

First and foremost, I'm a writer. It's why I'm out here. It's what I've always wanted to do.

In the meantime though, you have to pay the bills. I was lucky enough to get into the development side of things.

It's really a dream job for any screenwriter. All I do is read scripts and interact with writers every day.

In fact, I interacted with a writer this morning and that's a story I'd like to share with you before I lead into what I really want to talk about this week.

I had met Amy (name changed) at one of the pitchfests I had attended. She was extremely nervous and did a lot of the things that I mentioned in the past few weeks. She wasn't a total freak though and I really liked her idea.

You see, I'm a huge film history nerd. I eat the shit up.

Amy had written a bio-pic about a very little known silent film actor. I knew of him, but didn't know the details of his life. I was also impressed that a 22 year old would tackle such an old, obscure figure.

I took one glance at the first few pages of her script and knew that she needed help. I gave the script to one of my readers and had her write up a few things on it.

Amy contacted me today and I set up a phone call to go over the notes my reader had. I gave them to her and then told her that I hadn't read the script, but could give her my notes as well.

"If you haven't read it, how can you give me notes?"

That's a very good question and leads to what I want to talk about this week:

Just what in the hell do I look for in a script?

Back during my first pitchfest, I just looked for anything. I wanted to read everything. If the idea sounded remotely interesting, I asked for the script.

I learned very quickly that this is WAY too overwhelming. I would leave with stacks of scripts and could never really get through them.

I had to make some changes. So I decided to only ask for scripts that REALLY interested me.

Still, I'd find it really hard to get through even these scripts because they just weren't very well written.

I have since learned my lesson.

Now? I ask for the first 15-20 pages.

Nine times out of ten, I can tell within the first couple of pages if the writing is good enough to keep going.

In terms of the structure, I can tell in the first few scenes if I'm going to want to read more.

With Amy's script it only took a couple of paragraphs to know she still needed work.

So what are my red flags? Here's a few...

JIMMY "STARTS TO" DO ANYTHING

No one "starts to" do anything. Ever.

Every one of your characters is in a perpetual state of doing something. Anything. There is no way for them to ever start doing anything because they're already doing it.

You see this a lot when young writers want to convey someone getting out of a chair.

"Jimmy starts to get up when he's stopped by a fist hitting his face."

Jimmy doesn't start to get up. He gets up.

What happens during that process doesn't matter. He stands. It's in your next sentence that you interrupt the process.

"Jimmy stands only to find a fist hitting his face part way through the process."

Here's what I see ALL the time:

Starts to...

Begins to...

Continues to...

No! They just do.

JENNY IS ALWAYS "-ING" HER WAY AROUND

You see this a lot at the beginning of a scene:

"INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

Jenny is lying in her bed. Her eyes closed, fast asleep."

I won't lie, this habit had to be beaten out of me and it needs to be beaten out of you.

Young writers do this all the time. They always use "is (insert verb)ing" to describe the scene or the action.

Read this and see how better it sounds...

"INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

Jenny lies in her bed, eyes closed, fast asleep.”

Can you see the difference?

Writers do it a lot when they write action. They want to cut into a scene that’s in the middle of an action scene so you’ll see this:

“EXT. CITY STREET – DAY

Jenny is running at full speed through traffic.”

There’s no need for that. Jenny just runs. Jenny runs at full speed through traffic. Simple as that.

When it comes to dialog, I have to turn to my very good friend Jessica Bendinger. I learned this from her and she’s the one who beat this habit out of me.

Be careful of...

“SENTENCE STARTERS”

Everyone strives to get their dialog to sound “more real.” To do this, they often take the lazy way out by just writing how people speak. When people speak, they say a lot of dumb shit in place of a pause or to think.

Your characters don’t have time to think. We don’t want to hear a lot of “uh’s” and “um’s” and we sure as hell don’t want to read them.

More important than that are the dreaded sentence starters. Here’s what I mean...can you find them?

CRAIG

So, I was at the market yesterday and saw a beautiful woman.

JANE

Really? What was her name?

CRAIG

Well, I don’t know. I mean, I didn’t actually talk to her.

JANE

Really?! Why not? Don’t you have any confidence?

CRAIG

Hey! Dude! Get off my dick!

Now, lets see the same conversation without all the sentence starters...

CRAIG
I was at the market yesterday and saw a beautiful woman.

JANE
What was her name?

CRAIG
I didn't actually talk to her.

JANE
Don't you have any confidence?

CRAIG
Get off my dick!

See how much cleaner that reads? Your dialog POPS.

It has a rhythm to it. Something the first batch of dialog didn't.

Take any script of yours and just do a pass through on the dialog.

Take out all of the:

I mean's

Well's

So's

Yeah's

Hey's

And anything else that smells of a cheap way to start a sentence.

I promise you that just by doing that your script will read MUCH better.

Next week I'll tell you a little more about what I look for when I look at a script.

Till then...