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Letter from the Editor

Are you ready to show the world what you're capable of? The [2013 PAGE Awards](#) competition could be your entrée as a professional screenwriter. Winners in 10 categories are spotlighted for producers and representatives eager to find new talent. In just the last couple of years, PAGE Award winners have gotten movies made and landed TV jobs. A contest submission is an investment in your career and a statement of faith in your ability to write for a demanding industry that is also desperate to find new voices. The Late Entry Deadline is April 1, 2013.

For a peek behind the curtain at the criteria used by industry gatekeepers when evaluating material, check out our exclusive eBook [The Insiders' Guide to Screenwriting](#). Penned by 10 PAGE Judges in unpretentious style, it breaks down in detail each key aspect of the script – premise, structure, pacing, etc. Indispensable to beginners and veteran writers alike!

Spring is a time of natural renewal, and screenwriters are always seeking new information, fresh inspiration and just a few handy tips. In this issue, Tobin Addington makes a stirring argument for embracing your individuality as a writer. PAGE Judge Helen Truong tells you what movie execs REALLY want. Our resident genre doyen John Truby discusses the groundbreaking sitcom *Girls*. Script swami Dave Trottier ends the examination of scene headers begun last issue. Marvin V. Acuna offers a model for a compelling query to writers' reps. And finally, we have the latest "hot leads" from InkTip.com!

Happy reading,



Latest News from the PAGE Awards

- ◇ The hit U.K. comedy series *Spy*, created and written by 2008 PAGE Gold Prize winner Simeon Goulden, is headed for ABC primetime. Simeon wrote the pilot adaptation, which will be produced by Hat Trick Productions and ABC Studios, starring Rob Corddry (*Hot Tub Time Machine*), Mason Cook (*Spy Kids*), Ken Jeong (*The Hangover*), and Paget Brewster (*Criminal Minds*). Simeon is represented by the Curtis Brown Agency and UTA.
- ◇ The 2011 PAGE Award-winning TV Drama pilot *Icon*, by Joe Webb, has been optioned by Sony, with Jon Amiel (*Entrapment*) attached to direct and Deb Spera & Maria Grasso (*Army Wives*) attached to produce. In addition, Joe's TV drama pilot *Books* was produced by Freemantle Media last year and won the top drama prize at the 2012 New York Television Festival. Joe was signed by The Gersh Agency shortly after his PAGE win.
- ◇ The new feature *Blood Drive*, by 2006 PAGE Award winner Christian Parkes, has been picked up by Sentinel Pictures. Christian is represented by PAGE Judge Jeff Belkin.
- ◇ Jeff Belkin also recently signed 2012 Silver Prize winner Reeshi Ray after discovering his script in the 2012 contest. Reeshi's PAGE Award-winner *Coyote* is now in development.
- ◇ 2012 Bronze Prize winner Lyse Beck has now been signed by John Ferraro of Valleywood Entertainment, whom she met via a PAGE Judge's recommendation. Lyse writes: "John is everything I wanted in a manager. We had two amazing meetings and he's negotiating my very first option deal now. I am so appreciative of your kindness and support!"

2013 PAGE Awards Late Entry Deadline: Monday, April 1

A Story Only You Could Tell

by Tobin Addington

A friend of mine in film school was an accomplished stage and screen actress before becoming a writer. She used to tell this story about graduating from acting school, moving to New York and believing she could play any part. She auditioned for everything: grandmothers,

Tobin Addington won the 2012 PAGE Grand Prize for his psychological teen thriller *The Unraveling*. He was subsequently signed by literary manager Marti Blumenthal and is at work on a number of projects, including the true story of a Montana man who survived an encounter with a serial killer. Tobin currently lives in Brooklyn with his family and returns to the West as often as possible.

cab drivers, hobos from Wisconsin. And she couldn't understand why she, a 20-something "Southern belle" type, wasn't being cast!

Well, I suffered a similar affliction when I left film school armed with a new manager, a few writing awards, and the sure knowledge that I could write everything.

And believe me, I tried. Over the next five or six years, I attempted romantic dramas,

screwball comedies, political satires, spy movies and more. I was all over the map, writing constantly (a good thing), indiscriminately (a bad thing), and with an increasing sense of desperation (wasn't I supposed to be a success by now?).

When I met with producers, they'd ask what kind of material I wrote and I'd fumble for an answer, trying to make sure they understood I could write anything. Anything at all. Whatever they wanted. I was ready!

I kept getting the same notes on my scripts – people liked the writing but didn't always feel connected to the stories. With some exceptions, the stories didn't feel personal. They didn't feel like ME.

My technique was getting better, my sense of structure and pacing had improved, my dialogue was crisp and my characters were filling out and coming alive. But I didn't have the courage to throw MYSELF into my stories, to be vulnerable and honest and take the risk of accepting and revealing who I was as a person and a writer.

In trying to write EVERYTHING, I was often telling stories that ANYBODY could've told. I was writing them well, but it turns out that's not enough.

Plus, there's not time to write EVERYTHING. Life is short. You only get to tell a certain number of stories, so you better make them count.

I decided to take stock. See if I could identify the common elements in my best scripts. Figure out what it was I wrote that nobody else could write.

This is what I found: My writing came alive when it involved the West. I grew up in Montana and have a special place in my writer's heart for the characters and landscapes of the American West, from the small cities and smaller towns to the mountains and plains, as well as the self-reliant (often irascible) pioneer descendants who live there.

Second, I have a thing for character-driven suspense. (More Hitchcock, less *Saw*.) I'm fascinated by morally complex characters, characters questioning reality, and stories that play with identity – stolen, assumed, mistaken or lost. I like secrets and mystery, and I have some facility with heart-in-the-throat reveals. I had worried that such a focus would be limiting, but once I accepted this as part of my writer's DNA, I found that it opened up all kinds of genre possibilities, from supernatural thrillers to film noir.

I had also been told that I write young people well, particularly teenagers. Most of my best screenplays involved main or major characters in their teens, and I've always enjoyed exploring the torturous geography of adolescence.

So I went through the concepts I was considering and found one that combined my love of the West with my natural inclination toward suspense. I built the story around a strong teenage protagonist and worked to pour MYSELF into the story. I wanted to write something very ME, something nobody else could write, and I hoped the finished product would attract enough attention that I could reintroduce myself as a writer who knew what he wrote.

Last October, that script, *The Unraveling*, won the PAGE Grand Prize – which blew away all my wildest dreams and expectations.

Now, the cynical version of this advice is that you have to "brand yourself." You want your work to come to mind when producers and executives are looking to hire a writer for a particular project. The more poetic (and probably more useful) way to think about it is this...

Write stories that only **you** can tell. Stories that, written by anybody else, wouldn't vibrate with the same authenticity, personality, and truth. Stories representative of you as a writer and a human being.

Ask someone who knows your work to tell you what they respond to most in your writing, what feels most alive, the most like YOU. Think about what vein of stories in your artist's soul runs so deep and strong that you could tap into it time and time again without exhausting the supply.

Maybe it's urban dance films or Appalachian rural dramas or big-canvas sci-fi epics. It could be stories about the quest for eternal life or navigating sibling rivalry or finding forgiveness. Whatever stories are closest to your heart and experience and passion – whatever you've been too scared or embarrassed or ashamed to attempt – that's the material you should start pursuing immediately. Today!

My new litmus test, the one I started using when I wrote *The Unraveling*, is to ask myself: "If this is the last story I ever get to write, would I be proud of it as my legacy?"

If you force yourself to answer that question honestly, you'll find your way to your own stories. They'll be in your blood, you'll make them look like magic, and I guarantee – whatever happens next – you'll have a more fulfilling, enriching experience as a writer.

Because career, fortune and fame aside, life turns out to be pretty short. Spend it telling stories only YOU can tell.

Fresh Yet Familiar – The Paradox

by Helen Truong

There is a catalogue of passes every writer will hear over the course of his or her career: “Not commercial enough...” “Like it but don’t love it...” “[your genre] is dead...”

Helen Truong is a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. She has been a professional story analyst, evaluating scripts and writing coverage for companies such as United Artists, MGM, Paramount, and Nickelodeon Movies. The recipient of several prestigious screenwriting awards and fellowships, she has written scripts for L.A. and New York-based production companies.

But when execs are pressed for what they do want, the most baffling and common refrain is: “We’re looking for something fresh, yet familiar.”

Nothing is more infuriatingly puzzling. How can something be new but old at the same time? Different from everything we’ve seen, yet just like every other movie? The more they elaborate on it, the more baffling it sounds, like some Hollywood version of the mystical Riddle of the Sphinx.

So what DO industry executives mean when they ask for something fresh, yet familiar?

Storytelling has existed from the dawn of creation. The medium may change (from oral storytelling to novel to stage to film), but the need for stories is programmed into people. Great stories cut across boundaries of culture, era and context. This is why a movie like *Les Miserables* is still relevant today. Our world can still recognize social inequity and the struggle of a man trying to survive a system that must be changed. It is why *Romeo and Juliet* is remade with a different setting every few years – the story of forbidden love is timeless and universal.

Keeping this in mind will free you from feeling that you have to “reinvent the wheel” when it comes to stories. Remember that the WHEEL DESIGN is the familiar part. It’s familiar because it works. Your job is to refine the wheel, much like stone wheels evolved into wagon wheels into the car tires of today.

Great stories are all built around the same classic conflicts and themes – it is only setting, character or a unique “hook” that differentiates them – and THIS is where you as the writer can contribute a new element that makes your script distinct from everything else out there.

Setting can bring a new twist to a timeless story. A classic example is *West Side Story*, which is essentially *Romeo and Juliet* updated and set in 1950s-era New York with rival gangs. A script that sold recently, *Romeo / Juliet*, boldly announces its roots. It features the classic story but it is set in the present day and in the context of the drug world (“Romeo” is an undercover DEA agent and “Juliet” is the daughter of a cartel boss).

Avatar essentially tells the same story as *Dances with Wolves*, but does so in an entirely new world – set on a wondrous planet we have never seen before. The core story, that of a man who realizes he’s been fighting on the wrong side and comes to appreciate another culture, is a timeless tale that lends itself to many variations.

Another movie that successfully uses this same setup is *The Last Samurai*. A British soldier is captured by the Japanese, then switches allegiances and fights on the side of the Japanese.

These three movies are all variations of the same classic tale, but each one manages to give the core story a new setting or context that makes it feel unique.



Another way your screenplay can distinguish itself is by showing us characters we’ve never before seen portrayed on screen. Think about *Shrek*. The movie follows the same hero’s journey and overall story as the fairy tales it references, but makes its protagonist a grumpy troll. Because trolls are so often villains in fairy tales, this surprising role reversal makes *Shrek* feel totally fresh and different.

Silver Linings Playbook is another great example. We’ve seen hundreds of rom-coms featuring two cutesy leads who start off hating each other yet realize they’re perfect for each other by the end. David O. Russell’s film follows the basic storyline, but it gives the audience characters we haven’t seen in rom-coms before. The female lead is a widow known for sleeping around. The male lead has massive anger issues and was just released from a psychiatric center. The characters are so utterly unique that the entire movie feels new, even though it follows the conventional rom-com’s structure and hits all of the standard beats.

Finally, you can add a unique element to a timeless story by coming up with a great hook – that is, an original concept or twist that gives new life to a familiar idea. Again, *Avatar* is a perfect example. Not only is the alien world a new setting, there is a fantastic hook in the idea of avatars, which empower humans to live inside fantastical new bodies while still retaining their own consciousness. Combining these original elements with a universal story helped *Avatar* break box-office records.

Memento uses a clever hook to make an old story feel new again. The movie tells a classic noir story of a man trying to avenge his wife’s death, but the story is told backwards. The hook makes all the difference.

I so often read scripts that try to be EXACTLY like every other movie out there. Or conversely, they are so unlike any movie ever made that it’s impossible to picture the script being produced. But if you can identify an element – whether it’s the setting, the characters or a great hook – that makes an ageless story feel new and relevant to today’s audiences, you will have that holy grail of scripts: Fresh, yet familiar!

Writing the TV Sitcom: *Girls*

by John Truby



John Truby is regarded as the serious writer's story coach and has taught his 22-Step Great Screenwriting and Genre courses to sold-out audiences in Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Sydney, Rome, Toronto and other far-flung locales. Over the past 20 years, more than 30,000 students have taken Truby's 22-Step class and rave about the insights and direction it has given them. He is also the author of *The Anatomy of Story*. *Booklist* declares, "Truby's tome is invaluable to any writer looking to put an idea to paper." To learn more about John Truby's classes, screenwriting software, and story consultation services, please visit www.truby.com today.

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The biggest strength of HBO's series *Girls* is that it purposely breaks the sitcom form. To see how, we have to begin by looking at the character web of the show. *Girls* sets up the character web using the technique I call "4-point opposition" (see the [Sitcom Audio Class](#) for details), which is the structural foundation of the classic sitcom. With 4-point opposition, you have a minimum of four central characters, each distinctly different from the others. All stories and comedy come from the interactions of these four characters.

Where *Girls* twists the normal 4-point opposition is in how it differentiates the characters, and most especially in how it defines their character flaws. Traditional sitcom characters have one trait by which they can quickly be labeled comically, such as "the innocent" or "the raunchy one." They also have one weakness, which is relatively mild and almost always strictly psychological. A popular sitcom like *2 Broke Girls* isn't about exploring complex characters. It's about placing two characters with an easily recognized comic shtick in some kind of trouble every week and watching the unique way they get out.

In contrast, the four main women on *Girls* have serious character flaws, both psychological and moral. They're very self-centered, they make lots of mistakes and they sleep with the wrong people. Sex for these women is very in-your-face and often painfully pathetic.

The most obvious benefit to a more complex character definition/opposition is that it gives the audience a strong sense that this is probably what women in their early 20s are really doing. That's followed immediately by the sense that we haven't seen anywhere close to this kind of reality before. Sure, I've always known intellectually that the traditional singles sitcom is a fantasy confection. But one episode of *Girls* made it jarringly obvious to me that all other depictions of young women in sitcoms have been simplistic fakes.

One way that *Girls* structurally flips the normal sitcom form is in the way it handles the characters' self-revelations, of which the normal sitcom character has few if any. The conventional wisdom has always been that if sitcom characters undergo any real change or growth it would destroy the show's setup and chemistry. But these girls, especially Hannah, have self-revelations all the time. They are constantly analyzing themselves, as if they can make themselves grow up and have happy lives just by thinking about it. They have a strange mix of being highly intelligent and clueless at the same time.

But it's also a big advantage, because this mix not only defines their characters, it is the source of much of the comedy on the show. The constant alternation between self-revelations and blunders is built into the characters from the beginning. The original construction of a show determines everything that is possible as the show plays out its run.

In this vein, it's instructive that the name of the show is *Girls*, not *Women*. That not only tells you the maturity level of these characters, it is a very conscious reference to the classic feminist line: "We are women, not girls." These women are well past the feminist struggle of who they can be in a male-dominated society. They don't even think about it. But they have little clue of how to be a grown-up.

A show with this kind of setup gives the writers tremendous freedom to explore character and break out of the sitcom straitjacket. But it also creates some serious problems. For one thing, these women can be deeply annoying. I actually prefer "unlikable" characters. *Seinfeld* showed us long ago that unlikable characters are more intriguing, especially over the long haul of a series, and are much funnier. But these women are so self-centered no one could stand to be with them for longer than 10 minutes.

But there's a bigger problem that comes with such complex, self-aware characters: thin plot. The reason it's called situation comedy is that you put the heroes in a predicament and watch them struggle to get free. This predicament structure gives you maximum plot, not just for one episode but for 100 episodes over many seasons. In contrast, the girls in *Girls* are so self-conscious, navel gazing to the point of stupidity, that they don't have much of a story. They don't do anything.

The people who like this show might argue that they're not interested in the plots of most sitcoms. These are plots of everyday life, of becoming adult women with the help, and sometimes the hindrance, of your best friends. And that feels real and satisfying.

I think the future path for this show, which the writers have already begun to explore, lies in the moral flaws of the characters. With right blend of psychological flaws and moral dilemmas, surprising plot will come from complex characters.

Slugging It Out: Part 2

by Dave Trottier

This concludes a discussion of scene headings (slug lines) begun last issue.

As a script consultant, I sometimes find myself saying, “Where am I?” while reading a script. For example, here’s one of my favorites.

INT. A HECTIC BREAKFAST - DAY

“A hectic breakfast” is not a location. WHERE AM I? Here’s another goof.

EXT. OCEAN - DAY

Marion runs through the waves.

LIBRARY

Marion reads a book.

How can a library be a secondary location within an ocean? Is it a floating library? And how did we get from an EXTERIOR camera placement to an INTERIOR? Did I miss something? You don’t want a reader to stop and try to figure this out. The story should flow smoothly through the reader’s mind.

Let’s go to another example. As you know, you begin a scene with a **master scene heading**, which names the master (or primary) location. For example, EXT. SMITH HOUSE – DAY. Other locations (such as BEDROOM or HALLWAY) that are part of the master location are called **secondary locations**; the resulting heading is called a **secondary scene heading**.

In addition, it’s okay to add a secondary location to a master (primary) location in a master scene heading. I’ll illustrate all of these points below.

INT. SMITH HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

John slams the front door and races down the

HALLWAY

and into his

BEDROOM

where he dives on top of his bed and sobs.

As you can see, we began with a master scene heading that includes a secondary location and then move to other secondary locations.

Any number of secondary headings can follow as long as the locations are part of the master (primary) location. Once we change the camera placement to an exterior location OR to a location that is not part of the master location, we must create a new master scene heading.

What if you want to show John sobbing on the same bed, hours later?

INT. SMITH HOUSE - BEDROOM - HOURS LATER

That’s correct, or you could use the following secondary heading:

HOURS LATER

John continues to sob.

If I may, I’ll mention one other common formatting fumble – including description in the scene heading. To wit:

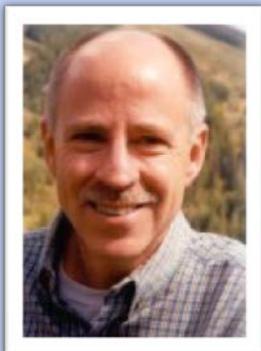
EXT. A WINDY NIGHT WITH A PALE MOON SHINING THROUGH TREES IN THE WOODS

That scene heading should actually be written as follows:

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

A pale moon shines through trees buffeted by a stiff wind.

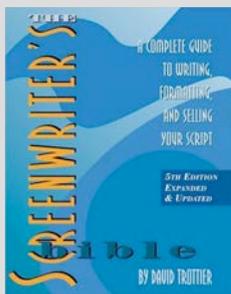
Save the description for the description (action) sections of your script. That will save the reader a lot of pain, making him or her a happy reader. And a happy reader can make you a happy writer.



Dave Trottier has sold screenplays and developed projects for The Walt Disney Company, Jim Henson Pictures, York Entertainment, On the Bus Productions, Hill Fields and New Century Pictures. As a script consultant, he has helped dozens of clients sell their work and win awards. [The Screenwriter’s Bible](#), Dave’s primer for both aspiring and professional scribes, is perhaps the most comprehensive industry guide on the market. To learn more about Dave Trottier’s books, classes and mentoring services, visit: www.keepwriting.com

Dave Trottier’s

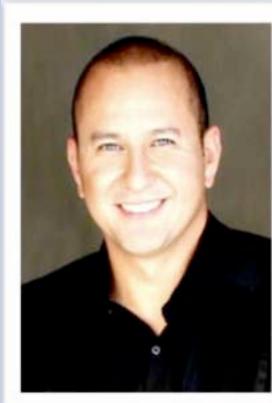
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Marvin V. Acuna is an accomplished film and television producer. He is currently in post-production on the features *Chez Upshaw*, starring Kevin Pollak and Illeana Douglas, and *Lovelace*, with Amanda Seyfried, Peter Saarsgard and James Franco.

Previously, he executive produced *The Great Buck Howard* (starring John Malkovich) and *Two Days* (Paul Rudd, Donal Logue), among other films.

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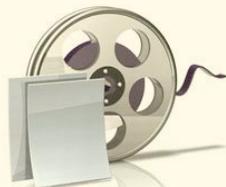
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What Makes a Query Great?

by Marvin V. Acuna

Among the copious questions presented and addressed in a tele-seminar I hosted, the following question prompted me to share my thoughts here.

I've emailed a number of managers and agents seeking representation, but have not heard back from anyone. What's the trick to securing a good agent or manager to represent me and my screenplays?

The trick? There is no trick. The answer lies in your **query**. There are many tools to aid you in your pursuit of representation, but the query and its components may be the most useful. A good query includes an engaging introduction and a compelling logline. Today we'll be discussing both.

It's widely believed that representatives delegate reading incoming queries to an assistant or intern. But the truth is, many representatives **DO** read queries. Even more importantly, representatives actually respond to the ones that **hook** their interest. If you are not generating any interest from queries, it simply means that you need to redraft or redirect your query.

First, targeting CAA or any of the top-tier literary representatives is simply the wrong strategy. They are shaping careers, not inventing them. They are elevating a career, not commencing one. Targeting boutique entities that develop new talent is a more appropriate and useful strategy. New blood is welcomed. But be original! Most representatives' inboxes are littered with emails that begin:

Dear Representative,

I'm in search of a manager to help me sell my work.

Boring and generic, right? If your email query begins this way or anything that resembles it, you may as well delete the email yourself. Instead, use the power of the Internet to ensure that your introduction stands out. This is a town full of press releases, screenwriting forums and companies that track who sells what, who buys what, who is being hired, fired, promoted, etc. Use this information to set yourself apart. Here's an example:

Dear Chris,

Congrats on the recent spec sales to Sony Animation and Disney – especially in the current environment. Personally, I found the Sony project logline to be particularly fun and entertaining.

This opening presents you as an informed professional versus a novice.

The industry is changing and will continue to evolve. What will not change is this... Representatives are seeking material they can sell in a competitive marketplace. Always lead off with your most commercial, big idea. Your logline should evoke the imagination to see the movie poster in our minds.

If it doesn't, rework your one-to-two-sentence logline until it does. This is the "coming attractions" moment. Christopher Vogler, author of *The Hero's Journey*, offers the following technique when crafting a logline. Introduce the reader to a base they are already familiar with, then offer a twist or something about the subject they did not know. For example:

The Easter Bunny decides to retire and hides out as a pet with a suburban family, turning their lives upside down.

See? Think in terms of the rhetorical device "Not only, but also."

Finally, never neglect the basics of spelling, grammar and clear, vivid writing. This is your first impression... it matters! Your query letter functions partly as a writing sample. Write a professional, intelligent, concise, intriguing query that includes a compelling and commercially viable logline, and not only will you entice representatives to ask for more, you'll be one step closer to a sale.



Sell Your Script

Hot Leads from InkTip.com

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER!

Please submit your work only if it seems like a **perfect fit** for these companies' needs. If you aren't sure your script meets their criteria, please check with jerrol@inktip.com before submitting it. **Do not contact the production company directly.** Thanks!

HOW TO SUBMIT YOUR SCRIPT:

1. Go to <http://www.inktippro.com/leads/>
2. Enter your email address
3. Copy/paste the corresponding code

Slyman Films

[code: za27sjpnhq]

We are looking for completed, feature-length big-budget action scripts that are based on stories from *1001 Nights*, in the vein of *Pirates of the Caribbean* but based on Ali Baba, Aladdin, Sinbad, etc.

Budget has yet to be determined. WGA and non-WGA okay.

Our credits include *L.A. Heat* and *Day of Wrath*.

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

AKA Aqua Ent

[code: 8fv7b1n8yj]

We are looking for completed feature-length, live-action scripts about a panda.

Budget has yet to be determined. WGA and non-WGA okay.

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

Arc Pictures

[code: xttx8fm2x0]

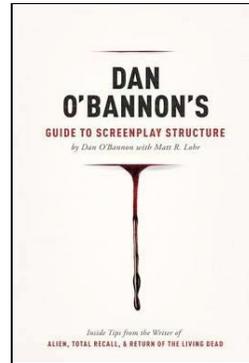
We are looking for completed, senior citizen sitcom pilots. Ideally we'd like to find material with old and young characters, highlighting families and relationships and age issues, but above all submissions must be for material featuring main characters who are senior citizens.

Budget will not exceed \$1 million. WGA and non-WGA okay.

Our credits include *Closing the Ring* and the upcoming *A Big Life*, which will be made from a script we discovered on InkTip.

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

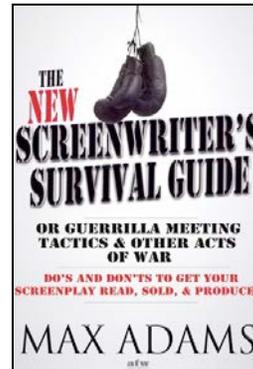
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DAN O'BANNON'S GUIDE TO SCREENPLAY STRUCTURE

The writer of *Alien* and *Total Recall* famously crafted his screenplays using a system he called "dynamic structure." This book outlines how O'Bannon's method differs from those of other well-known screenwriting gurus and uses examples to illustrate how dynamic structure can craft narrative and character. Also: insights on subjects such as the logic of three-act structure and the psychological principle known as "hedonic adaptation," which has a unique effect on the structuring of screen stories.

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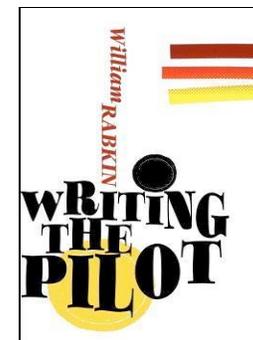


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