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Letter From the Editor

Congrats to all the proud winners of the 2019 PAGE Awards! What a tremendous feeling it must be to receive this industry-wide recognition, an honor that has given countless writers their first real shot at working in the global film and television industry. There is a lot of hard work to be done, as the reps you will meet are sure to tell you, but you're on your way! And to the vast majority of writers – those who did not win one of a handful of prizes – do not despair. The 2020 contest is right around the corner, and we can help you make your screenplay competition-ready.

How do we do that? [Script Services](#) is here to grant you access to industry readers who know what Hollywood is looking for. They're also the PAGE Awards Judges who decide which entries advance! With their constructive and always-encouraging input you can refine your work to meet the needs of today's reps, producers, and talent.

This issue of the **LOGLINE** eZine closes the book on another year and, as always, we try to go out with a bang! First, 2018 PAGE Award winner David Schumann shares his critical takeaways from the production of his first short film. PAGE Judge Laurie Ashbourne explains how theme should inform all aspects of your story. Script consultants Ray Morton and Dave Trottier tell scribes which trends to avoid and illustrate the best ways to build a compelling protagonist. Career coach Lee Jessup asks an array of working writers what their early mistakes were. Finally, InkTip offers three "hot leads" from producers seeking new projects to develop for the screen.

Happy reading,

Latest News From the PAGE Awards

◆ The new action/crime drama **Honest Thief**, by 2010 Bronze Prize winner Steve Allrich, is now in post-production. Filmed on location in Massachusetts and directed by Nick Cassavetes, the movie features Liam Neeson, Robert Patrick, and Kate Walsh in the starring roles. It is slated for release in 2020. Steve is represented by Zero Gravity Management.

◆ 2018 PAGE Silver Prize winner Jeffrey Field was recently signed by Writ Large and the Hudson Agency, and his drama script **Waiting Games** was optioned by director Chris Moriatis. In addition, Jeffrey's thriller **Don't Go There**, a 2019 PAGE Awards Finalist, has been optioned by Stephen Dubriel of Woolf+Lapin.

◆ 2013 Bronze Prize winner Melissa London Hilfers was recently hired to write the remake of the thriller **Jagged Edge** for Sony Pictures and actress Halle Barry. Melissa has also been given a script commitment by Fox for her new country music series, a multi-generational musical drama about America's first family of country music. Melissa is represented by Alan Gasmer & Friends and UTA.

◆ 2007 Silver Prize winner Bill Balas, who was recently a consulting producer on the CBS true-crime series **Interrogation** and co-producer on the TNT drama **Animal Kingdom**, has now been hired as a producer on the new TBS sci-fi series **Snowpiercer**. Bill is represented by Circle of Confusion and APA.

◆ More TV tidbits to share: 2013 Grand Prize winner Brooke Roberts is currently a co-executive producer on the CBS drama **NCIS: New Orleans**, and she wrote the October 22 episode of the show. 2018 Gold Prize winner Kat Sieniuc has just been staffed on the Netflix horror series **The Order**. 2015 Bronze Prize winner Vivian Lin was just hired as co-producer on the CityTV drama series **Hudson & Rex**. 2015 PAGE Awards Finalist Howard Jordan Jr. is now an executive story editor on the CBS All Access series **The Unicorn**, starring Walton Goggins.

2020 Contest Opens for Entries: December 1

Making My First Short Film: Three Lessons Learned

by David Schumann

In early 2017, I sat down to start writing my first feature screenplay and... not much came out. "Who am I kidding?" I thought. "I don't know how to write a feature screenplay!" So I decided to put it aside and start with something smaller and shorter, and what came out was my short film **Blind Date**. In 2018 I decided I was going to produce and direct the film. Here are the biggest lessons I learned in the process.

You'll Need to Ask for Help.

I wanted to make sure the script was as good as it could be, so I showed it to friends, co-workers, and accomplished screenwriters I had met in the course of life. I made revisions and showed it to them again, and kept working on it and trying different things.

The more I put the script out there, the more people I connected with who might be able to help get this thing made. It also didn't hurt that during the process, my script won a PAGE Award! I posted about it online and this definitely increased awareness for the film and added to our credibility.

I recognize that most people might not be in the position I was when I started working on the film. I had almost 15 years of experience as a trailer editor, working on big movies and meeting a lot of amazingly talented and generous people. I worked for a company that said yes to designing my titles, covering post production, designing my poster, doing the VFX, and contributing to the crowdfunding campaign. I was able to save thousands of dollars because of my connections and relationships, and I know that a lot of people do not have access to the things I did.

But here's the thing. We all have people in our lives who want to help and contribute, and what's important is that you reach out to those people. If you don't ask, you'll never know who could help or who you could ultimately connect with. You have to risk looking silly or being uncomfortable or saying the wrong thing.

Communication and Generosity of Spirit Are Vital.

As a filmmaker it's your job to figure out solutions to the inevitable issues that arise and not have a tantrum. If you're stressed out and not communicating with your crew, bad things will happen. If your spirit isn't positive and supportive throughout, the actors and crew will pick up on it and not give you their best. Especially when they're working for less than they usually earn, in the middle of the night, just to execute **your** vision. I made sure to shake everyone's hand and introduce myself on Day 1. I constantly thanked the crew throughout the shoot for their hard work. I made sure to be in communication with my DP and First AD so we were all on the same page about every issue, big or small. And it paid off!

Like when the actor playing Man in Suit arrived on set without a suit. That was fun! Apparently there had been a communication breakdown somewhere and he had not been told that he needed to bring his own suit. So I freaked out internally for about three seconds and then considered the options. He couldn't go home to get a suit because he lived too far away. And we didn't exactly have a costume department he could pull a suit from. Fortunately, our wardrobe stylist offered to take the actor to a nearby department store to get a suit and shoes, and he was back and ready in time for the shot!

There were times I messed up and either over-explained or under-explained something, but because I was kind and generous, the crew was quick to forgive me. Being in communication with everyone made a huge difference and we were able to figure it out together.

The Way You Think Something Should Be Done Is Not Always the Way It Needs to Be Done.

Since I had taken the time before shooting to fully storyboard the film, I knew exactly which shots I needed to get in order to be able to tell the story clearly. When issues came up that forced me to re-think how a scene was going to be shot, it was much easier to improvise having my storyboards in front of me.

For example, on Day 2 I had four shots storyboarded for the opening scene. But my First AD informed me that because we were going to shoot on a block we didn't have permits for, I could only get one of the shots. At first, I was really attached to the idea that we **needed** to get all four shots I had storyboarded. I thought, "If we don't get the shots in this exact way, the film won't come out right." But we were on a tight schedule and I didn't have that kind of time.

So I chose the most important shot — a medium shot tracking back as the actress walked towards camera. This meant that camera and actress had to be perfectly in sync, because we wouldn't be shooting anything else to cut away to. Also, because it was sunset, we only had about 10 minutes to get the shot right. First take, nope. Second take, nope. Third take, boom shadow in the shot. Fourth take, we lost focus. Fifth take was good. Sixth take for safety was good! Phew!

Making my first short film was an incredible, eye-opening experience and I'm extremely happy with how it turned out. I love watching it with people, seeing their reactions and talking to them afterwards. I'm thankful to every member of our cast and crew, to my friends and family who have supported me along the way, and to everyone who contributed to our fundraising campaign.

I can't wait to get started on my next short film!



David Schumann won a 2018 PAGE Silver Prize for his short film script *Blind Date*, which is now produced and playing at festivals around the country. He has worked in Los Angeles as a movie trailer editor for almost 15 years, working on campaigns for such films as *Star Trek*, *Gravity*, *American Sniper*, *The Avengers*, and *Jumanji*. David is currently at work on his next short film, *Marriage*.

What's It All About? Finding the Theme of Your Story

by Laurie Ashbourne

Whether I'm starting a project of my own or am brought on to do notes or a rewrite, one of the first things I ask is: "What do you want the audience to walk away with?" When we get an idea for a story there is usually an underlying "thing" we want the audience to recognize and somehow be moved by. That thing is theme, and it can really break your story (in a good way).

The term "breaking story" refers to the moment when you finally get the breakthrough that makes your story sail toward that coveted "FADE OUT" moment that satisfies the reader. Getting there can be an arduous process, and I dare say this is often because the writing process was spent hammering away at the plot rather than what the script is about. Ask yourself: Why am I telling this story? What lasting tidbit do I want the audience to walk away with? These questions are answered with your main theme.

Realizing your main theme is often an "aha!" moment for the writer, and thus the breaking of your story. The moment a writer breaks the back of their story is the moment the scenes flow effortlessly, each character's goal becomes clear, the plot paces out like the best day of your life, and you cannot wait to get it all down in writing.

Sadly, a lot of writers don't think about theme until after the first draft. But by breaking your theme early, you will always be able to address notes while staying true to your story. The sooner you figure that out in your creative process, the sooner the story's other elements will fall into place. Everything from the opening and closing images to dialogue and casting decisions will be informed by your theme. Even the use of color and props! Most importantly, the sooner you figure out theme the less defensive you'll feel about notes, because you are able to stay true to what the story is about and address outside impressions constructively.

It's easy to mistake some premises for a theme. For example, a child is kidnapped and the mother will stop at nothing to get her child back. But that's just a cursory stab at a plot line, not a theme. Theme tells us how the mother's journey to save her child will change everything about who she thought she was. Theme is what the story **means**.

This transcends cultural barriers. When a theme is universal, it touches on the human experience, regardless of race or language. Theme is not only your point of view as a writer, it is also in opposition to the flaw of your main character; it is what he or she needs to realize to complete the story. And that's why, when you get it right, theme can break your story and make everything work in synergy.

So how do you pinpoint and develop the themes of your story? As you build the story, remember: the most compelling protagonists (and antagonists) have a flaw they need to transcend in order to get past the story's biggest obstacle. Nobody is perfect; we know that. And it is our imperfections that make us relatable. For example, if you look at the character of Joy in Pixar's *Inside Out*, her flaw is that she doesn't believe there should be sadness in life. It's not until she accepts the character Sadness (and the concept of sadness) that she can grow emotionally and allow Riley to embrace this emotion, thus getting her life back in emotional balance. The theme of *Inside Out* is that it's okay to be sad once in awhile.

Another way to build theme is to look at your plot's turning points and find ways to check in with your main character emotionally as he or she faces them. This results in a story that has layers and fires on all cylinders. A word of caution, though: everything in moderation. Don't overload your film with riddles of metaphor. I once worked with a filmmaker who thought everything in his film had to be a metaphor – it was a running joke on set and, sadly, this belief made the film a mess. Your movie's theme should appear in every aspect of the film as subtly as possible. It needs to be evident enough that it ties everything together and gives the audience the "why" of the story, but not so much that it becomes a sermon or a sledge hammer.

One of the easiest ways to introduce theme is through dialogue. Some of the most memorable lines of dialogue also cement their film's theme. In the *Star Wars* franchise, "May the Force be with you" expresses the theme of tapping into our own personal power. In *The Godfather* series, "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse" always had the effect of a zinger, but it also expresses the underlying theme of "Do as I say, or pay with your life." In the end all of the Corleones paid with the lives of the ones they loved.

"Just keep swimming." This Dory line is one of the underlying themes of *Finding Nemo*. Persistence can achieve the seemingly impossible. Had Marlin and Nemo not kept swimming, they never would have found each other. This theme can also be found in every character and subplot in this film, from the fish in the tank to making it through the jellies to the sharks trying to cure their addiction. As with the films mentioned above, *Finding Nemo* actually has several themes, but "just keep swimming" is the theme we cannot escape.

Nine times out of ten, theme won't be the first thing you think of when you get an idea for a story, but it should go like this: A big idea should lead you to wonder 1) what kind of character would best portray this idea? And then 2) what flaw would that character need to overcome to be most changed by their journey?

The answer to this question reveals your theme, which can then inform your plot and everything else.

In Stephen King's first book about the writing process, *Danse Macabre*, he recalls how he instinctively felt his way through the theme, like a blind man. Then he was asked to teach the subject, and he realized that one never truly understands what their given thoughts are on any subject until they've written them down. In my consulting on other writers' material and helping them find the focus of the stories they want to tell, the question "what's it all about?" has become the main focus of every story I look at, including my own.



Laurie Ashbourne has worked as a writer, producer, and story consultant for Disney, Amazon Studios, and many independent producers. With over 20 years in the industry, she reads hundreds of scripts a year in many different capacities. Laurie is also an optioned screenwriter and currently has several features in various stages of production, including a genre film on the fast track with Eli Roth and Roger Birnbaum producing at Orion; a biopic set up at Bohemia Group Originals; and an animated film that is in pre-production.



Ray Morton is a writer and script consultant. He was a senior writer for *Script* and is currently the author of *Scriptmag.com*'s *Meet the Reader* column.

Ray's recent books [A Quick Guide to Screenwriting](#) and [A Quick Guide to Television Writing](#) are available in stores and online. He analyzes scripts for producers and individual writers, and he is available for private consultation.

You may contact Ray at ray@raymorton.com and follow him on Twitter @RayMorton1.

Set the Trend, Don't Follow It

by Ray Morton

As moviegoers know, the film business loves trends. If one slasher movie hits it big at the box office, you can be sure 25 more will follow in the ensuing decade. If a rom-com rakes it in, a whole bunch of meet-cutes will soon be on the way. If an action flick featuring two mismatched buddy cops sells tickets, then it's a safe bet many more *Lethal Die Hard Weapons* will soon be playing at a theater near you. Despite this, it's not a great idea for aspiring screenwriters to chase trends. By the time you notice the trend and start writing a spec to capitalize on it, there are already dozens – if not hundreds – of similar scripts floating around the industry.

I read a lot of specs and so I am in a decent position to track what trends aspiring screenwriters are following. Most trends last a few years and then peter out, although the imitation-Tarantino trend lasted for the better part of 15 years. It's only relatively recently that I no longer have to wade through piles of scripts about pop culture-referencing hit men and, believe me, that makes me one happy dude.

Here's a list of some of the spec trends that are going full blast right now – and therefore the sorts of scripts you really shouldn't be writing.

Superheroes

Due primarily to the tremendous success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, superheroes are the dominant trend in mainstream Hollywood films these days. Sometimes it seems that every other movie that comes out features a costumed avenger of one sort or another. The thing is, no producer or studio wants to make a movie about an original superhero. These days, MBA-trained studio execs are only interested in sure things – properties that have already proven themselves to be successful in other iterations, with the hope being that if audiences liked a particular comic book, novel, toy, game, or TV show, then they will be eager to see that property transformed into a movie. Original properties and therefore original superheroes don't have a proven commercial track record, and thus the production entities aren't interested.

Dark and Gritty Versions of Classic Characters

The success of movies like *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* has led to a whole stream of scripts that offer a grimmer and more serious (no humor or fun allowed) take on classic characters. There are already lots in development and tons more floating around – most so dark and gritty that they read like a parody of dark and gritty – so if you can spare me from having to read yet another iteration of *Claus*, I would greatly appreciate it.

YA Fantasy Trilogies

In the aftermath of *The Lord of the Rings*, many spec writers churned out their own three-part fantasy epics about magical quests across imaginary lands. The pseudo-*LOTR* trilogy trend has subsided (somewhat – I still get more three-parters submitted to me in one year than the Geneva Conventions should allow). In its place has arisen the Young Adult fantasy trilogy onslaught. Thanks to the success of the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series, "speccers" are dreaming up all-new dystopian worlds for their teenage heroes to conquer. However, the YA fantasy trend is well underway and may have even peaked. There are a number of similar movies already in production and/or development and plenty of proven book series to choose from should the trend continue.

Scatological R-Rated Comedies

The R-rated comedy trend waxes and wanes, but every time the trend seems to be petering out, a new raunchy yukker comes along to keep the movement going. This may be one trend that spec-script writers wouldn't be completely wasting their time trying to follow, as a really good R-rated comedy script is still something producers are desperate for. The problem is that most of the writers who churn out these specs put too much emphasis on the R-rated and not enough on the comedy. Gross by itself is not funny – it still has to be placed in a fresh, humorous context.

70s Rock Star Biopics

No one expected *Bohemian Rhapsody* to be the smash hit that it was. Even so, *Rocketman* was already in the works by the time *BR* opened and the David Bowie biopic *Stardust* was greenlit not long after. There are lots more coming, so it's already too late to get started on that behind-the-scenes expose of The Starland Vocal Band you've always dreamed of writing.

Rather than follow trends, it's best for aspiring writers to focus on creating something fresh and new. Don't follow trends, start them.





Dave Trottier has sold screenplays and developed projects for companies such as 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.

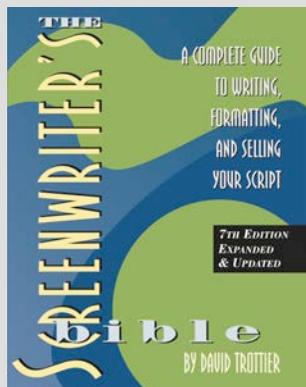
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Building and Revealing Character

by Dave Trottier

READER'S QUESTION:

How exactly do I "build" a character in my screenplay?

DAVE'S ANSWER:

I get this question all the time, and I can answer it in one word: **Pressure**. Character is revealed and developed by and through adversity. But there's more to it than that...

Drama imitates real life. And in real life, we grow and develop by confronting opposition. Likewise, your character (and your audience) cannot experience joy or happiness without also experiencing sorrow or misery. Growth in this life and in the movies transpires because of **opposition**.

If I never go to the gym or walk around the block, then my muscles will atrophy. There must be opposition, and that opposition can be painful. Hey, no pain, no gain, right? Likewise, you've got to bloody your character's nose if you want him or her to grow and change, either positively or negatively.

In addition to opposition, another element must exist. It's essential in life as well as in drama. To introduce it, let me first ask, does Michael in **The Godfather** grow or does he decline? He ascends to the position of godfather, but he declines morally in the process. And how does this ascension (positive growth) and decline (negative growth) take place? Opposition (adversity, obstacles, pressure) confronts Michael and he must make decisions. Those choices change him. For your character to grow either positively or negatively, he or she must have **free will** – the ability to make meaningful decisions.

In fact, **dramatic action** is when a character **willfully acts** against **opposition** in situations where the outcome is important to the audience.

Years ago, I read a script about a woman who had an abusive husband. She complained for 90 pages, and then a neighbor rescued her. All the ingredients for the protagonist's growth and development were present:

- Adversity was always present.
- The woman had free will and the opportunity to make choices.

But there was no action against that opposition – she did nothing. The result? No character growth. And no drama. Although she had free will, this protagonist lacked **the will to act**.

So how do you build character?

Your character must have 1) the will to act and 2) opposition. Oh, but there is also that third element: Is the outcome important?

I remember watching a movie with my wife. Halfway through I said, "I don't care who lives or dies in this flick." The outcome was not important to me. The above-the-line artists (writers, director, actors, and producer) had failed to involve me emotionally with the characters and the story. Even "saving the world from destruction" may not be a strong-enough outcome to involve your audience unless we can love, hate, or be fascinated by at least one character.

As a script consultant, over the years I've noticed a slight tendency in some sci-fi writers and action writers to overly emphasize plot, the cool world they created, the spaceships, the inventive weapons, the CGI action, and so on. In such cases, I simply ask them if they like **Star Trek**. "Yes, of course," is always their response. Then, I ask them **why** they like it, and they will say something like this: "Oh, because of Kirk, Bones, Spock, Uhura, and Scotty." And I'll say, "Exactly."

Can that emotional involvement or identification with the character be negative? Yes. In **The Dark Knight**, I was involved with both Batman and the Joker.

Now, there are many elements that combine to involve an audience in a movie. We are only focusing on the fundamentals here. Those fundamentals revolve around building and revealing character. There must be 1) willful action, 2) against opposition, 3) where the outcome is important to both the character and the audience. That's true for drama and for comedy. Thus, characterization and character development are crucial regardless of genre.

The above is adapted from material in the newly released 7th edition of [The Screenwriter's Bible](#). Part 2 of my answer to this key question will appear in the next issue of **LOGLINE**. Meanwhile, keep writing!

Working Writers Share Their Mistakes

by Lee Jessup

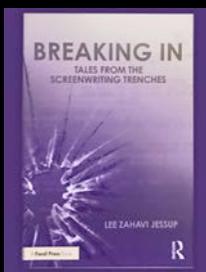


Author of the best-selling books [Getting It Write](#) and [Breaking In: Tales From the Screenwriting Trenches](#), Lee Jessup is a career coach for professional and emerging screenwriters. Her clients include writers who have sold pilots, pitches and specs; staffed television writers; participants in TV writing programs or feature labs; and, of course, writers who are just starting out.

In her role as coach, Lee serves as an industry guidance counselor, adviser, drill sergeant, cheerleader, confidant and strategic partner. Previously, Lee had her own script picked up, worked in development and ran ScriptShark.com for more than 6 years.

To learn more about Lee's services, visit leejessup.com.

Lee Jessup's Breaking In: Tales From the Screenwriting Trenches



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Everyone makes mistakes. You only know what you know and you learn as you go along so... making mistakes is inevitable. That said, isn't it always useful to learn from other people's mistakes? With that in mind, I turned to some of my clients and friends who are working writers and asked them:

What were some of your early career mistakes?

Jimmy Mosqueda, who staffed on **Schooled** while in the Disney/ABC writing program and is currently a story editor on the second season of **Legacies**, replied, *"Not picking a lane. I was a drama writer, then a comedy writer. I was a feature writer, then a TV writer. I can be all of those things, but in the early stages it helps to be just one thing, and then branch out from there."*

2013 PAGE Award winner Melissa London Hilfers, who sold the spec scripts **Undone** and **Unfit** and is currently on assignment for the **Jagged Edge** remake with Halle Barry, told me, *"[My early career mistakes were] saying yes to things I wasn't passionate about. In the beginning, it's hard to say no to anything, you're just happy to be getting paid to write. But the truth is writing is hard work, and committing to things you don't really care about can be draining and there's an opportunity cost — you could be working on something else that might be more meaningful in the long run."*

Hollie Overton, celebrated author and writing producer on the CBS All Access show **Tell Me a Story**, had this to share: *"Being too nice and too agreeable is definitely my Achilles' heel. I'm someone who actively avoids conflict and I don't like to be asking lots of questions, which are two things that are in direct opposition with succeeding in this business. You have to stand up for yourself and your work, and you have to make sure the people you're working with are on the same page. Because of that, I found myself doing work I wasn't being properly compensated for and staying with reps who weren't actively working for me."*

Moises Zamora, executive producer and head writer on Netflix's Selena bio-series, who previously staffed on **Star** and **American Crime**, had this to offer: *"[My biggest mistake was] underestimating the stress of being a staff writer. Pay attention when you're doubting yourself. Always go back to the process that got you hired."*

iZombie co-producer Bob Dearden shared this: *"Overstepping is probably the big one. In TV, the system is set up with a show runner who makes all the big creative decisions, and then everyone else. There's a hierarchy based on experience and talent, but if you're not the show runner, you really have no autonomy. So if you have an idea or a script that doesn't land, or that the show runner doesn't like, that's just the way it goes. That can be a difficult transition, for some, when you're used to just writing for yourself."*

Greta Heinemann, currently supervising producer on **Good Girls**, provided her philosophy: *"I don't necessarily believe in the concept of 'mistakes,' as our career is learning and experience based. I believe any experiences — especially the bad ones — become valuable teachable moments. That being said, the moments I've seen 'mistakes' happen are usually those in which we approach the business from an emotional level, e.g., giving our honest, unfiltered emotional responses without weighing the options and political implications first."*

Josh Renfree, who recently completed a feature writing assignment, told me: *"Writing too slow, as in taking too long to complete my next screenplay. Not holding myself accountable to the fact that if I want this as a career, I have to treat it as one."*

Paul Puri, who is currently staffed on his second season of **Chicago Med**, said, *"I still consider myself to be early career, so that's a little hard to measure. After I had my first script optioned, I was taken into a meeting with a production company. I was working with a producer on some pitches, but he promised me that this was a general meeting only. So I didn't prep to pitch any story ideas. But then they wanted to hear 'what I brought them,' and I was less than my most articulate self."*

Finally, Richard Lowe, a graduate of WB's TV Writers Workshop who is now on his second year of Greg Berlanti's **God Friended Me**, shared this: *"[My early career mistake was] thinking success would happen sooner. It takes an amazing amount of patience to break in. (Or it did for me.)"*



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Budget won't exceed \$500K. Both WGA and non-WGA writers may submit material.

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Company C: Seeking Social-Impact Dramas

We are looking for social-impact drama scripts. We need material that is contemporary and that highlight current societal issues, i.e., projects in the vein of *Leave No Trace* and *The Hate U Give*.

Budget is TBD. Both WGA and non-WGA writers may submit material.

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