

## Tips on Writing and Selling Your Script

by Joshua Grover-David Patterson

I have a theory.

Everyone, deep down, is seriously afraid of being the stupid kid. Because everyone, at some point in their life, has found themselves in a classroom situation where the teacher is explaining something, and everyone is nodding their heads, and, oh, man, it can't be possible that I'm the only person who doesn't get this, right?

The day I got my first actual check for something that came out of my own head, I had three thoughts.

Man, I need to call my parents.

Man, I wish there was some way I could thank every single human being who helped me reach this point individually. (Thanks, by the way.)

Man, I wish someone had told me X a long time ago. I would have gotten here a lot faster.

Of course, X was not one thing. X was probably more like a thousand things that I learned from books, posts, columns, web sites, magazines, and other people I came into contact with.

But somewhere amongst all the little things I learned were some very, very big things.

So here's my X's. Hope they help you.

### *1. Read more scripts.*

Everyone says this and no one listens. But I can guarantee you I can make you a better writer over the weekend. Here's what you do.

Locate twenty scripts. Ten from movies that you love, ten from movies you were indifferent to or downright hated. Read them. Don't skim. If it helps you, write down everything you learn.

On Monday, I promise that you will look at the screenplay you're working on in a whole new light.

### *2. Something has to be going on.*

In my earliest scripts, I'd often get comments like great dialogue, interesting idea, but not a lot of stuff seems to be happening. Reading the scripts over again, I couldn't see what they were talking about.

Months went by, I was working on a new script, and somewhere in the middle of it I wrote a kitchen scene. Since I had two characters in a kitchen, I figured I may as well have them making dinner. Since I'd already gone through the trouble of having them make dinner, I

realized that they were going to have to reference it at some point.

And suddenly, it became a great scene. Because all the other scenes I had written were about the plot. And this scene was about pasta. Having shoved what was going on far into the background meant that the characters didn't have to reference it every four lines.

So have your characters do something. Ski. Point guns at each other. Eat. Play on the computer. Write poetry. Set fire to a dog. Cross stitch. It works wonders.

### *3. Dialogue makes good scene description.*

This I picked up from Ron Bass and David Twohy. Both use faux-dialogue in place of description. Rather than actually have a character say, "I hate you," they jam it into the description or the action, thereby turning what might have been a horribly cliché line into an actor's dream. Something to do besides shrug, punch someone, or talk wryly.

It looks like this:

STEVE

I want you to know something.

Me too.

STEVE

This is hard for me to say.

I love you too, Steve.

STEVE

I'm in love with Barb.

Barb? Who's Barb?!

### *4. Play your strengths.*

I'd completed two scripts and was bouncing between three others that were in various stages between idea and final script, when my wife turned to me and said "why don't you write a comedy?"

It never occurred to me. Despite the fact that my radio show in college consisted mostly of my friend and I working overtime to come up with the most bizarre stuff we could put on the air. Despite the fact that I consistently got comments from readers like "I really enjoyed (insert funny part here)." Despite the fact that people I know have referred to me as the funniest person they ever met.

Of course, I've also been called the most verbose, but that's another matter entirely.

If you're married, go hug your spouse right now and thank them for understanding you better

than you understand yourself.

*5. Don't save your best ideas "until I'm a better writer."*

For some reason, no one is that interested in a script you call "my second best idea, ever!" They always want to see the script for your best idea. I had one. People filmed it.

*6. Don't work for free.*

I talk about this a lot, because it is something I had to learn the hard way, and I don't think anyone should have to.

I once wrote a script for someone, with the caveat that I would be paid as soon as money was attached to the production. It hasn't filmed. I've gotten no money. And I can't take the script to someone else, because I don't own it. In all the hours I spent writing that script, I could have written another one, from one of my own ideas, which I could own and revise and take to as many places as I want. Lesson learned.

*7. The following words are almost always redundant in scripts: And, Then, We See, and any dialogue starting with the words "Look" or "Listen."*

Take every appearance of these words out of your script, and all you'll lose is half a page of worthless text.

*8. No word should end with -ing in a screenplay.*

Jack runs. Not Jack is running. Enough said.

*9. If you always go for the big laugh, people will get very, very bored.*

The comedies that are still on video years and years and years after coming out are those that have 5-7 huge laughs surrounded by things that make you smile so hard you think your face is going to break in half.

*10. Everyone thinks they're a writer, or they could be one.*

For the longest time, I kept my writing ambitions a secret. Once I actually started to get my name "out there" and an exec wandering through the halls of most major studios could find work with my name on it, I started talking about it with friends and family. Most were supportive, although some were confused that I hadn't mentioned it up until that exact moment.

Once I started telling people I didn't know as well, however, the most common response I got was "hey, I've got this great idea for a movie," or, "yeah, I always thought I could do that," or, "I always wanted to be a writer."

Everyone thinks they're a writer.

Not once, but twice, I had a producer rewrite me because they didn't like what I was doing,

exactly. I remember the conversation like it was yesterday.

"I was thinking of maybe rewriting you a little."

Shocked silence.

"Are you okay with that?"

"Um, well, not really. If you really think it's necessary - "

"Good. Because I was going to do it anyway."

"Oh."

This is the same producer who said things like "I think I have a better grasp of this part because you're a comedy screenwriter and I'm an action screenwriter."

Apparently in some ancient English dialect "action screenwriter" actually means "no-talent hack."

*11. Give your script to five different people, and you will end up with the following: Five very different, wildly conflicting suggestions.*

I once gave my script to a director, an actress, a financier, a and a producer.

The director: Thought it was an interesting premise, but didn't finish reading it because she was more interested in pursuing her own projects.

The actress: Thought it had great dialogue, but didn't think "the stakes were high enough."

The financier: Passed because it wasn't the kind of thing he was interested in.

The producer: Loved the dialogue as well but "just couldn't get through it."

As far as I know, no one read the entire script.

I then brought the exact same script, with four lines taken out and six spelling errors corrected, to a director/producer team. The director read the entire script the moment she had it in hand despite the fact that she was suffering a deathly flu.

They optioned it three days after reading it, and only waited that long because they couldn't reach me for those three days.

*12. The left hand turn game.*

If you want someone to read something, there's any easy way to do it.

Put it on the left hand side.

And people will read it.

Every time.

I can't promise using any or all of these ideas will tun your script into the next great agent war. But they might bring you one step closer.

Good luck.

Joshua Grover-David Patterson's first film, Searching for Mr.Right.Com, will be released in Australia this year. In addition to screenwriting, he has also written for college radio and penned an award-nominated music column.