

40 COMMON ROOKIE SCREENWRITER MISTAKES

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There are so many ways that an aspiring but inexperienced screenwriter can crush a potentially brilliant writing career. Some are pretty basic, while others are insider expectations that defy logic. This guide is intended to help you avoid many of these common pitfalls, goofs, mistakes, and oddities, and to increase the chance of your screenplay being noticed.

There is nothing magical or proprietary about the items in this guide. Everything described here is basic "Screenwriting 101" stuff, taught in most screenwriting schools, courses, seminars, webinars, and workbooks.

They are NOT in any particular order, but they all need to become part of your writing arsenal.

One more thing: the rules described in this guide are for NEW screenwriters. If you are a prolific writer and have sold screenplays (such as Spielberg, Tarantino, Sorkin, Cameron, etc.), then it's "what rules."

Good luck, enjoy the journey, and write, write, write!

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Screenplays about a SITUATION, not a CHARACTER:

Producers want compelling personal stories. That means your protagonist needs to be the center of the story. The situation should be designed to reveal the character's inner qualities.

The "Spiderman" franchise is not about saving MJ from the bad guys. The movies focus on Peter Parker's internal struggle between his personal desires and his responsibility to help others.

Protagonists that are all good:

There are very few Mother Theresa's around. If your protagonist is a goody-two-shoes, the character will not be believable, or worse yet, boring. Audiences connect with characters when they see themselves in the role. People are flawed. Characters should be, too.

Who is a more compelling in "The Wizard of Oz"- Glenda the Good Witch or Dorothy? Glenda is sweet and good, but a little boring. Dorothy abducted her dog from the mean neighbor lady, ran away from home, and went on an adventure which landed her in trouble. Not boring.

Writing a sequel or a book adaptation:

Unless you are a well known screenwriter or the original author, forget it. Aside from potential trademark and copyright infringement issues (which are VERY REAL)... Wait- that IS the big deal. If you want to do a sequel or adaptation, get approval from the original copyright owner FIRST. (Good Luck!)

Clichés:

They nerdy bookworm gets bullied. The soldier turns to his buddy and says "We got incoming." The young housewife burns dinner. Secret lovers saying "We've got to stop meeting like this." A kid sits outside of the

principal's office. Saying "What's the worst that could happen?" BEEN THERE, DONE THAT. MANY, MANY, MANY TIMES.

Too many characters with similar names:

A group of teens went to the beach. One of them is missing. Is it Tommy, Tom, Tony, Toni, Tina, or Tanya?

Too many transitions in and out of scenes:

Watch your favorite movie and count the number of times that the protagonist walks into or out of the scene. Most likely, the scenes start mid-action. People are already in the room. By the way, does anyone actually say "goodbye" when they leave the room? Not often.

There are times when ingress/egress transitions are acceptable, but only if it's critical to the scene.

Good enough is not good enough:

Your first draft is awful. It better be. Your first write should be rough and fluid and contain lots of errors. It means you are creating and brainstorming amazing ideas. Editing stifles creativity.

But, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER send in your first draft. If you don't rewrite at least five times (I rewrote my first screenplay 14 times), you're not performing your due diligence.

Failure to get professional criticism:

Once you've sold a few screenplays, you can slide on this one (I said can, but you shouldn't). Most first time screenwriters are emotionally attached to their story. Don't be. It's a product.

I guarantee that producers or readers will look at your screenplay with harsh eyes (if they even look at all). Buy a professional coverage first, pay attention to the critique, and then rewrite. Then get another professional coverage. And then rewrite again. And again.

Expecting to sell your first screenplay:

Because so many new screenwriters have. NOT!!! Okay, it does happen (rarely). If you have a screenplay that's polished, and you've received a "recommend" on your professional coverage, and you've won a screenplay contest, and you become an excellent screenplay marketer, maybe. Just don't EXPECT it to happen!

Weak characters:

Failure to fully develop characters is a common problem for all screenwriters, particularly rookies. People are complex, and their strengths and weakness are equally important in shaping their behaviors. Avoid clichéd, simplistic people. Every character in your story needs to have a purpose, identifiable motivations, real needs, real flaws, and must be crucial to the story.

Extraneous characters:

You should test every character's importance to the story. If you can remove a character with no consequence to the story, the character is clutter. Producer's see that as laziness on the writer's part.

Here is a simple test. Would your screenplay be hurt by deleting any character? If the answer is no, get rid of them. Or rewrite them and make them relevant, complex, identifiable, and believable.

Failure to create suspense (tension):

Suspense and tension is like the smell of bacon cooking for breakfast (if you like bacon!). It's the emotional hook that makes producers interested, and keeps moviegoers on the edge of their seats. Think of tension as winding the clock, and suspense as the expectation that the spring will pop at any second.

Every scene should create tension and build suspense toward the story's climax. Failing to create tension

will prevent readers and audiences from caring about your characters and their challenges.

Writing your life story:

Unless you are Donald Trump, Whoopi Goldberg, Sir Edmund Hilary or Casey Anthony, nobody really cares. Really. Producer's want stories that audiences will care about enough to give up their money.

If your life story is compelling in a way that the average "everyperson" will care, then maybe. But if you really believe that your story is worth sharing, start by writing a short story, and get it published. If you can do that, you may have something.

Disjointed scenes and character arcs:

One of the most common newbie mistakes is to allow the story or character to spiral out of control. Instead of funneling the story into a single, dramatic, suspenseful climax, the story undertakes too many problems at once.

The result is a diluted, meaningless, or even worse, boring plot that meanders and fizzles. Ask yourself whether each scene and character moves the story forward toward the final outcome.

Hitting the wall:

You're in the zone. Action and dialogue are rolling off your fingertips like bullets flying in a battle. Fast and furious. And then, WHAM! You slam into the wall. Not one more word.

This is very common, and can occur for several reasons. Maybe after reading what you wrote, your idea seems silly or meaningless. Or maybe you just can't see how to transition from the current scene to the next.

If it happens, don't stress out. Stew on it for a day or two. If your concept is good, you will figure out

how to move past the wall. If not, set it aside and go back to where you were before the mental explosion and work forward from there.

PS- If you get a great idea that doesn't fit your current screenplay, write it down. I have launched whole screenplays from scenes I originally developed for, and then cut from, a different screenplay.

Breaking the 80/120 rule

If your screenplay is longer than 120 pages, you need to CUT. If it's less than 80, you need to WRITE. It's uncommon for a major motion picture to be less than, or longer than 90-100 minutes. Since each page of script equals about one minute of film, producers often skip reading a screenplay altogether because of the length.

Writing derivative screenplays:

It may seem tempting to use a character from your favorite movie or book, or to write a spin off. Resist the temptation! But much like sequels and book adaptations, derivatives are a hard sell due to copyright and trademark issues.

Perhaps even more compelling is the difficulty in recreating the original story's flair or the character's voice. No two screenwriters write the same, and your version will likely be less familiar, and therefore less believable than the original.

Indistinct characters:

Rookie writers often forget to change speech patterns for different characters. They write each character in exactly the same voice, style and cadence. Every one of your characters needs a unique personality and voice.

Asking family members for feedback:

It can make you feel good. It can validate your concept. It can give you hope. It can also allow you to write poorly. This is a business, and is both cold and

harsh. Your mom will definitely be more interested and much kinder than a producer! It will not help you become a better screenwriter or sell your screenplay. GET PROFESSIONAL FEEDBACK.

Run-on action:

And then he walked down the street and into the building and then up the stairs and into the apartment and then he saw the blood and then he ran into the bedroom and found the producer lying on the floor and then he picked up the screenplay and he read the first page and he saw the never ending string of run-on action descriptions and then grabbed the producer's gun and then shot himself, too.

Diary or countdown format:

Creating sequential time or date scenes (like a daily diary or time countdown) has been so overused that it is almost impossible to sell. If you must use this technique, it better be critical to the story. In general, it should only be used for historical or "docudrama" stories. Or better yet, not at all!

Extraneous scenes and meaningless action:

It's very unlikely that a scene about making and eating a sandwich for lunch matters. Now, if the sandwich is poisoned and the character nearly dies, then maybe. But not too many people will care that the protagonist ate lunch. Every scene and every action must have a significant purpose and consequence for the story.

Excessively poetic writing:

A screenplay is the written expression of action. Poetry is a stylized and figurative expression of ideas. It's very difficult to explain action using figurative language. It will mark you as an amateur. Be prosaic in your language (just don't be boring!).

Insignificant consequences:

Would you care about this movie: "Ride the Bear" is the

story about a college graduate who can't find his car keys? How about this one: "Ride the Bear" is the story of a college graduate who can't find a job and contemplates suicide as the only way out of his crushing debt?

In screenwriting, consequences are critical to making producers, and eventually audiences, care about the character and the story.

Incorrectly formatted screenplay:

Screenplay formatting rules were designed for you and me. We must follow those rules or risk (read "this will absolutely happen") having our screenplays "round filed." Spielberg, no. You and me, yes.

Ugly, stilted, stupid dialogue:

Can you actually write like people talk? I don't know anyone who talks like this: "I am going to walk to the men's room and use the sink to clean the spaghetti sauce from my hands." It may be grammatically correct, but for dialogue, it stinks.

So, how do real people talk? "I gotta wash my hands," or "I'm gonna go to the can and wash my hands." Unlike formatting rules, there is no official "right and wrong" for dialogue. So, ask yourself. Would you talk that way? Would someone you know? If your answer is no, then don't force your characters to dialogue like that, either. Another rookie telltale.

Expecting your screenplay to sell:

There are an estimated 250,000+ spec screenplays currently circulating among agents, managers, movie producers and other buyers. Add to that at least another 100,000 or more written on contract or commissioned. Then, add to that the number of screenplays rejected each year (another 250,000?). Now estimate the number of feature films made each year? 50? 100? Let's say even 1000. Are you seeing a pattern?

So, how do you ever sell your screenplay? Through perseverance, shoe leather marketing, and networking. But not through writing.

Excessively long scenes:

As a general rule, scenes should be no more than one page (about one minute of film). If the scene is really, really, REALLY important, maybe up to 3 minutes. If your scenes are too long, you haven't written or edited properly. This is another telltale for producers that you're a novice.

Scene slugs:

It's important to know where a scene takes place. That's the purpose of a scene slug. Write the scene slug, and then let the director create the locale based on his or her vision. If they want to know more, they will ask. But if the screenwriter tries to control too much, (especially a first time screenwriter), the producer is likely to pass. They don't want to work with a "prima donna." Particularly a "first-timer."

Keep in mind that an experienced director will understand what INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT should look like. An exception would be in the case of an unusual or exotic location. That where the scene description or action block comes into play.

Too little or too much action description:

The action and description of a character or scene needs to be clear and concise. Think of it as a basic roadmap to the flow of the scene. The key is finding the right balance between the quality and quantity of that description.

Here are two examples that illustrate the extreme polar opposites of the same mistake. In the scene, our protagonist John gets out of bed, walks to the window, and looks out. The hit man down on the street fires a gun at John, and the bullet strikes the windowsill.

INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT

John stands up. The window frame explodes.

The description doesn't explain anything, so the director won't know how to express the intent of the scene. Or worse yet, will just make something up.

Here is the other extreme:

INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT - DAY

John kicks off his grey blanket, two beige sheets, and his pillow and then jumps up from the double bed. He quickly moves to the partially opened window topped by a pull up vinyl 2" blind. He looks out the window and then down at the ground where he sees trees, bushes, a street, and a black sedan parked across the street. He also sees a man dressed in all black and dark sunglasses, standing in front of the car. The guy in dressed in all black points an object up toward the window. There is a loud exploding sound and John quickly moves away from the window as small white and brown splinters of wood begin to fly through the room as away from the wooden windowsill.

You may as well describe how each splinter travels through the air, the dimensions of each splinter, how they land, etc. Who knows, maybe the entire screenplay can be an action sequence for this one scene. You get the idea- WAY TOO MUCH INFORMATION.

A Better Way:

INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT - DAY

John jumps up from the bed and charges the window. In the street below, a man dressed in all black and dark sunglasses points up toward the window. John leaps back from the window as the wooden frame explodes from a gunshot.

Experience born of watching movies, reading successful screenplays, and getting professional feedback will all help you learn how to write the proper amount of description for a given scene.

Death by dialogue:

Film is a visual medium. It's all about action and motion. We are not talking about 1960's cerebral or intellectual movies like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf." A telltale trait of inexperienced screenwriters is to include so much dialogue that it bogs down the pace or kills the intent of the scene.

This is not to say that two characters sitting at a coffee shop can't have an extended conversation. But if your protagonist is in the midst of a gunfight with the bad guys, she's probably not going to launch into a long conversation about it with her partner.

Think about the intent scene, and create the dialogue based on what would be normal in that situation.

Meaningless dialogue:

A cousin to "Death by Dialogue" is "Meaningless Dialogue." It is painfully frequent for rookie writers to fill the empty spaces with dialogue that does nothing to move or support the story. Run the scene through your head with and without the dialogue. If you don't miss it, then cut it.

Saying, not doing:

If your characters reveal more about themselves through their dialogue than in their actions, your scene is weak. Show us your character's mettle through actions and deeds, not talk.

Narration:

The scene opens with a twinkling black star field, as the words of the narrator scroll up the screen. A deep voice speaks the words "Once upon a time, in a galaxy

far, far away, a small group of intrepid space warriors seeks the evil giant death star..."

Don't do it. It's so "last century." You can do the same thing by showing a group of fighter spaceships streaking through space, and then doing a close-up of the protagonist asking over the radio "Anyone picking up the death ray trails on their heat scanners?"

Only use a narrator if there is no other way (really NO OTHER WAY) to explain the situation. (And that means almost NEVER!). It's a fast track to the round file.

Sudden character reversals

Just like people in real life, your characters need to be relatively consistent in their beliefs, their feelings, and most critically, in their behaviors.

A Catholic nun who goes to the grocery store, pulls a gun, and robs the cashier, is probably not going to be believable. Likewise, a famous politician probably won't worship Satan at night. (No humor intended).

That's not to say that a character can't ever be quirky: a cop steals cash from a drug dealer, the pastor cheats on his wife, the librarian like whips and chains, etc. Just keep in mind that the reversal must be logical and reasonable. Even wild reversals are acceptable if your character is a schizophrenic manic-depressive, or gets bitten by a vampire. But barring any unusual circumstance, consistency is the rule.

Sudden Plot Twists

Just as with characters, the plot should also be consistent. Unless the story is ABOUT the bizarre turn of events, keep it on an even keel.

Here is an example of what not to do: At the end of the love story, the reunited lovers walk down the wedding

aisle and as they approach the minister, he bares his fangs, pounces on the groom, and eats his brain.

Unless there is some reasonable explanation for the twist, it doesn't belong in the script. Even small but irrelevant twists can hurt the story if they're not logical. Twists can be excellent tools when used properly. Just make sure they make sense.

No screenplay opener

The fastest way to lose a screenplay reader is to fail to include a great opener. An opener is the very first scene at the beginning of a screenplay. Examples of openers: A love story opens with two people kissing; a war movie opens with explosions on a battlefield; a murder mystery opens with a body on the coroner's table.

Be sure your opener matches the screenplay's theme or plot. You wouldn't likely start a kid's movie with a pile of bloody dead bodies, or an action adventure movie with little puppies playing in a park.

This is not to say that the opener can NEVER be ironic. Just remember that you have one page to grab a reader's attention. Make it count.

The "Duh" factor:

In the scene, your protagonist shoots the bad guy. As we see the body lying on the floor, the protagonist's wife says "You shot that bad guy." And then your protagonist says "Yes dear, I shot him with the gun I am now holding in my hand." Stating the obvious is a common rookie error, and a biggie for getting your screenplay bounced.

I have personally read screenplays where every single scene includes dialogue describing the scene. It's lazy, it's a shortcut, and it's cheating. about the action. There are occasions where a character SHOULD

say what will or what did happen. Just make sure it's rare, and that it's critical to the scene's natural flow and rhythm.

Failure to use screenwriting software:

There are rules, and more rules, and even rules about rules, for formatting a screenplay. Do you really want to learn all those rules, or would you prefer to focus on the story?

Do yourself a favor and use proper screenwriting software. If you can't afford "Final Draft," it's no problem. Celtx is good, and it's free. And there are others, too. The first thing a pro reader will see is formatting errors. As in terminal errors... round file errors... "no sale" errors. Are you getting the point?

Poor writing

Script readers see hundreds, if not thousands of screenplays a year. These readers are highly skilled in the proper use of language. They just don't have time to fool around with poorly written screenplays.

A few typos in an otherwise superbly written screenplay is PROBABLY no big deal. But if the errors are big, noticeable, consistent, or otherwise get in the way of a quick read, you're script is dead.

GETTING A LEG UP ON THE COMPETITION

This guide is by no means all inclusive, comprehensive, or in any way a guarantee that your screenplay will get a fair shake. Winning at the screenwriting game is as much about presentation and perseverance as it is about the writing or story. If you can internalize these recommendations and incorporate them into your writing, you will stand head and shoulders above the MAJORITY of other screenwriters, both rookie and seasoned.

A well written screenplay with an interesting story has a far better chance than a killer story that is poorly written. The reader will appreciate that you care about the craft, and that you respect them enough not to waste their time. That is half the battle won.

Being a screenwriter needs to be an enjoyable avocation because the odds are stacked against your success as a career screenwriter. You can shorten those odds by writing well, following industry norms, and keeping your writing concise and sharp. The producers and other readers will appreciate your professionalism and courtesy, and that's an advantage earned!