

SCRIPT PIPELINE

Writers Workshop Reviews

The aim of Script Pipeline's Writers Workshop is to offer constructive criticism that will help the writer take their work to the next level, finding a delicate balance between creative vision and marketability. We have thus set up the following options:



Consultation ~

Our consultants are available for one-on-one development meetings with writers, either in person in LA or over the phone. It is typically a two-hour long meeting in which the consultant will go through the script with you in detail. Feel free to come with a list of questions to be addressed, and steer the conversation in any direction you wish. The consultant will come with their own notes and ideas on how to improve the story. If the script is at the point that it should be shopped around town, we will give you concrete suggestions as to where the screenplay has the best chance and the companies that would most likely be interested in the material.



Development Notes ~

Script Pipeline's Development Notes focus on maximizing the creative potential and marketability of your screenplay. They also serve as a crucial tool in preparing your script for industry circulation. Perfect for writers who are in the initial stages of their drafts, or who would like a deeper analysis of their story.



Overall Review ~

The Overall Review offers a discounted rate for writers who are primarily seeking our assistance in circulating their material. Like Development Notes, the Overall Review covers characterization, dialogue, conflict, and so forth, but in more general terms intended to point you in the proper direction. This is the ideal service for a writer who has already gone through multiple drafts and is in need of further notes or a fresh perspective on the screenplay.



Studio-Style Coverage ~

Studio-Style Coverage is geared toward writers looking to get notes similar to those by a production company or studio. Coverage includes: The Script Pipeline "Matrix," which breaks down and ranks the elements of the script (characterization, dialogue, premise, etc.) on a basis of Superb, Excellent, Very Good, Good, Decent, or Needs Work. A brief, half-page to page-long synopsis of your script, hitting the major plot points; comments covering all elements in need of work, as well as areas that are working—similar to our Overall Review.

Here is a breakdown of common problems that readers, agents, producers and executives all look for:

CHARACTERS: Everything in a screenplay starts with character. If the characters aren't properly developed, this leads to weaknesses in the screenplay's structure, conflict and believability. Some common issues in this area:

- The story/genre requires a strong, single protagonist but there isn't one.
- The protagonist's goal isn't specific enough. For example, "to get rich" is too vague a goal to carry a whole screenplay. "To get rich by robbing the armored car of the biggest bank in town the day after Christmas" is a concrete goal.
- The protagonist isn't active enough. S/he waits for other characters to reveal information or to resolve problems rather than being the one who drives the plot.
- Minor characters have too much screen/page time and become a distraction from the main action.
- Minor characters are more interesting than the main characters.
- Minor characters have no real function in terms of the plot and could be eliminated without affecting the story.
- There's no strong antagonist/opposition figure for the protagonist to fight.
- The characters aren't well developed enough. They feel flat or stereotyped.
- The goals, needs, desires and motivations of the characters aren't clear.
- The protagonist and/or other main characters aren't sympathetic so we don't really care what happens to them.
- The protagonist is too perfect. The best heroes always have a least one serious flaw that needs to be confronted over the course of the story.
- None of the characters undergoes a personal transformation. Usually it's the protagonist who experiences some kind of profound change or revelation as a result of the story's events. But an important supporting character can also play this role.
- Important characters are introduced too late (i.e. after the screenplay's midpoint).
- Rather revealing their personalities, attitudes and needs through actions/images, everything the characters think/feel/do is conveyed in dialogue.

STRUCTURE: Another area that frequently needs work. Typically, a screenplay's structure lacks focus when the protagonist/main characters don't have specific goals to pursuing.

- The story lacks a strong central character who drives the plot (protagonist).
- The protagonist's goal isn't specific enough, so the conflict lacks focus.
- The protagonist's goal is introduced too late.
- The story starts too soon and includes lots of back story we don't need.
- The middle act lacks focus and there's no real sense of tension slowly rising.
- There's no real climax.
- The ending is too long and drawn out. Most stories only need 5 – 10 pages after the climax in order to wrap up the plot.
- There are no clear "act breaks" or they aren't dramatic enough.
- There's a lot of "filler" – scenes that don't add anything substantial to the story.
- There's a lack of logical progression between one scene and the next.
- Subplots are a distraction from the main action or aren't properly integrated.

The traditional "three-act" structure breaks down as follows: In act one (approximately pages 1 – 30), the protagonist's goal, needs and desires are set up, as are those of the other main characters. Typically the antagonist and protagonist have opposing goals, which brings them into conflict with one another. In act two (approximately pages 31 – 90), the characters pursue their goals despite increasing obstacles and complications. (This escalation of events is known as rising tension and it builds as the climax approaches.) At the end of act two comes a moment when all seems lost for the protagonist. This is known as the crisis. However, drawing on what s/he has learned throughout the story, the protagonist survives the crisis and formulates a new plan for obtaining his/her goal. This leads to act three (approximately pages 91 – 120) and the climax. The climax is the story's dramatic highlight and the moment when the goal is within reach. The climax is then followed by a short resolution in which it becomes clear how things have changed for the characters.

While some screenplays are much more fluid or experimental, most should follow the kind of structure outlined above. Three-act structure is particularly important in genres such as Action, Horror, Sci-Fi etc. Dramas tend to be more diverse.

CONFLICT: If there are problems with structure and character, this will affect the level and effectiveness of the main conflict. Each scene should push the story forward, creating a new obstacle or getting the

characters closer to a goal. The protagonist needs a formidable opponent (i.e. the antagonist/opposition figure). Also, conflict must be properly motivated. Otherwise, it won't be believable or engaging.

STAKES: The stakes are most apparent when we know what the characters want and why. So if the characters' goals and motivations aren't clear, the story will lack strong stakes. In any story, the stakes should be as high as they possibly can. So rather than just losing her job, maybe the protagonist gets fired, gets evicted and has her wallet stolen all in the same day?

BELIEVABILITY: This term relates to the world of the story and the logic of the plot. Readers often ask themselves the following questions: Has the writer quickly established the story's time period, setting, tone and genre? Have the rules governing any fantasy elements (supernatural forces, monsters, future technologies etc.) been clearly established? Does the plot unfold in a logical manner or are there holes in terms of how one event leads to the next? Is there too much coincidence in the story? For example, are characters who live in a big city always bumping into one another? Is the protagonist in the right place at the right time to overhear a crucial conversation? Does the protagonist defeat the villain or does some other force/character swoop in at the end and save the day? Do we know enough about the characters to understand their behavior and decisions?

DIALOGUE: Most screenplays contain an excess of dialogue. Sometimes it's just a question of polishing a few scenes here and there. Other times the screenplay relies too heavily on dialogue throughout. Screenplays should be a balance of action and dialogue. So while comedies and dramas tend to be more dialogue heavy, all screenplays should employ visual storytelling wherever possible. Dialogue also needs to be in keeping with the story's tone, genre and period.

Some tips for dialogue editing:

- Every line of dialogue should advance the story, deepen our understanding of the characters or ideally do both.
- Every scene should start just before the dramatic highlight and end just afterwards. Often the first and last couple of speeches in a scene can be cut.
- Dialogue that repeats things the reader/viewer already knows is just "filler" and should be cut.
- Chitchat such as "hello", "goodbye," "thanks" etc. is just "filler" and should be cut. The same is true of lines such as "what," "why," "how" etc. Screenplay dialogue is not real life conversation. It is edited and honed in order to create effective drama.
- When characters say exactly what they think/feel or when they seem to be talking just to inform the audience, this leads to dialogue that is too direct or "on the nose." On the nose dialogue feels flat and unrealistic. Adding subtext or giving the words a little twist helps to eliminate this problem.
- If there are whole pages with nothing but dialogue, the dialogue/action balance is off.
- Film is a visual medium. Look for instances where images/actions could replace dialogue.
- Long talking head scenes are not cinematic and should be avoided.
- If characters must engage in a long dialogue scene, the setting/action should be as interesting as possible. (Telephone conversations and restaurant scenes are typically the most uninteresting of all "talking head" scenes.)
- The main characters should have distinct and unique "voices." If all the characters sound exactly alike, the dialogue is less interesting and realistic.

OTHER CONCERNS:

Budget – is the screenplay's budget too high for its genre?

Theme – perhaps the screenplay lacks a compelling theme/emotional throughline?

Tone – obviously individual scenes will vary in tone, but what about the overall story? Perhaps it seems like a light comedy at first but then becomes incredibly dark? Perhaps there's a scene that's supposed to be scary but comes off as funny? Problems with tone will affective a screenplay's believability.

Genre – does the screenplay seem undecided as to its genre? Maybe it starts out like a realistic thriller but introduces supernatural elements late in the piece?

Audience – does the screenplay seem undecided as to its target audience? For example, maybe the story appears to be aimed toward children but includes adult material like drugs, excessive violence and sex?

Format/presentation – all screenplays should conform to current industry standards. This makes the work easy to read as well as demonstrating the writer's professionalism. There are a multitude of screenwriting books, software packages and programs that can be used as a guide.

Grammar/spelling – Again correct spelling and grammar is a crucial part of screenplay presentation. A couple of errors will be overlooked – especially if they occur later on. However, numerous mistakes and those within the first ten pages suggest that the writer is not serious about his/her craft.

BUDGET: Some key elements that determine budget:

Cast – low budget films have only a handful of characters, whereas high budget films can have a cast of thousands.

Stunts – anything that could cause bodily harm is a stunt. The more extreme the stunt, the more money it costs. A low budget film might have one basic stunt such as a character falling down a few steps. A high budget film will have several impressive stunts, such as a character falling off a building, jumping out of a helicopter etc.

Locations/sets – exterior filming is generally more expensive than interior. So a story set in the Amazon jungle will be a lot more expensive to film than one that takes place in an apartment. If the story depicts a past or future time, this will also have a big affect on the budget, as it will require a lot of set building and dressing.

Genre – some genres are inherently more expensive than others. For example, Action, Adventure and Sci-Fi films will all involve a lot of locations, stunts and effects. Period/Historical films are also more expensive because all the locations, costumes and props in the film have to be specially designed. The cheapest genres are generally drama and comedy since these tend to be more character driven.

Effects – More effects means more money – a lot more. So low budget films generally do not require any special effects. The Science Fiction, Action and Adventure genres tend to have a lot of effects, as do films involving supernatural occurrences or fantasy characters (monsters, talking animals etc.).

A budget breakdown guide:

Under \$1 Million Small cast (less than 5 key characters), a couple of main locations, no stunts, no effects, no period scenes, usually a drama or comedy (e.g. *Clerks*, *Paranormal Activity*)

1 – 5 Million Small cast, a few main locations, some exterior filming, one or two basic stunts (i.e. no battle sequences), no period scenes, usually a drama, comedy or low budget horror film (e.g. *Lost In Translation*, *Cabin Fever*)

5 Million + Medium cast (less than 10 key characters), possibly a couple of period scenes, a few main locations, some exterior filming, a few basic stunts

10 Million + Large cast, some complex stunts (e.g. car chase), multiple locations, some special effects (e.g. *Being John Malkovich*)

20 Million + Large cast, multiple special effects, multiple complex stunts, multiple locations, usually a period/action-based genre (e.g. *Spider-Man*, *Transformers*)

Keep in mind that a screenplay's budget should reflect its genre and potential audience. For example, if the story is a quirky, independent comedy then it shouldn't contain lots of effects and stunts.

SCRIPT PIPELINE GRADING: There are three possible grades a screenplay can be given – NOT CIRCULATION READY (NCR), CONSIDER or RECOMMEND.

If there are major concerns regarding character, structure, marketability, believability, and so forth, the script's status will be NCR, even if the story is compelling and the writer shows great potential.

A screenplay receives a CONSIDER if is very close to being ready for circulation. For instance, it might need polishing in few places, but doesn't require significant changes to the structure/plot or the characters.

A screenplay is only given a RECOMMEND if it's ready to be sent to agents, producers etc., or close enough so our Director of Development can work with the writer one-on-one on fine-tuning the material—in other words, the script is "circulation ready."

Although Script Pipeline must maintain high standards for all Recommend scripts, as they are sent to our circle of industry contacts, all genres and styles have received and can receive a Recommend.

For questions on the Workshop, our readers, or the process of submitting, E-mail notes@scriptpipeline.com.

www.scriptpipeline.com/writers-workshop

