LOGLINE

The Screenwriter's eZine

Letter from the Editor

With a new decade comes a new PAGE Awards competition! The starting gun has been fired and the sprint is on. Careers will begin or be advanced right here as a few fortunate screenwriters use PAGE to bridge the gap from amateur to professional. Whether you've entered several times before or this is your first entry in our annual search for promising talent and material, we wish you the very best of luck in 2010.

In this issue of *LOGLINE*, a new contributor, acclaimed TV writer/producer Bill Grundfest, boils down the lessons of all those writing courses, seminars and how-to books to three simple principles. 2005 Gold Prize Winner Sean Mick talks shop, explaining how paring down the setup can actually enhance a scene's payoff. PAGE Awards Judge Alison Haskovec invites film writers to emulate the complex female characters now thriving on TV. John Truby explains the success of *Paranormal Activity* and how to write a viable horror spec yourself. Dave Trottier teaches us how to handle characters reading something onscreen. Marvin V. Acuna identifies the mindset of a winner at the screenwriting game. And in InkTip's Hot Leads column, you'll learn the specific needs of producers actively seeking new material.

Happy reading,

John Evans

The Entirety of Scriptwriting Technique in 3 Post-It Notes

by Bill Grundfest

Here it comes, aspiring screenwriters! Are you sitting down? If not, then sit down. If so, then lie down. Here is everything you need to know to write like the pros, in three **Post-It-Note Principles**:

1. LOGLINE. You must create a compelling logline for your script (that's the *TV Guide*-sized description) that says WHO — WANTS — WHAT. If your WHO is relatable/likeable/hateful/scary, what they WANT and are ACTIVELY trying to get is something we emotionally care about, and a powerful WHAT stands in their way, all in one sentence, you have a possibility of creating a script that works. Without all this, you have zero chance and you may not move on.

2. CAUSALITY. The events in your story mustn't simply follow previous events, they must be CAUSED by previous events. In turn, they must CAUSE future events. This is what makes a page-turner, or causes us as viewers to lose track of time when we watch a movie or television show.

3. TOPS & BOTTOMS. What does everyone want at the top of your story and where do they end up regarding that specific issue at the bottom of your story? What do they want at the beginning of an act and where are they regarding that specific issue by the end of the act? The same question should be applied at the top and bottom of each scene.

BONUS POST-IT NOTE! How to Take a Notion and Turn It into a Script.

There are five levels of development for each script. You may only go to the next level upon succeeding at the previous one, and you must adhere to the three **Post-It-Note Principles** throughout.

1. Logline (see above)

2. Fat Paragraph that tells your overall story with beginning, middle and end

3. Three Fat Paragraphs, one for each act of the script

4. **Beat Sheet** with a logline for each scene that crystallizes it into one sentence

5. **Script**

That's it. The rest is DOING IT. Check what you've done against the three fundamentals. Re-do. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

It may be hard, but it's not complicated. Keep writing!

Bill Grundfest is a TV writer and producer who has won a Golden Globe Award® and received three Emmy® nominations. He writes for major award shows including the Oscars®, Grammys® and Emmys, including the most recent Emmy telecast. For more, visit his website at www.workshopforwriters.com.

Why It's Important to "Protect" Your Assets

by Sean Mick

"Writing is rewriting."

As screenwriters, we've heard it a million times. But it's so true! For me, a script doesn't truly come alive until it's been through numerous drafts. I liken it to a woodworker shaping a piece of oak, using finer and finer grades of sandpaper until the heart of the grain shines through. By shaping and honing our scripts through finer and finer drafts, rewriting, getting feedback, and doing yet more rewrites, we create the moments — scenes that surprise and sequences that crackle — that glue audiences to their seats.

> Sean Mick is one of only a handful of screenwriters to win two PAGE Awards. His Action / Adventure scripts *Silencer* and *Resurrection Run* won a 2005 Gold Prize and 2009 Bronze Prize, respectively. Sean has been signed by manager/producers Zero Gravity and both of his PAGE Award-winning scripts are being shopped in the new year, with Zero Gravity attached to produce.

But what to change? What to cut and what to leave in? What does the audience need to "get" our moments and our story? And how can we use cutting to make those moments really "pop?"

There are no hard and fast rules. One script's cuts are another's gaping holes. What I'll share here are some examples from working with my manager, Eric Williams at Zero Gravity Management, while fine-tuning my PAGE Awards Gold Prize-winning script *Silencer* for market. The feedback provided by Eric and his partners has been instrumental in helping me take my script, and my writing, to an entirely different level.

First, some words about feedback: whether you use friends or family, fellow writers, or a coverage service, notes are essential. Yes, we write for ourselves, but we also write for the audience. Feedback is a valuable tool to gain the "audience's perspective" and maximize your script's impact. Feedback is also subjective. Consider the source and trust your gut.

In my case, I got off to a good start with Eric and crew after receiving their first batch of notes, which involved a major first act rewrite (which, ironically, brought the story closer to my original concept). I knew right away that they "got it" and off we went.

As we got deeper into the process, honing the script through multiple passes, one note kept popping up: "We need to protect…" this or that scene. At first, I didn't get it. Protect? Protect what? And a lot of the proposed changes and cuts were, in my mind, going to ruin my carefully crafted setups and plot points. Nevertheless, I put my writer's ego aside and dug in to the notes.

And it finally hit me.

By "protect" Eric meant finding the balance between enough information to avoid confusing the audience while not bogging them down with unnecessary detail. It meant crafting necessary information to protect the ensuing payoff. In other words, making sure point A works so well that the audience can leap effortlessly from point A to point E (skipping B, C and D) and still "get it."

In *Silencer*, which deals with an ex-mob hitman on a quest to rescue a child from the clutches of his former boss, one of the bigger moments we needed to protect involved a gang of killers tracking our hero to his hiding place for a major action set piece.

First, we see the gang discover the location of the hero's only friend (and his likely place of refuge). We then cut away to our hero and his friend as they prepare to leave that location. We know they will take the friend's plane on their journey. As they drive to the airstrip, three cars full of bad guys come roaring after them for a car chase and huge gun battle.

To make sure everyone "got" the fact that our hero had been found, initially I inserted a brief scene of the bad guys at the airstrip. Then we cut to our heroes leaving for the same destination, followed by the arrival of the bad guys. That's the moment in need of protection. We know the bad guys are coming,

> *"Set up your big moments as efficiently as you can, then cut directly to those moments and trust your audience to come along with you."*

but not exactly when or from where. The brief airstrip scene (a location header and two lines of description) actually undercut the tension and surprise of their entrance.

Instead, I reworked how the bad guys learned their information (cutting dialogue and adding visuals for clarity) and cut the airstrip scene, protecting the bad guys' big entrance by saving it for the moment of greatest impact — when they come blasting after our heroes.

Even in smaller moments, cutting the fat can protect the payoff. Later in the script, the hero's plane circles the boss's Mexican hideaway as they plan their attack. Originally, a brief dialogue scene set up how another character would fly the plane while the hero and his buddy grab parachutes and jump from the plane. We see them suit up, then cut to a shot of two silhouettes free-falling through the night sky.

The moment to protect here is the free-fall. The audience knows they need a plan, and the parachutes were set up in a previous scene. We protect the subsequent scenes by cutting unnecessary exposition and letting the plan unfold onscreen. Now our hero simply tells his buddy to "let the kid fly, you're coming with me." Cut. And then they're free-falling from the plane. It's a minor change, but it definitely punches up the action.

One last example, a personal favorite: the climactic march from Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (which I pay homage to in *Silencer*). Pike Bishop doesn't gather the Bunch and explain how they need to get their guns, confront Mapache and rescue Angel. He says "Let's go" and then we see them do it. The entire film has set up the scene perfectly; any more explanation would rob the moment of its power.

So, protect your assets. Set up your big moments as efficiently as you can, then cut directly to those moments and trust your audience to come along with you.

Sex and the Small Screen

by Alison Haskovec

What can the film industry learn from television when it comes to writing female characters? Why are there are so few interesting roles for actresses in mainstream movies while TV seems to be brimming with them? From *Weeds* to *The Good Wife* and even the male-dominated *Mad Men,* women in television these days tend to be more three-dimensional and complex than their counterparts in film. And even the exceptions often have small-screen roots — witness the fabulous ladies of *Sex and the City*. Setting aside the argument of whether TV is simply more female-driven, film scribes can learn much about creating memorable women from their colleagues in television.

> Alison Haskovec has more than eight years of experience in feature film development and production. She began her career at Team Todd / Dreamworks and Radar Pictures, and for the past four years she served as Vice President of Production at Intermedia Films, where she worked on such films as *The Hunting Party*, written and directed by Richard Shepard, Billy Ray's *Breach*, and the Japanese horror remake *One Missed Call*. Alison became a PAGE Awards Judge in 2009.

This isn't rocket science. In many ways, writing a female role is no different than writing a male one. Women are made up of the same basic building blocks of human physicality, emotions, objectives, and life stories. But when it comes to writing women, the specific traps to avoid are different.

One enduring cliché is the "Madonna-whore complex," where women are portrayed as either virginal and pure or sexy and slutty, but nothing in between. This has led to a surfeit of woebegone mothers and prostitutes in film. The Showtime series *Weeds*, on the other hand, is a superb example of reaching beyond these trite stereotypes. The lead, Nancy Botwin, is a youthful widow who sells drugs to support her two young sons. She is at once a doting mother, a sharp wit, and a sassy woman oozing sex appeal. As Nancy is an entrepreneur, criminal and loving parent all rolled into one, it becomes difficult to pigeonhole her and that makes the character exciting and fresh.

A second stale type in movies is the passive victim. You know the one. She often appears as the wronged wife, relegated to a backseat view of her own betrayal. In most cases, making her more true-to-life requires little more than granting her thoughts and objectives independent of her husband's. Having her own agenda makes a woman more active and can do wonders for her appeal to audiences. Alicia Florrick, the protagonist in the CBS series *The Good Wife*, at first seems like a familiarly passive figure, forced to stand silently by her husband's side as he admits to his affairs. But after he is sent to prison, Alicia must start over as a junior associate at a law firm and it is there that we are able to delve much more deeply into her psychology. Alicia is torn about her husband's indiscretions; though she feels horribly cheated, she continues to do everything in her power to keep her family together. Her personal dilemma, the inner strength she finds to confront it, and her impressive skill as an attorney make Alicia an uncommon and riveting female character.

Yet another tired Hollywood trend is the portrayal of women as mere pawns in extravagant male fantasies. Often personified as an attractive bimbo, this character is always ready and eager to jump in the sack. She generally looks and speaks more like a caricature than a real person. And yet, giving women their own dreams, desires, and complexities can actually enhance the drama and make their relationships more believable, exciting, and substantive. Characters are much more intriguing when they aren't exactly what they seem. For instance, the AMC show *Mad Men* could have completely glamorized gorgeous blonde housewife Betty Draper. On the surface, she seems to have it all, especially by early 1960s standards — a beautiful house, a handsome husband, and cute as-a-button kids. But beneath that veneer, Betty smokes like a chimney, is in therapy after several nervous attacks, and seems itchy about her domestic role. There is much more to this sweet little stay-at-home mom than meets the eye, and its gradual emergence makes an otherwise throwaway part quite gripping to watch.

> *"The most interesting female characters... have their own hang-ups, obsessions and points of view."*

In short, the most interesting female characters are not unlike their male counterparts in that they are layered, proactive, and unconventional; they have their own hang-ups, obsessions, and strong points of view. Even the most testosterone-fueled movies and TV shows are elevated by female roles with originality and spark. But don't take my word for it, just re-watch *Rocky* and consider what the movie would be like without the Talia Shire character, Adrian. The movie is a classic not just because of its underdog protagonist but because of the quirky woman he loves. It is their relationship that gives the film its soul. Were *Rocky* made in Hollywood today, Adrian could well be a scantily clad Victoria's Secret model utterly lacking in personality. Luckily, in 2010 we can find plenty of fascinating female characters simply by turning on the TV.

Writing the Horror Film: *Paranormal Activity*

by John Truby

Paranormal Activity isn't a great film. But it is a brilliant indie filmmaking strategy. In my article "10 Story Techniques You Must Use to Sell Your Script," I state that "if you're writing a screenplay for an indie film, write horror, thriller, or love." Horror is the most consistently popular genre around the world after myth. But unlike the epic-scale myth, horror can be made for very little money.

So why doesn't everyone just go out and make their own indie horror film? Well, almost everyone trying to break in does. But they don't succeed because they don't know the horror genre well enough to do it in a unique way, especially within the form's extremely confining budget limitations.

Writer-director Orin Peli succeeded where most others fail because he adapted the special horror story beats to a low budget and turned the lack of money into a strength. The strategy is not new; *The Blair Witch Project* pioneered it back in 1999. Essentially, you make the horror come out of the real and the everyday. Instead of jamming blood and gore (and expensive special effects) in the audience's face, you highlight the contrast between normal people and extraordinary circumstances.

By first establishing normal characters (played by unknown actors), you intensify the audience's identification up front. Then you build the attacks from the small and the believable to the big and outrageous, all within the tightest space you can find. Because you start with real characters that the audience identifies with, the audience experiences the attacks in a more personal and intense way.

At least that's the theory. But you may have noticed a huge structural flaw in this approach. The less money you have, and the smaller the space of your horror world, the less plot you have. The hero cowers in a room and the monster attacks again and again. That's the same beat over and over, folks. The audience gets bored quickly, not to mention exasperated by the fact that the hero doesn't just get out of the damn room.

Peli doesn't completely overcome this basic weakness in the structural foundation of the horror form. But he uses two techniques that make *Paranormal Activity* a big hit. First, he establishes the everyday reality of his couple with great skill. He strings together a number of short scenes at the beginning of the story with no structural value except to show that these two actors are a real couple living in a real house. They have a believable chemistry and argue about the things real couples fight about.

Any director will tell you that 80% of his or her job is the casting, and these two lead actors prove that in spades. We tend to forget that one of the biggest obstacles stars must overcome is getting the audience to forget that they are famous actors only playing a part. The actors here were unknowns but had to play the early scenes in the flat, non-dramatic way real people act in real life. But they also had to be adept at the extremely dramatic acting required in the later scenes, when the supernatural attacks attain life-and-death stakes. These actors excel at both, and the performance by Katie Featherston is superb.

The second technique Peli uses to overcome the lack of plot in the horror form is his subtle weaving of the horror story beats (events) into the realistic world he sets up. Horror has more specialized beats than any other genre, a whopping 15 of them. Why? It's **because** horror is so narrow a form, with so little natural plot, that it **must** have that many unique beats to carry it. Those specialized beats represent the superstructure, the horror mythology if you will, that prevents a plot with normally one beat, repeated ad infinitum, from sinking like a stone. Beats like the "sins of the parents" and "crossing the threshold" aren't just a natural outgrowth of the unique theme of horror. They create the plot complexity and character depth that this form desperately needs to last on the big screen for 90+ minutes.

Peli includes every one of the 15 unique beats in *Paranormal Activity,* but he sets up the realistic base of the film so well that you don't notice them. I would argue he could have pushed the horror beats even further and thereby avoided a long stretch of sloooowwww that plagues the middle of his film. But that was a choice he consciously made, believing I suspect that he would lose the realism that was the heart of his storytelling strategy. In this he also borrowed from the strategy of the short film: focus everything to one big punch at the end of the story. It's one helluva punch.

Ironically, Peli's low-budget, realistic approach highlighted for me the idea that horror is fundamentally about dying. He simply sets his camera in the corner of a single room and then builds the assault. When all is said and done, great horror storytelling is about pushing you into a smaller and smaller box until your box is in the ground.
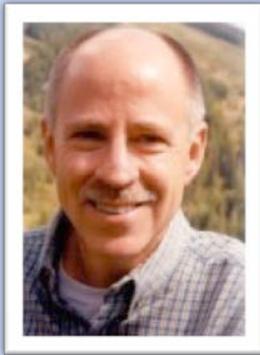
How to Reveal What a Character is Reading

by Dave Trottier

READER'S QUESTION:

I have a scene where a character discovers a journal and reads an entry from it. Since it's not really up to me whether the character reads the entry aloud or if the actual entry is displayed on screen, how should I format it in the script?

DAVE'S ANSWER:

Before I answer the question, let me make two points.

First, don't be ambiguous in a screenplay. Describe what the movie audience will see and hear. Either the character will read the journal out loud, or the movie audience will read it silently — you decide. Yes, the director may change what you wrote later, but at least give him or her a vision of what **you** see.

Second, only dialogue is dialogue, meaning that only spoken words qualify as dialogue. Any other sounds that a character makes (such as screams and grunts) should not be written as dialogue but as **action.**

Now, in answer to your question, I see two ways to approach this formatting problem.

1. If the journal entry is very short, you might consider allowing the audience to read it. Use the INSERT technique for this:

```
INSERT - NATASHA'S JOURNAL, which reads:

    "I love Boris, but I plan to leave him for
    Fearless Leader."
```

2. If the journal entry is longer, then perhaps your character can read it to the audience:

```
Boris tiptoes into Natasha's room, spots her journal, and turns to
the last page.  His eyes soften.

                    NATASHA (V.O.)
    I love Boris, but his silly mustache tickles me.
    I plan to leave him for Fearless Leader.
```
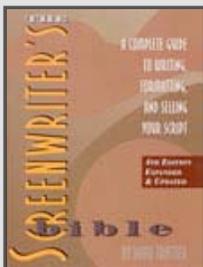
I hope your dialogue brings you a lot of action. Keep writing, and best wishes for 2010.

Play to Win

by Marvin V. Acuna

"Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her: but once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game." — **Voltaire**

In 1991, while playing Frisbee with a friend in Oregon, screenwriter Stuart Beattie decides he will write a screenplay about pirates. He submits the material to the **one** person he knows living in Los Angeles. Twelve years later, the world is introduced to *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (though Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio would receive the final screenplay credit).

In 2008, Michael Martin was named one of *Variety's* "10 Screenwriters to Watch." While living in Brooklyn and working as a flagger for the New York MTA, a car accident changed Martin's life. With his car totaled, he was determined to find a creative way to buy a new one. He entered a screenplay competition and won $10,000. His submission, *Brooklyn's Finest*, made its way into the hands of producers who packaged the film with Richard Gere and Ethan Hawke. Directed by Antoine Fuqua, it will be released by Overture Films.

Spider-Man is one of Sony's most valuable franchises. The story of an ordinary kid dealing with the normal struggles of youth in addition to those of a costumed crime fighter, the series has amassed a worldwide box office gross of nearly $2.5 billion dollars. Receiving screenplay credit on the second and third installments was a 77-year-old screenwriter, Alvin Sargent.

Melissa Rosenberg graduated with a dance and theatre degree from Bennington College. She then made the decision to become a filmmaker. Her second produced feature screenplay was the adaptation of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*. She was given a "manifesto" written by Meyer outlining **everything** that had to be included or could not be changed in the adaptation. She wrote a detailed 25-page outline in August 2007, expecting to have another two months to write the actual screenplay, but had only five weeks to finish the script before the commencement of the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike. Rosenberg pulled it off. She has since adapted the highly anticipated and online-ticket-sales-record-setting sequel *New Moon* as well as the next chapter in the series, *Eclipse*.

Federico "Fede" Alvarez, an obscure filmmaker from Uruguay, places his short film on YouTube and it spreads virally, attracting the attention of young agents and producers scouring the Net for fresh new talent. The feeding frenzy that erupts results in a seven-figure directing deal, representation by CAA's Todd Feldman (one of the premier literary agents in the industry), commercial representation by a prestigious L.A. based firm and the privilege of being mentored by one of the most commercially successful filmmakers of our time, Sam Raimi.

In my mind, the examples mentioned above represent one simple idea: **Play to win.**

If you want a professional career in screenwriting, dismiss all the perceived limitations that are holding you back. The only limitations that exist are the ones you have set for yourself.

I think storytelling expert Christopher Vogler summed it up best at one of our lunches. He said, "Some people have a dream. The dream itself is enough. And that's okay. But, for others, the dream itself is not enough. It simply must be realized. And nothing, no one, will prevent them from attaining it. They don't focus any energy on what they don't have."

Unfortunately, I find that aspiring screenwriters in general do just that… they focus on what they don't have or what's not in their control.

If you are satisfied with simply having the dream, I salute you. If that's not sufficient, then go claim what belongs to you.

You don't have an agent? Neither did Michael Martin. You don't live in Los Angeles? Neither did Stuart Beattie. You're too old? Tell that to Alvin Sargent. You are a minority in a male-dominated industry? Tell that to Melissa Rosenberg. You don't live in the United States? Neither does Federico "Fede" Alvarez.

Now, I could continue to pile on examples of screenwriters who play to win, who simply **decided** to be successful and who do not expend energy on what others perceive to be limitations. But, I thought it best to finish my rant with this:

"Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win." — **Sun Tzu**

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[code: kn4j2hpx8h]

We are looking for completed, feature-length, ultra low budget character-driven dramas that can be shot in one or two locations. The script should focus on the interesting dynamics between characters, with well-written dialogue in the vein of *Tape, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *Oleanna*. Please do not submit any scripts in other genres (comedies, thrillers, etc.) and only submit a stage-play adaptation if you own the rights to the work. A synopsis is required and we are only looking for material that is free of any attachments (talent, director, etc.).

Budget will not exceed $200,000. Writers must be non-WGA only.

Please submit your work only if it fits the above description exactly. If you aren't sure, email jerrol@inktip.com. Thanks.

Wishing Well Pictures
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We are looking for completed feature-length period-piece dramas with a male lead in his 20's. The story should be high stakes for the character, such as fighting for a cause or for love, but not limited to those. We like stories such as *The Last of the Mohicans, Braveheart, Dances with Wolves* and any Ed Zwick film. Though a romantic interest is good, we are not seeking Jane Austen-type stories. Big action scenes are not required. We are more interested in a compelling hero, as in the examples above. A synopsis and full logline (not a tagline) are required.

Budget has not been determined. WGA or non-WGA may submit.

Please submit your work only if it fits the above description exactly. If you aren't sure, email jerrol@inktip.com. Thanks.

8790 Pictures
[code: n04t3u3swf]

We are looking for completed feature-length or MOW romantic comedy scripts featuring a female lead in her 20's and involving Christmas or Valentine's Day. The story should be appropriate to air on television, meaning for audiences of all ages. No serious dramas or provocative situations. Please do not submit very lengthy feature scripts as the runtime must be MOW friendly.

Our credits include *Because of Winn-Dixie*.

Budget will not exceed $4 million. WGA or non-WGA may submit.

Please submit your work only if it fits the above description exactly. If you aren't sure, email jerrol@inktip.com. Thanks.

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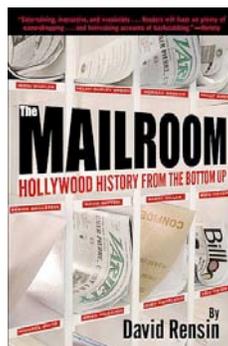
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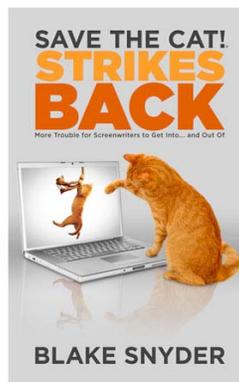
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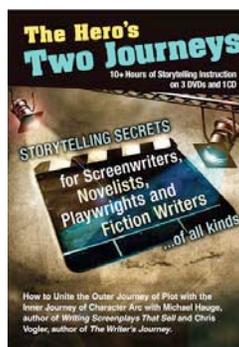
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