Suzuki – additionally based on the "Ringu" screenplay by Hiroshi Takahashi)

Premise: When a journalist looks into the mysterious death of a high school girl, she learns of a videotape that supposedly kills those who watch it seven days later.

About: One of my favorite combinations is the horror-procedural. I mean, it's such a brilliant mash-up. With the procedural half, you get your structure built in for you (find the killer/solve the mystery) and the horror side allows you to place your character in all sorts of creepy situations. *The Ring* takes full advantage of this and creates one of the best horror films of the last decade. In my opinion, the best horror procedurals keep you guessing until the very end, making you wonder if you're dealing with reality or the supernatural. That's what was so cool about *The Ring*. Until that freaky girl comes out of the TV, you just didn't know.

TIP 416 - **Pet Shop Scares** - Anybody can have a cat pop out of a cabinet or a face appear in a window. These are cheap scares. For something more intense, however, *build up* your scares. Have them emerge through your storytelling. The opening of *The Ring* isn't two girls walking around and jumping at random noises. Kruger spends the first four minutes setting up the rules of the tape. Now, whenever the phone rings or the TV turns on, it's not a cheap scare, it's a direct extension of the disclosed rules.

TIP 417 - **It may suck in real life, but baggage ROCKS in movies** - If you're going to team your protagonist with someone, consider an old flame with whom they have baggage. With baggage comes conflict. With conflict comes drama. Rachel doesn't have to work with just anyone. She has to work with her ex-boyfriend (who also happens to be the father of her child). This baggage adds another layer of complexity to the story.

TIP 418 - **If your character flies airplanes, he better be a pilot** - Readers roll their eyes when a character with a mundane job can take out a Blackhawk helicopter from three miles away with a bazooka, so make sure the skill-set your character exhibits matches up with his job (or one of his past jobs). Rachel's not some soccer mom investigating this. She's a professional journalist. Investigating *is her job*. Her ex, Noah, is a video producer, which makes him the ideal candidate to help with the tape.

TIP 419 - **Horror is spelled F-E-M-A-L-E** - Audiences tend to prefer female protagonists in horror movies because they're more vulnerable. When Rachel's on that island in that old man's house all by herself, we feel way more frightened for her than if she were Jason Statham.

TIP 420 - **URGENCY ALERT** - According to the legend, once you watch the tape, you die in seven days, so Rachel has seven days to figure out what's going on or else she's maggot stew. It's maybe the most obvious ticking time bomb in screenplay history, and yet it works because it's organically tied into the premise.

TIP 421 - **Eliminate lags between investigation leads** - Procedurals are really just a long series of leads. Your hero follows one lead, which in turn leads her to the next lead, which in turn leads her to the next lead, and so on and so forth. That's why these movies work so well, because the character always has an immediate goal. For that reason, try not to have any lags between these leads. There will be the occasional lead that goes nowhere, sure, but if there's too much downtime between leads, your script starts dragging.

TIP 422 - **STAKES/MIDPOINT SHIFT** - At the midpoint, Rachel comes home to find out her son has watched the tape! The stakes have infinitely raised. If she doesn't find out the tape's origin, it's not just her who dies, *but her son as well*.

TIP 423 - **SCENE AGITATOR** - When Rachel visits the hotel where the tape originated, she encounters the owner at the front desk. As she's about to question him, he holds out a deck of cards and asks her to pick one. She plays along, picking a card, looking at it, and putting it back. As she proceeds to question him, he keeps interrupting her with, "Is this your card?" It's a wonderful idea from the writer to turn a potentially mundane, question-and-answer scene into something more fun.

TIP 424 - **The perfect analogy** - Noah's (Rachel's old boyfriend) flummoxed by the faulty control track numbers on the infamous videotape in *The Ring*. He explains the problem to Rachel in technical jargon, but she (and we) don't understand it. So he follows with, "A videotape without control track numbers is like a person born without fingerprints," Ah-ha! *Now* we understand. Whenever something starts getting too tech-y, soothe our confusion with the perfect analogy.

TIP 425 - **Keep your reader updated!** - You can't tell us the videotape kills you in seven days and then never bring it up again. We need to feel that time ticking away – each day bringing us closer to doom. Do this by giving your audience updates. *The Ring* uses screen titles at the beginning of each day ("Saturday – Day 4"). Amateur writers forget to do this, and as a result, we forget there's a ticking time bomb in the first place, or aren't sure how close we are to the end.

TIP 426 - **Investigations within the investigation** - A good procedural has four to six mysteries that must be overcome before the final mystery can be solved. Any fewer and your story will feel thin. Any more and your story will feel dense. *The Ring* kicks ass in this department. We have the strange way the girl in the opening scene dies. We have the blurry faces on the pictures. We have the mysterious lighthouse on the tape. Then there's the series of horse drownings. We also have a woman who committed suicide. And finally, we have a daughter who was institutionalized. Most screenplays I read don't have enough mysteries, leading to a thin, boring reading experience.

TIP 427 - **Don't use scene agitators in your big scenes** - Remember, scene agitators are used to enhance scenes, but your big scenes don't need enhancing. They already have enough going on. In *The Ring*, when Rachel finally meets Mister Morgan (the husband of the creepy woman in the tape), it's such an important meeting that the scene can live on its own. It doesn't need any agitators.

TITANIC
Written by: James Cameron

Premise: A Titanic survivor tells her story to a treasure hunter, who hopes that her testimony will lead him to a famous jewel purported to have gone down with the ship.

About: It still baffles me that the screenplay for *Titanic* didn't get nominated for an Oscar. People who didn't vote for it obviously don't know screenwriting. I mean, sure, the script had some clunky dialogue. But dialogue isn't even close to what makes a screenplay work. Dialogue is the frosting. Structure, story and characters are the cake, and Titanic baked a hell of a cake. Here's how I see it: if you can keep a story interesting for even *ten minutes*, you've achieved something 99% of the people on this planet can't do. If you're one of the few who can keep a story interesting for *two hours*, you're basically an all-star. Keeping people interested for over *200 minutes*? There are maybe five screenwriters in the world who can pull this off and that, for me, is why *Titanic* is one of the best screenplays ever written.

TIP 428 - **EXPOSITION ALERT** - Hide your exposition inside of humor. One of the things Cameron does here is he brings in the big, funny redheaded guy to give us the background on Rose and the sinking. These are exposition-heavy scenes, but we don't notice it as much because we're laughing every ten seconds. Humor is a great way to hide exposition.

TIP 429 - **Making your hero likable is good. Making him likable in his first scene is better** - Remember, the sooner you have us wrapped around your hero's finger, the sooner you have us engaged in your story. You want to have us fall for your hero in his very first scene if possible. Jack's first scene has him winning a ticket on the Titanic not just for himself, but *for his friend who's desperate to get back to America*! A hero who wins tickets for his desperate friend? How can we not like the guy?

TIP 430 - **CONFLICT ALERT 1** - Rose and Jack's relationship is challenged by three main elements. The first is class difference. She's rich and he's poor. The second is that Rose is engaged, which makes it impossible for them to be together. And the third, of course, is the sinking ship, which *literally* tears them apart. This constant conflict from three different sources is why this 200-plus minute movie never gets boring.

TIP 431 - **CONFLICT ALERT 2** - If there's no conflict tearing at your couple from the inside, there must be conflict tearing at them from the *outside* - In some relationships, like in *The Proposal*, you'll have conflict *built in* to the relationship (they both hate each other). When your couple is happy and in love, however, the conflict must come externally. Those three conflicts I mentioned above (class, a fiancé, and a sinking ship) are all external forces. If you're following a happy, carefree couple around a ship for three hours and nothing bad is happening to them? Well, then you have yourself the most boring movie ever.

TIP 432 - **Give your present-day framing device a story** - When you're using a framing device to tell your story, you want to make sure the framing segment ALSO has a story. That way, when we jump back to the present, there's something to keep us occupied. The present-day storyline in *Titanic* isn't a bunch of people recalling the good old days. It's an intricate mystery about the fate of a priceless diamond. Movies are storytelling, so if there's a portion of your movie where you're not telling a story, something's wrong.

TIP 433 - **Strained dialogue is good dialogue** - If you want to add some spark to your dialogue, put your characters in a position where it's difficult for them to talk. Maybe time is running out. Maybe they're hiding from someone. Maybe one doesn't want to talk to the other. Maybe a combination of all of these things. There's a moment where Jack sneaks up to the first class deck and pulls Rose into an exercise room to make a final plea to stay with him. Not only can't these two be seen together, but Jack's not allowed to be on the first class deck. Moreover, the group Rose was with will start looking for her soon. This puts a ton of strain on their conversation, which is a lot more interesting than if they were chatting away without a worry in the world.

TIP 434 - **Treat your story like a roller coaster** - There isn't any roller coaster I know of that goes in a straight line. There are peaks, valleys, twists, turns, and loops. That's exactly how you need to think of your screenplay. Bring the audience up, yank them back down, pull them up again, throw a curve in there. In one moment, Rose and Jack are dancing downstairs. The next, a furious Cal FLIPS a table at her. They hide. She leaves him. She comes back. They're chased. They're split up. Always be thinking of that roller coaster when you're writing. Keep those straight-aways to a minimum. Straight-aways suck!

TIP 435 - **STAKES ALERT** - There's a small scene near the middle of the screenplay where Rose's mom ties Rose's corset. She reminds Rose that her dead father left them with a ton of debt and if she doesn't marry Cal, they're going to live the rest

of their lives as maids. This raises the stakes considerably for Rose: Now choosing Jack doesn't just harm her, it harms *her family*.

TIP 436 - **When characters in a love story make love for the first time, have it happen somewhere UNIQUE** - Remember, this is A LOVE STORY. So your lovers have to experience love in a unique way. We see enough of the normal way in our boring everyday lives. Here, the two have sex in the lone car on the ship (which is in storage). That's way cooler than if they'd had sex on Jack's bunk bed.

TIP 437 - **Don't write a three hour movie** - When told they should keep their spec scripts under 110 pages, beginner writers retaliate with the fact that the biggest box office hits in history (*Titanic, Avatar, The Dark Knight, Transformers*, the Harry Potter movies) are all over two hours long. Well, yes, that's true. However, none of those movies were spec scripts. They were adaptations, in-house projects, sequels to mega-hits, or writer-director fare. Spec writers operate under a different set of rules. They don't have the most famous comic book hero of all time guaranteeing audience awareness. They don't have one of the top three most successful directors in history directing their script. Therefore, producers won't give them as much rope. You can try writing your 150 page opus, but I've yet to read an amateur effort *that long* that isn't terrible.

TIP 438 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - Did you know that the ENTIRE STORY in *Titanic* is built on dramatic irony? The audience knows the ship is going to sink, but the characters do not. This is why we're so gripped for the first 90 minutes of the film even though nothing's happened to the ship yet. We know it's only a matter of time before these people are scrambling for their lives, and we wish we could tell them before it's too late.

TIP 439 - **Never write a period drama on spec** - Let me repeat that: "NEVER WRITE A PERIOD DRAMA ON SPEC." They DO NOT SELL. The only exceptions to this rule are if you're using the script as a calling card to get assignments in the period genre or you love the genre so much you don't care if you sell your screenplay. Even still, readers and producers HATE reading these scripts so you'll rarely get any read requests. James Cameron got to make *Titanic solely* because of his incredible track record as a writer-director.

THE MATRIX
Written by: Wachowski Starship

Premise: A reclusive programmer learns that the world as we know it is actually a virtual simulation run on a computer.

About: *The Matrix*, like a lot of movie projects, was never a sure thing. It languished on the Wachowskis' hard drive for 10 years before a studio gave it a shot, and that's because Warner Brothers didn't really know what they were making. Had they understood how ambitious the Wachowskis' plans were, they probably wouldn't have greenlighted the film. In fact, nobody knew what the Wachowskis were making because the only sign of their skill rested on a sorta-decent noir flick with a hot lesbian scene in it. But there's beauty in waiting. You see, all that time allowed the Wachowskis to get feedback on their script and hone it into the classic it's become today. Never underestimate the importance of time. To drive home this point, pop in *Matrix Reloaded* or *Matrix Revolutions*. Each sequel is sloppy and drastically overwritten, a product of not having the time to trim, tuck and tighten the way they had on the original script.

TIP 440 - **Consider giving the main goal to your villain** - Neo does NOT have a goal in *The Matrix* until late in the movie (to save Morpheus). If nobody has a goal, then nobody's going after anything, and nothing's going to happen. So the Wachowskis give their villain, Agent Smith, the big goal: to get the mainframe codes from Morpheus so he can destroy Zion (the last human city). It's this goal that drives the first two-thirds of the story.

TIP 441 - **Don't let your script take a nap after the opening scene** - I read a ton of screenplays that have an awesome opening scene, like *The Matrix*. Yet, as soon as that first scene ends, the hero starts wandering around with nothing to do, and within ten pages, the script's already a rambling mess. The truth is, the cool opening scene is one of the easiest to write. You simply write something cool! But after that, you gotta keep your story moving, and that's where the fakers fall. How do you avoid falling with them? By NOT SLOWING DOWN. After that awesome opening, Neo wakes up to a conversation with Trinity on his computer. Afterwards, he follows some partiers to a club where he meets Trinity in person and she teases the *Matrix*. He gets cursed out by his boss the next day, then gets a phone in a package telling him he has to run for his life. In other words, instead of five slow scenes introducing us to Neo's boring world, we get five scenes that THRUST us into the story!

TIP 442 - **Résumé Moment** - One of the quickest ways to convey hero backstory is through a "résumé moment." To do this, create a situation where a character reads off a list of your hero's achievements via a "résumé." This is great if you want the audience to know your hero went to Stanford or was a NAVY SEAL. The résumé moment in *The Matrix* comes when Agent Smith interrogates Neo and reads from his file: "It seems that you have been living two lives. In one life, you are Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company. You have a Social Security number, you pay your taxes, and you help your landlady carry out her garbage…The other life is lived in computers where you go by the hacker alias Neo, and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for." It's a simple little device that can convey a lot of information about your character in a short period of time.

TIP 443 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - *The Matrix* kicks ass when it comes to showing. Morpheus doesn't tell Neo about the Matrix, he jacks him into it and SHOWS him. Morpheus doesn't tell Neo how to manipulate the Matrix, he puts him on top of a building and tells him to jump to the adjacent rooftop. In sci-fi *especially,* make sure you're showing us your world and not telling us about it.

TIP 444 - **URGENCY ALERT** - *The Matrix* spends the first half of its script setting up and revealing a mystery: *What is the Matrix?* We get spurts of urgency here and there via the agents chasing Neo. The second half, however, is where the real urgency kicks in: Smith kidnaps Morpheus, and Neo and Trinity must go into the Matrix to save him before he's killed (or before he gives up the mainframe codes to Zion).

TIP 445 - **Sci-fi is about characters first and sci-fi second** - This is a gigantic trap into which young sci-fi writers frequently fall. They think sci-fi is about the spaceships and the weaponry and the anti-gravity cities and the robots and the battles. That stuff *is* important, but it PALES in comparison to character development. The set pieces in *The Matrix* are incredibly tame compared to those of *The Phantom Menace*, but I don't know anybody who liked the pod race better than Neo and Smith's subway fight. That's because the Wachowskis made sure we *cared* about the characters before we threw them into their set pieces.

TIP 446 - **Give us scenes that could only happen in your sci-fi world** - A big problem I see with sci-fi scripts is that writers write scenes that don't utilize the unique world they've created. For example, someone will set their script in 2340 and write a run-of-the-mill warehouse shoot-out scene. Why write a sci-fi script if you're not going to play around with your

world? Watch Neo and Trinity defy gravity as they meticulously gun down a group of guards in a building lobby. *That's utilizing your unique world.*

TIP 447 - **MIDPOINT SHIFT** - The midpoint in *The Matrix* is when Neo goes to see the Oracle and is told he's not "The One." This is a great midpoint shift because it makes us re-evaluate everything we know. If Neo's not "The One," then what happens now!? If our hero isn't really our hero, what's the plan, Stan? It shifts the movie onto a different path, which is what a good midpoint will do.

TIP 448 - **Carrot-dangling** - A great way to keep the audience invested is to constantly dangle carrots in front of them. Most carrots come in the form of questions. For example, the carrot in the first act is, "What is the Matrix?" We have to know! Once we're in the Matrix, we hear of the Oracle. "Who is she?" we ask. We have to know! Also, Trinity keeps telling Neo she has to tell him something. Another carrot. What's she have to tell him??? Always try and dangle a few carrots. If you don't, why should the reader keep walking?

TIP 449 - **Add depth to your action scenes** - Most action scenes I read are pretty boring. Lots of guns shooting, cars speeding, helicopters chasing. It's all rather pointless and empty, no matter how fancy the writer's description is. In order for us to care, use your action scenes to *challenge your hero's fatal flaw*. This way, it's not just about the action, but how that action affects your hero. Take the subway fight scene between Neo and Agent Smith, for example. If this were *just* a fight, it would be fun, but ultimately empty. The scene shines because it's more about Neo taking steps to overcome his flaw (believing in himself). That's what makes this scene so cool. Neo could've run. But he's "starting to believe."

TIP 450 - **Hold off on that first kiss (or first sex scene) as long as possible** - Usually, once your romantic leads kiss (or make love), all the sexual tension between them evaporates. In other words, their scenes become boring-sauce. Couples held apart are always more interesting than couples happily together. Don't believe me? Compare Neo and Trinity in *The Matrix* to Neo and Trinity in *Matrix Reloaded*. In *The Matrix*, they're electric and unpredictable. In *Matrix Reloaded*, they're obvious, boring, and annoying. That's because the writers took away their charge! They've kissed. They've banged. Who cares anymore? Keep your characters away from first kisses for as long as possible!

TIP 451 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - Right before the group brings Neo to the Oracle, we get a scene where Agent Smith makes a deal to send Cypher back into the obliviousness of the Matrix if he gives up his buddies. So during the Oracle sequence, we're aware of something that none of the other characters are (that Cypher plans to deceive them). Notice how much more compelling the scene is as a result. We know something bad is coming, and we can't warn our heroes.

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS
Written by: Ted Tally (based on the novel by Thomas Harris)

Premise: An FBI trainee is brought onto one of the agency's biggest cases, that of Buffalo Bill, a serial killer who likes to skin his victims. But, in order to solve the case, she'll need the help of another famous serial killer, Hannibal Lecter -- a psychopath famous for eating his victims after he kills them.

About: Almost every procedural I read follows the same formula: A protagonist follows a series of clues to catch a killer. The simplicity of this formula is what makes the genre so popular. The downside to that simplicity, however, is that it's hard to surprise the audience. I know this firsthand as I read tons of procedurals and they all read the same. Find a clue. Talk to a guy. Find another clue. Talk to another guy. And on, and on, and on. *The Silence of the Lambs* is different. It introduces a wildcard into the mix with Hannibal Lecter, who becomes a *second* serial killer tasked with helping our protagonist catch the first. Now, instead of scrolling through a series of predictable leads, the storyline gets interrupted with these compelling meet-ups between our protagonist and the psychopath. As if that didn't add enough spice, Hannibal's subplot grows into a central plot as the story evolves, giving us two great endings for the price of one! The approach ripped the typical procedural rulebook to shreds, and the lesson to take from it is this: If you're going to write a serial killer procedural, you better have a unique take on it. Otherwise, you're going to be one of the hundreds of serial killer scripts I read that put me to sleep.

TIP 452 - **Build your villain up before his entrance** - Why wait until your villain's onscreen before making him scary? Good writers allude to their villains long before they arrive. In the very second scene of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice's boss warns her about how dangerous Hannibal is. When she goes to visit him, the warden *also* warns her how dangerous Hannibal is, going so far as to show her a gruesome picture of one of his victims. Then the *head guard* warns her how dangerous Hannibal is. All of this happens as Clarice walks through a plethora of locked doorways leading down to Hannibal's cell. We're already terrified of this guy and WE HAVEN'T EVEN MET HIM YET!

TIP 453 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - After the title sequence, Clarice heads into her boss's office where she sees a wall full of pictures showing Buffalo Bill's victims. Pictures are a proven, popular way to show instead of tell.

TIP 454 - **Never underestimate a humorous villain** - One of the reasons we love Hannibal so much is because he's funny! One of the first things he asks Clarice is, "What did Migs in the next cell say to you?" Clarice replies, "He said 'I can smell your cunt.'" He hesitates, "Hmm, I myself cannot." Later, in reference to the death of one of his patients, Hannibal quips, "Best thing for him really. His therapy was going nowhere." Not to harp on this, but beginner writers make their villains one-note. They're either 100% mean or 100% heartless. You gotta mix it up! Humor's a perfect way to achieve this.

TIP 455 - **IRONY ALERT** - Audiences LOVE an ironic villain. Hannibal Lecter is a psychiatrist who killed his patients. In other words, the person you're supposed to trust the most is the person with whom you're the least safe.

TIP 456 - **BACKSTORY ALERT** - *The Silence of the Lambs* uses the teacher-student relationship to sneak in some backstory. Early in the script, Clarice's boss, playing the role of teacher, asks Clarice to create a profile for Buffalo Bill. She does, going into extreme detail on the kind of man they're likely looking for. To the audience, it seems like Clarice is simply answering a question. But what's really happened is that the writer has given us key backstory (a "resume moment") on Buffalo Bill.

TIP 457 - **If there's something to be discovered in your story, make sure your hero discovers it!** - New writers have a tendency to have Secondary Character #3 discover the big secret in a scene. That's not how it works in the movies. Your *hero* needs to be the one making all the discoveries. So in the morgue, when they're picking away at one of Buffalo Bill's victims, it's Clarice who discovers that there's a bug cocoon lodged in the girl's throat. You don't want to give this cool discovery to the coroner, who's only going to be in one scene.

TIP 458 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT 1** - This is a great little use of dramatic irony. Before Buffalo Bill kidnaps the senator's daughter, we see him watching her from afar through night vision goggles. So a minute later, when we see Bill "struggling" to load a chair into his truck, the dramatic irony is in full effect. We know he's going to kidnap her, but she has no idea. We're desperately hoping she'll figure it out before it's too late, but alas, she doesn't.

TIP 459 - **Characters should be reluctant to share their backstory** - Most people don't willingly go into the deepest, darkest recesses of their past via long monologues, so you have to figure out clever ways to get them to do so. Clarice, in particular, is not someone who shares details about her life. So how are we going to get to know her? By forcing it out of her, of course. The writers create this really clever device whereby Hannibal demands "quid pro quo." He'll tell her something about Buffalo Bill, but she has to tell him something about herself in return. In other words, she has no choice

but to reveal her backstory! Is that not great writing or what? Had Clarice handed us her backstory on a platter, we would've called bullshit. But because it's been given reluctantly, we don't notice it. Genius!

TIP 460 - **MIDPOINT SHIFT** - The midpoint shift in *The Silence of the Lambs* occurs when Hannibal is moved out of his cell and transferred to Memphis. Obviously, this is a great midpoint shift in that it severely ups the stakes. Hannibal Lecter is now out of jail and therefore more dangerous than ever!

TIP 461 - **POWER TIP** - The length of your scene should correspond directly with the stakes of your scene. The more there is at stake, the longer your scene can last. That's because an audience's interest level escalates as the stakes rise, giving you more time to play. Look at the late scene when Clarice visits Hannibal in his makeshift jail cell. This is an eight minute standard dialogue scene. How are they able to do this without the scene dragging? Because the stakes are so high! Buffalo Bill is *very close* to killing the girl, so Clarice *must act now*. It's our desperate desire to see Clarice pass Hannibal's test so she can get the info and save the victim that these 8 minutes go by so fast.

TIP 462 - **Super Dramatic Irony** - The most powerful form of dramatic irony is the kind where we know our hero is in danger, but they do not. When Clarice finally gets to Buffalo Bill's house, *we* know this is Buffalo Bill, but *she doesn't*. That's what makes it so captivating. Also note how the dramatic irony evolves in the scene. She spots a moth in the kitchen (the same breed she found in the woman's mouth). Now we know that she knows. But *he* doesn't know that yet. So the dramatic irony is still working its magic here, but in reverse. That's why this tool is so awesome!

TIP 463 - **If your villain is keeping the victim alive, there better be a good reason for it** - Serial killers kill. That's what they do. They're not "Serial waiters." So if they're keeping a victim alive, make sure it's not just because you need to fill up 110 pages. Here, Buffalo Bill needs to starve his victim to loosen her skin so he can cut it off and use it as his suit. That's a legitimate (if majorly screwed up!) reason why he hasn't killed her yet.

TIP 464 - **Your villain should encounter obstacles too** - I've drilled it into your heads that your hero should run into as many obstacles as possible. But here's a lesser-known tip that can serve to surprise your audience: every once in awhile, throw an obstacle in front of your *villain*. Audiences aren't used to villains having obstacles, so when they happen, it's shocking. One of the cooler moments in *The Silence of the Lambs* is when the kidnapped girl lures Bill's precious dog into the hole and holds her for ransom. For the first time, Buffalo Bill's on the defensive, and because we're not used to seeing that, it's one of highlights of the movie.

TIP 465 - **Throw your reader off the scent of your twist** - The big twist is that Clarice (not the FBI) ends up at Buffalo Bill's house. Take note of how the writer threw us off the trail though: Clarice is speaking to the friend of one of Bill's victims and the friend mentions how they used to work at a sewing shop together. When Clarice asks who their boss was, the friend says, "Missus Lipman." *A woman.* So now we think Clarice is going to question a woman. Had she mentioned a man, we would've suspected something was up. Always look for little opportunities to throw your reader off the scent.

THE SIXTH SENSE
Written by: M. Night Shyamalan

Premise: A child psychologist is assigned to help a young boy who claims to see dead people.

About: *The Sixth Sense* is one of the most successful spec screenplays ever, selling for two million bucks. Its success didn't stop there though: the film went on to make 300 million dollars at the box office. Most spec screenplays are lucky to break 100 million and almost all of them are comedies. What fascinated me the most about this film, however, was what happened afterwards. Each successive script Night wrote was worse than the previous one. I always wondered why. Later, I would find out that Night wrote 20 plus drafts of *The Sixth Sense*. These days, he's lucky if he has the time for six. Why is that a big deal? Well, it wasn't until the tenth draft that Night realized Dr. Malcolm Crowe was dead in *The Sixth Sense*. This makes you wonder, what would he have discovered in the tenth draft of *The Village*? What would he have discovered in the tenth draft of *The Happening*? I guess we'll never know, but it certainly makes you think. I'm not trying to bum anybody out here. I think there's actually a great lesson to learn from all this. Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite. The more you toil away at a script, the more discoveries you're going to make!

TIP 466 - **BACKSTORY ALERT** - One of the best backstory scenes I've ever read was when Malcolm comes to visit Cole at his house, but Cole doesn't want to talk to him. So Malcolm comes up with a game. He'll guess something about Cole and if he's right, Cole has to take a step forward. If he's wrong, Cole gets to take a step back. Not only was this an entertaining scene, but it was an effective way to give us key backstory about Cole's life.

TIP 467 - **If a location's details are unimportant to the story, don't describe them** - If a scene takes place in a generic church, you don't have to waste four lines describing the artistry of the stained glass. Just do what M. Night does: he writes, "INT. CHURCH," then jumps into the scene. Now, if there's something odd or unique or relevant at the church (i.e. Someone has spray-painted "I love Satan" on the benches), then yes, tell us. Otherwise, just get to the scene already!

TIP 468 - **Use sound to create atmosphere in your horror script** - One of the best ways to create atmosphere in your horror script is to focus on SOUND. The *creak* of a floorboard, the *pounding* of rain against the pavement, the *static* in a phone call, the *whistling breeze* through an open window. Without atmosphere, your horror script will feel dull and lifeless.

TIP 469 - **Great surprise endings are worth $$$$$** - A great surprise ending almost guarantees your script will be sold. "Great," however, is the operative word here. Your ending can't be forced, convoluted, or artificial. It must be shocking, yet a logical conclusion to everything you've set up.

TIP 470 - **Avoid dual-column dialogue** - Dual-column dialogue is when you have two people talking at the same time so the dialogue is placed side-by-side. I don't know who invented this monstrosity of a device, but readers haaaaaaate it! It clutters up the page, forces readers' eyes to do weird things, and takes twice as long to read. The great thing about Night is he keeps his pages clean, his description and dialogue sparse. He doesn't mess with dual-column dialogue, and neither should you!

TIP 471 - **Dual-column dialogue is always a tell-tale sign of an amateur** - For whatever reason, new writers love dual-line dialogue. They use it proudly. On the flip side, veteran writers never use it. They've outgrown the gimmicky tool. So when I see dual-line dialogue, 99 times out of 100, I know I'm dealing with a beginner.

TIP 472 - **But Carson, how does one overlap dialogue in a script then?** - An easy way to overlap dialogue is to write dialogue like you normally would, but preface it with something like: "*The following dialogue overlaps*." The ONLY time I'm okay with dual-line dialogue is when it's used via a single word. For example, when both characters say, "NO!" at the same time.

TIP 473 - **Don't hang your entire story on a twist ending** - Guys, if all you're doing is writing a bullshit script so you can get to your big twist ending, don't write the script. Readers will know it. And nothing will make up for the 90 minutes of script-torture you just put them through. My advice? If you're writing a twist ending, pretend like you're not. That way, your script will have to work on its own. The twist then becomes the cherry on the sundae.

TIP 474 - **Avoid last second changes to your first five pages** - If you're rushing to get your script out, don't fiddle with the first five pages. The reason? Whenever you make changes, you make errors, which means you'll either have typos or misspellings right there *in the first five pages* of your script, the absolute worst place to have them. The reason this happens a lot is because the first five pages are the most analyzed. Whenever you open your script, there they are. So you start tinkering with them!

<u>TIP 475</u> - **Billy Wilder taught me this one**: **"The more subtle and elegant you are in hiding your plot points, the better you are as a writer."** - When writing a story, the objective is to make it seem like it's not a story, but that things are just…*happening.* If a character barks out, "If we miss this train, we won't get to Boston in time to stop the bomb and save the city!" that's not hiding your plot points. This is one of the great things about *The Sixth Sense.* It never feels "written." Every plot point is invisible.

STAR TREK
Written by: Roberto Orci & Alex Kurtzman (based on the television series by Gene Roddenberry)

Premise: A reboot of the famous franchise that takes us back to when a young Kirk and Spock first met.

About: Look who's back! The amazing J.J.! Did you know Abrams wrote *Regarding Henry*, which snagged (at the time) the biggest movie star in the world, Harrison Ford, when he was *24 years old*. My biggest accomplishment at 24 was learning how to do laundry. Still, when I heard Abrams was going to direct a *Star Trek* film, I thought, "Uhhhh, you may have gotten a little cocky there, fella." The last four *Star Trek* films, in addition to being unwatchable, grossed nine dollars and 16 cents at the box office. Even Trekkies were pissed! What could he possibly do to reinvigorate this dead franchise? I found out soon enough when the trailer of a young James Kirk driving his car off a cliff followed by an encounter with a robot cop lit my eyeballs on fire! I was in! It was a great lesson too, and a staple of Abrams' success. Find a classic property/idea/genre and figure out a way to update it. All J.J. Abrams did was give *Star Trek* attitude, something it never had before. And VOILA, the franchise was reborn. Genius, this man is!

TIP 476 - **No matter how huge your movie is, anchor it around a central relationship** - *Star Trek* is a great big rock-em, sock-em summer blockbuster with space battles and planets exploding and time travel. All of that, however, is secondary to the relationship between Kirk and Spock. You have to focus on the relationships, guys! They're one of the most important parts of your screenplay!

TIP 477 - **When you introduce a bad guy in an action movie, make sure to show us he's bad right away** - When we meet Nero, the first thing he does is plunge a spear into the Captain. *That's* how you introduce a bad guy! (Don't forget Darth Vader choking a man to death at the beginning of *Star Wars* as well).

TIP 478 - **In action movies, take care of exposition while characters are on the move** - Action films are kinetic and action-packed, so that's where you have to deliver your exposition. When Kirk and Sulu are about to air jump down to the giant alien drill, Captain Pike is giving them the plan *as they march through the ship*. This is preferable to giving it while sitting down in an air-conditioned office. In fact, if there's any scene in an action movie where your characters are sitting down and talking, there's probably something wrong with your script.

TIP 479 - **Popcorn movies live or die by their set pieces** - You have to push the envelope with high concept set pieces because these are the scenes that'll sell your movie. If they look exactly like every other action scene out there, nobody's showing up to your film. Do something different with these big scenes! Air jumping down to a wobbly 40-mile long alien drill platform and then fighting the bad guys with swords…it's safe to say I've never seen that before. Try to have three set pieces in your action flick that nobody's seen.

TIP 480 - **In an action movie, make sure your hero saves others at his own peril** - This is your hero. Heroes need to be *heroic*, and they need to be heroic without thinking of themselves. This is why we love them! When Sulu falls off the edge of the alien drill, Kirk goes diving after him, risking his own life in the process.

TIP 481 - **The bar for your script is higher than the bar for the latest Hollywood blockbuster** - *Star Trek* escaped this fate, but a lot of big budget films have terrible screenplays. Look no further than the Transformers franchise. However, if you think the Transformers screenplays are the bar for your own scripts, think again. Those scripts are bad for a number of reasons, most of which revolve around too many cooks in the kitchen. The bar for your script is 50 times higher. It may not be fair, you may not understand why, but trust me on this: don't use those films as the bar to beat. Write the greatest screenplay you're capable of writing and let the rest take care of itself.

TIP 482 - **Your villain can't be bad just to be bad** - A villain without a motivation is like a car without a steering wheel: Directionless. Trek's villain, Nero, didn't wake up one day and decide to hate the Federation. He hates them because they sat and watched his people die, doing nothing to help them. That's why he's waging war with them.

TIP 483 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - When Kirk meets Old Spock, instead of Spock giving us a long boring monologue about how he ended up here, he touches James' head, allowing him to SEE what happened to him. Much more cinematic than gathering around the fireplace and hearing Spock tell a tale.

TIP 484 - **Stop introducing new characters! Ahhhhhhh!!!** - If you want to make a reader angry, introduce a LOT of characters. Readers *hate lots of characters* because it's impossible to keep track of them all. If you're writing for a pre-existing franchise, like *Star Trek*, where the character pool has already been established, then it's okay. But in a spec script? I'm

begging you: keep your character count as low as humanly possible.

TIP 485 - **Bring characters back** - Here's a tip on how to eliminate characters. Instead of introducing yet another person, why not bring back someone from before? The dude who captures Kirk when he miraculously beams onto the Enterprise during warp speed is the same guy he fought in the opening bar scene. It means so much more to the reader because *they know that guy*.

TIP 486 - **When characters fight, they should fight in UNIQUE STYLES that REFLECT WHO THEY ARE** - Kirk fights like a street brawler. Spock's moves are tactical and structured. This philosophy should extend to every aspect of your characters. Show them talking, walking, loving, arguing, all in their own unique way.

TIP 487 - **The more intense the internal conflict, the more memorable the character** - One of the reasons Spock has captured people's imaginations for so long is that his internal struggle is so compelling: he's constantly fighting between logic and emotion. Internal strife adds tons of weight to your characters (Michael Corleone goes through it. Luke goes through it in *Empire* and *Jedi*) so if it fits your hero and your story, make sure to include it!

TAXI DRIVER
Written by: Paul Schrader

Premise: A New York taxi driver finds himself becoming more and more disillusioned with the city. As he retreats from any and all social interaction, he leans towards solving the problem with violence.

About: Word is that Paul Schrader wrote this script in under a month, and to be honest, it kind of feels that way. The narrative drifts along like a lucid dream. Of course, back in the 1970s, there were no such things as screenwriting books, e-mail, or Twitter. It was just five channels and the local theater. With so few things competing for our eyeballs, writers could take their time with their stories. Unfortunately, that's just not the case anymore. Every scene has to *move the story forward*. Goals have to be clear. Motivations have to be clear. The story always has to feel like it has a purpose. *Taxi Driver* doesn't feel that way and in that respect, it's kind of a dangerous script to emulate. However, despite its old-school approach, it knows how to move the chains, and therefore has some good lessons to teach.

TIP 488 - **POWER TIP** - The anti-hero. Anti-heroes are non-traditional heroes. They're not out to save the world. They're out to *save themselves*. Since Hollywood equates "selfishness" with "un-likability," producers are terrified of anti-heroes. Except that they bring one tremendous strength to the table that traditional heroes don't: *they're unpredictable*. You never know what an anti-hero is going to do next. And that's fun to watch! Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* is a perfect example. One second he's chatting up a distinguished woman, the next he's befriending a 12-year-old hooker. Other notable antiheroes include Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*, Johnny Depp in *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, and Will Smith in *Hancock*.

TIP 489 - **IRONY ALERT** - Travis wants to clean all the scum and danger off the streets, yet Travis himself is scummy and dangerous.

TIP 490 - **SHOW DON'T TELL ALERT** - Schrader needed a visual to represent 12-year-old prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster). So after Travis sees the pimp rough her up, the pimp throws a CRUMPLED TWENTY DOLLAR BILL at Travis and says, "You didn't see anything." Later in the film, Travis pulls that crumpled 20 dollar bill out, stares at it, and we know exactly who he's thinking about.

TIP 491 - **Crazy characters are like "walking baskets of dramatic irony"** - One of the reasons it's so interesting to watch Travis Bickle (and crazy characters in general), is that we know he's psycho, but the people around him do not. So whenever he's around anyone, we get nervous for that person, and that creates an exciting undercurrent to the scene. Take the scene where Travis and Betsy go out for "coffee and pie." It's a simple date. It's even in a public place. Yet we're afraid Travis is going to say something or do something weird. He might embarrass himself. He might scare Betsy. Or worse! If you have a dangerous or unstable character, you can load up on these scenes, which in their own weird way, always seem to entertain.

TIP 492 - **Anti-heroes provide the best opportunity for arcing** - The thing about anti-heroes is that they possess such an inherently negative flaw that they're the easiest characters to arc. That's not to say they always will (Travis himself has an odd arc), but the opportunity is there. For example, Han Solo turns from selfish to selfless. Jules Winnfield (Sam Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*) puts his hit man days behind him. Mad Max starts off selfish, but in the end decides to help others.

TIP 493 - **Character transformations don't happen at the 11th hour** - Your character can't be an asshole for 99 minutes, then turn into Mother Theresa 30 seconds before the credits roll. With any transformation, there has to be an arc - a series of developments that lead to a final change. *Taxi Driver* nails this arc. Travis starts off somewhat hopeful. He gets dumped by Betsy and becomes cynical. As he gets lonelier, he gets angry, which leads to him purchasing guns. More frustration leads him to the streets. The transformation culminates when he shaves his head. He's full-blown nuts now. That's how you transform a character. *Gradually*.

TIP 494 - **Research the shit out of your character's job** - Please research your hero's job. Please! There's nothing worse than reading a script where the hero's job plays a central part in the story and the writer knows no more about that job than we do. Here's a snippet of voice over from *Taxi Driver*: "Each night when I return the cab to the garage I have to clean the cum off the back seat." Now that's something only someone who's driven a cab would know. This attention to detail is what will set you apart from the lazy hacks .

TERMINATOR 2
Written by: James Cameron and William Wisher Jr.

Premise: A Terminator is sent back from the future, this time to protect a young John Connor from a new model of Terminator superior to the original in every way.

About: *Terminator 2* is one of the rare sequels that trumps the original. A lot of people attribute this to the special effects (which were cutting edge at the time), but the screenplay's pretty solid too. The story is basically split into two halves. The first half is about our characters meeting up and escaping the T-1000 Terminator. The second half is about going after Cyberdyne employee Miles Dyson to stop the future nuclear war. There's a ton that's done right here, but *Terminator 2* has its share of missteps as well: Cameron gets too on-the-nose with the whole father-son relationship between John and The Terminator. Also, the Sarah Connor voice-overs are way over the top, and the middle of this script is a mess. We get stuck in that desert FOREVER. It's like Cameron forgot for 25 minutes that he was making an action movie. Holy shit, though, talk about creating one of the best villains of all time! I still have nightmares about the T-1000 chasing me. Cameron struck gold there.

TIP 495 - **DRAMATIC IRONY ALERT** - When Arnold first goes into to the biker bar (still naked from time-traveling), *we* know he's The Terminator, but the bar patrons do not. There's nothing more fun than watching a bunch of tough guys who think they're about to kick our character's ass, when we know *they're* about to get their asses kicked instead. Seriously, go watch this scene now. Tell me you don't get goose bumps when the bikers start taunting Arnold.

TIP 496 - **LIKABLLILITY ALERT** - Audiences LOVE, and I mean LOVE, clever characters. So write a scene where your character out-thinks the bad guys. As Sarah Connor darts through the psyche ward with the workers in pursuit, she reaches a barred door, opens it with her stolen key, then BREAKS the top of the key off so the tooth is stuck in the lock, making it impossible for the workers to use their keys. We love Sarah Conner after this moment!

TIP 497 - **Do something new with your car chase!** - Movie audiences have seen every car chase imaginable. So you better rack that noggin of yours to come up with something unique. Cameron has a semi-truck chasing a motorcycle down the Los Angeles viaduct. I haven't seen something like that before or since. Talk about a great chase!

TIP 498 - **Leave the philosophizing to Nietzsche** - Please, I'm begging you, avoid philosophizing in your screenplay. The second characters start yawning out heavy-handed philosophical ramblings is the second your reader starts rolling his eyes. As good as *Terminator 2* is, when Sarah Connor goes into her WAY OVER THE TOP voice-overs about the impending war and the meaning of life, we want to shoot ourselves, right after we shoot her.

TIP 499 - **MIDPOINT SHIFT** - The midpoint in *Terminator 2* comes when they shift from escaping the T-1000 to trying to assassinate Miles Dyson, who unknowingly will create the program that destroys earth. So we go from a reactive first half (escape) to an active second half (save the world).

TIP 500 - **Drop the goofy fight dialogue** - Unless you're writing an action comedy (*The Princess Bride*), your characters shouldn't be trading one-liners during a fight. I read a lot of scripts with running fight commentary and it never works. "I assumed you would've been stronger." "I assumed you would've been *taller*!" Gag me with a brad! In *Terminator 2,* when the terminators fight, they don't say anything, they just beat the metallic crap out of each other.

TIP 501 - **In high concept movies, make sure the villain's motivation is airtight** - Too many high concept amateur scripts have villains with confusing motivations. Your villain will be risking *everything* to take down your hero, so if he doesn't have a damn good reason to do so, then your movie won't hold up. The T-1000's motivation is about as sound as it gets: he's been programmed to destroy John Connor so there's no resistance to the machines in the future.

TIP 502 - **The power of a PG-13 (or lower) rating** - Look, we all like to write dark sci-fi projects like *Terminator 2*. Keep in mind, however, that the real money comes with a PG-13 rating or lower. Did you know that, as of this writing, 48 out of the top 50 grossing movies of all time (not adjusted for inflation) are rated PG-13, PG, or G? The only exceptions are *The Passion Of The Christ* and *The Matrix Reloaded*. Write what you want, sure, but keep in mind the magical monetary power PG-13 has on the producers reading your scripts.

NOW WHAT?

So you've written a high concept marketable screenplay with compelling complex characters who have big goals with high stakes attached. Your story moves quickly. There's conflict in every scene. And your ending? It's a bona fide shocker. But let's be honest: you're still just another wannabe screenwriter with a screenplay on your computer and no industry contacts. This leads us to the most common question I get asked: "What do I do *after* I've finished the script?" Well, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that it's easier now more than ever to break into the industry. The internet has made everything more accessible. The bad news is that you have to become something most writers are afraid of: a *salesman*. Abandon the dream scenario where you send your script to a friend who's a P.A. on Spielberg's latest film and the script somehow gets switched with Spielberg's shooting script, and he reads it at lunchtime and calls you the next day to buy it for a million dollars. That ain't gonna happen. You're gonna have to pound the pavement and break down a few doors instead. I'm not going to lie. It's going to be tough, unpleasant, and awkward at times, but in the end, if you have a great script, it *will* pay off. Here's how you're going to sell your screenplay...

CALL EVERYONE YOU KNOW

You need to call every single person you know and ask them if they know anyone in the movie business who will read your script. Depending on your proximity to the industry, this might be two people, it might be twenty people. And chances are, they won't be Peter Jackson or James Cameron. But they'll be working in the industry. And if they like your script enough, they just might know someone to pass it on to. And if that someone likes it, *they* might have someone to pass it onto, and so on and so forth until someone with power reads it. I've seen this happen plenty of times before. One of my favorite young writers got his break by giving his script to a guy he played pick-up basketball with. That guy happened to know an assistant at WME. That assistant got it to the agent he worked for, and that agent got it to buyers, and just like that, someone bought it. You NEVER KNOW who knows who until you ask. And even if all those calls lead to dead ends, chances are you'll meet a few people who become fans of yours, people who someday may be in a position to buy one of your screenplays. Remember, screenwriting is a career. Try not to be short-sighted. Play for the long game.

MOVE TO LA

I know for some of you, this is your biggest fear. You have a family, a mortgage, a job. Shit, you may live in an *entirely different country*! You can't just get up and move to another city. Which leads to the obvious question: *Do I have to move to LA?* Good news. No. In fact, it's easier than EVER BEFORE to break into Hollywood from outside of Hollywood. However, here's why you should still move to LA if you can: you want to be able to meet people year round. Whenever your script is read or whenever someone hears about you, you want to be able to meet with them right away. Hollywood is just like any other business: it's about relationships. If you're not physically here to build those relationships, then people lose sight of you. Just for argument's sake, let's say a small-time producer reads your script and loves it. He wants to meet tomorrow, but you're in Iowa so you can't. If you'd been in LA, you could've taken that meeting. And maybe you and that producer hit it off. In fact, maybe it went so well that afterwards he asked you to rewrite a tiny horror flick he's making. Maybe that horror flick got a surprise theatrical release and did a lot better than expected and now that producer is willing to pay you TRIPLE the original amount to write his next movie. All of a sudden, you're a credited screenwriter with people asking for your services, which means more people know you. Which means more fans. Which means more meetings. Which means more offers. Which means more people for you to pitch your OWN ideas and your OWN scripts. Which means a REAL SHOT at selling your script! You don't make that initial connection if you're not in LA. Which means none of that happens. So yeah, Hollywood is a "meet-up" town. They like to see your face. They like to look you in the eye. They like to bounce ideas off you and see if you're a writer they can work with. I'm not saying you can't succeed if you don't live in LA. What I'm saying is, if you CAN live in LA, do it. You'll increase your chances of breaking into the industry substantially.

BUILD A NETWORK - HELP OTHERS

If you can't move to LA, move to Cyber-LA. That means going to sites like Scriptshadow and Go Into The Story and Amazon Studios and Triggerstreet and the Black List. Park your browser on these sites and meet as many screenwriters as you can. Be nice. Build as big of a network as you can. If someone sounds funny or interesting, get in touch with them! Tell them you want to trade script reads. I remember watching writers break through online every few months. And guess who benefited the most from those breakthroughs? Their buddies. The guys and gals who traded scripts with them. They then helped their friends get scripts to their new industry contacts, and inevitably some of those led to them snagging their own agent or manager. It's not rocket science. The larger your network, the more shots you get on goal. So stop focusing on

bumping into Christopher Nolan on an elevator. Instead, focus on helping other screenwriters. When the time comes, one of them is going to help you, and that's probably going to be your big break. I've seen it happen dozens of times.

COLD QUERY STEP 1

Cold querying means contacting agents, managers and producers you don't know and asking them to read your script. The idea is to hook them with an irresistible logline so they'll request to read your script. However, before you write anything, you gotta do some research! Go to The Black List website, download the last three Black Lists, go through each one, logline by logline, and look for managers/agents/producers attached to projects that sound similar to yours. Sign up for IMDB Pro and do the same. Not only do they list produced films, but they also list films in development, along with the production companies and sometimes the agents of the writers attached to the project. This is a goldmine of information. The Tracking Board is also a great resource. Afterwards, do some Googling. Find out which one of these projects are top level (i.e. WME, Imagine, Anonymous) and scratch those off your list. Those are big-timers who only deal with other big timers. They won't read your stuff unless you know somebody there. Where you want to look is the mid-level and smaller outfits. These are companies or agencies that are big enough to still have good contacts, but small enough so that they'll occasionally read unsolicited material (The Gotham Group, APA, Underground). I've found that managers in particular are willing to take risks on young writers since that's their job - to develop writers. So look up every manager you can and query them! Managers will help you find agents and once you have those two in your corner, you'll be able to get your scripts sent out to everyone in town.

QUERY STEP 2

It's time to write your query. Now, having received thousands of queries myself, I can help you kick ass in this department. Remember that industry people are busy. They have tons of work to do. So you have to be short and to the point - a quick, but unique sentence or two about how much you like their company (or movies they've made) and then get to the cheese: your logline. This is where all that research you did before you wrote your script pays off. Having already tested your idea with a bunch of people, you've ensured that you have a concept people like. Which means all you have to do now is let the concept do the talking. 95% of the reason your script will get requested is due to your logline. A good logline should include the main character, the objective, and the major source of conflict (You can learn more about crafting great loglines on the site). You should be getting between a 2-15% request rate from your query, 2% if your idea is boring, and 15% if it's great. If you're not getting a lot of requests, I'd strongly suggest starting a new script, this time with a bigger idea, one that people will actually want to read. Once again, nobody can buy your script if nobody reads it, and nobody's going to read a script that sounds boring.

Assuming your script delivers the goods, you'll get people wanting to meet you. If it's an agent or a manger who took a liking to you, great! They'll send your script out to even more people. Which means you'll be making even more contacts. These contacts are going to become GOLD to you. Unless your script is beyond awesome, nobody's going to buy something from you yet. Hollywood likes to know who they're dealing with before they throw money at them. So by staying in touch with these people, keeping them abreast of your ideas and future projects, you'll build a network of folks to send scripts to! After awhile, these people will be coming TO YOU and asking YOU to write stuff FOR THEM. For money! Which means as soon as you take one of those jobs, you're a professional screenwriter! How sweet is that? And remember that success comes from you hitting the pavement, getting your scripts out to people, e-mailing them, talking to them, and keeping yourself on their radar! I can't stress this enough. Give your script to as many people as possible. It costs you nothing and builds your network of fans.

CONTESTS

Contests are becoming a much better way to break in. That's because more and more contests are offering reads at agencies, management companies and production houses. So, when you research which contests you're going to send your script to, don't focus on the money. Focus on who reads your script if you're a finalist or a winner. The Nicholl contest leads to reads. The Tracking Board contest gives reads. I believe the Page contest does as well. Just make sure you're sending your script to contests that are right for *your scripts*. For example, the Nicholl rarely rewards comedies. Bluecat, on the other hand, loves comedies. And Page actually has different winners for each genre. Do that research so you're not throwing money away. Contests are a long shot but when you have nobody, they're one of your only shots. Just make sure the script you send them is awesome and not some autobiography about the struggles you're enduring as a 24 year old trust fund baby.

SCRIPT CONSULTANTS

    This is a more expensive option, but also a way to leapfrog the grind if you can afford it. There are two kinds of consultants out there, consultants who will read your script and give you notes, and consultants who will give you notes, as well as send your script to industry contacts if they like it. The more experience and the more contacts the consultant has, the more expensive they tend to be. Because most screenwriters aren't rich, you have to decide if this is an investment you want to make. All I'll say is research the consultants thoroughly beforehand. If you're going with one of the more expensive guys, ask them for a few people they've helped. What agency did the writer get signed at? What studio was their script sold at? If you can find someone who gives great notes AND offers connections, the investment might be worth it. This is what happened when Tyler Marceca sent me his script, *The Disciple Program* for a consultation. I thought it was amazing, sent it to my contacts, and the next thing you know it sold for six figures, and Tyler joined the best agency and management companies in town. Just remember, this is the pie in the sky scenario. 95% of the scripts anyone in this town reads need work. So be realistic. But if you've been honing your craft and think you're ready, or you just want some great notes, check out the consultants page on my site, or do a quick Google search for "Screenplay consultants."

IT'S A MARATHON

    If you want a real shot at breaking in, you gotta stay on top of all of this. It's a hassle, I know. You'd rather just sit on your couch and write. But unless you were born into the Peter Jackson household, then becoming that salesman is your only way in. And really, it's not as hard as it looks. If all you do is meet a bunch of people online and trade scripts with them, sooner or later you guys will carry each other into the profession. I see it happen all the time. Just remember, as this may be the most important tip in the entire book: *screenwriting is a marathon*. This insane, ridiculously difficult craft takes way longer to conquer than you think. As long as you stick with it and keep getting better, keep learning, keep writing, you'll get there. The finish line is never where you think it will be, but always shows up when you're ready. Now go finish that script so I have another success story to trumpet on Scriptshadow. GOOD LUCK!!! :)