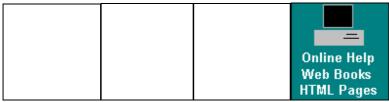# WRITERS WORKSHOP
SCRIPT DOCTOR

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SOURCES AND ASSOCIATIONS

DISCLAIMER

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

In grateful appreciation to all those who contributed indirectly to the information in this book through interviews or sharing information or assistance with editing, and especially to all who labor for the benefit of others with helpful readings, critiques and advice. May the hills you climb become the measure of your rewards, and may all your literary dreams come true.

- Scott -

WRITERS WORKSHOP SCRIPT DOCTOR

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TOP TWENTY LIST OF SPECIFIC PROBLEMS

RANK   PROBLEM

1   Characterization: Weak character motivation
2   Structure: Plot weak, unfocused, wanders, no concept
3   Character originality: Non-dimensional, stereotypical, no voice
4   Structure: Confusing, contradictory, explanations lacking
5   Structure Originality: Tired storyline, predictable, overused
6   Characterization: Action out of character, inconsistent
7   Structure: Mechanical solutions: manipulated or contrived
8   Structure: No payoff to setup
9   Structure: Misleading, doesn't deliver what is promised
10   Characterization: No main character (or antagonist)
11   Characterization: Character doesn't change
12   Characterization: Dull, uninteresting, out of place
13   Structure: Premise, storyline, scenes not credible
14   Scenes & Drama: Action doesn't follow from previous drama
15   Dialogue: Tells information, motivation, or is preachy
16   Dialogue: Wasted, doesn't move story forward
17   Format: Scene descriptions tell thoughts
18   Scenes & Drama: Action doesn't move story forward
19   Scenes & Drama: Lacks emotion, stakes too low
20   Dialogue: Length, less is more

Screenplay Script Problem Areas	Typical Ratings	
Structure fair to poor: 77%	Superior	0%
Characterization fair to poor: 80%	Excellent	8%
Originality fair to poor: 77%	Good	40%
Premise fair to poor: 77%	Fair	42%
Dialogue fair to good: 85%	Poor	10%
Scripts with some excellent elements: 15%		

INTRODUCTION: WRITING IS ILLUSION

Being a writer is a state that's like a hologram - it's there, but it isn't - it permeates every cell of your being, is present every moment of the day, and like a holographic illusion, stays just out of reach. This is a book for writers who would like to raise the odds of success on those hundreds to thousands of hours they invest in writing. I hope it brings the illusion within reach.

Screenwriting may be a communicable disease. Every other person in L.A. is tantalized by the reward from screenwriting. The competition is intense, the prizes are high, and what it takes to win is a story that is the creme de la creme. Just who are these people who spend so much time and energy talking to a piece of paper, hoping to create the perfect story? They are writers, all kinds, educational levels, persuasions.

At one writer's conference, I listened to one man tell of coming home from Vietnam with high expectations of becoming a writer, then spending the next ten years going from one flunky job to another while trying to become "published." A tear in his eye, his voice quavering from desperation, he asked the conference leader how to become a writer who sells. The answer was simple: stay with a good job until you consistently write material that sells. Writing is an adventure, seldom a lucrative career. So if you're planning on moving to L.A. and becoming a screen writer, bring several years salary. (High salary - L.A. is expensive. Same for actors. I personally don't even live in California.)

Writers slave away at a labor of love, spending hundreds to thousands of hours creating material no one has asked them to create with no hint of a potential sale in sight. They send their material to a machine that is as cold and calculating as a cruise missile. Fewer than 20% of writers actually work as writers. Most writers have other careers, have a great deal of fun with their writing, and are lucky ever to sell anything.

But a sale, or a good review, can be the first step in a career in television writing, book publishing, or a request for a second script. And if you're successful, your story will be mutilated by everyone who touches it, including a host of other writers who will modify it by another's vision. Career screen writers advise: it is a frustrating and agonizing business, stay out of it - but the rewards are great.

Some people love to write and are going to do it whether they sell or not, whether they're appreciated or not, whether they eat or not. They are the people for whom putting one word in front of another just makes sense. For example, I had a back problem for years which caused me agonizing pain

which increased the longer I sat. My job involved traveling or sitting in an office, which was about all the sitting I could take. When I got home, I would sit for another one to four hours and write, pain or no pain - I find writing that valuable. (Thank God for back surgery!) Willard Rodgers, Director of Writers Workshop, believes that, "What sustains a writer is writing about a subject that is very important to you."

My agonized hours of writing taught me a lot about fixing and rewriting. I learned how to rewrite stories of 150,000 words (a thick novel) and rewrite and rewrite. And I have tried to help others do the same. I hope you won't have to make all the mistakes that I did.

The People At Writers Workshop

Writers Workshop is people. It isn't a large organization of highly paid professionals with an impersonal job to do. It is an ever changing, relatively small group of volunteers who feel strongly about what they do. Actors like Jennifer Warren, Ron Thompson, Kim Hamilton, and Margaret Fairchild have been members and directors of the Actor's Repertory, which does staged readings of scripts selected for development. Writers like Ford Clay, Jack Guss, David Carren, and Stirling Silliphant have had their scripts read, and have also acted as Moderators.

Moderators have included Robert Blumofe, Ben Benjamin, Richard Brooks, Virginia Carter, Neal Israel, Oliver Stone and Syd Field. Syd, author of several highly successful books on screenwriting, has graciously served as Moderator frequently in recent history. A small army of knowledgeable behind-the-scenes people read the screenplays and write critiques which they hope will be helpful to the writer. The major qualifications for readers are a writing or critical background, plus a proven ability to critique and provide helpful feedback. Between chapters in this book are profiles of people who graciously offer their services to Writers Workshop.

PART I
Fixing A Weak Script

Twenty Most Common Problems & How To Fix Them

If you had a ten thousand dollar car sitting in your drive with a flat tire, what would you do with it? Park it behind the garage? Shuffle it around to the car lots trying to sell it as damaged goods? Read a book on how to design a car? Unless you're eccentric or insane (appreciate that I'm on dangerous ground here), you would probably invest a few dollars in fixing the tire - makes sense. But what do you do with a screenplay that doesn't sell?   One you have invested a lot of yourself in, with a potential value of forty thousand or more. Keep shuffling it around to agents and contests?   Park it on the top shelf of a closet? Read yet another book telling the same old things? Yes! Writers do with their screenplays what they wouldn't do with their car.

Do you really need another book on "how to write a screenplay?" I doubt it. If you had the passion to write something the first time, then you need to "fix what ails it." Good writing may take practice, but most professionals say the real secret to good writing is rewriting. That is where most of the time and effort go to make a script commercial. That is also where writers die: "Write it again! I wrote it, I love it, there's nothing wrong with it!" This book will help you find what is wrong with it and fix it. Use the test on the next page to help identify areas that need improvement in your writing.

The Top Twenty Problems were distilled from Writers Workshop critiques, where scripts are evaluated similarly to reader's coverage at studios. Over 80% fall into the fair to good category, with excellent to superior being the sought after ratings.   They are checked for premise, structure, characterization, dialogue, originality, and writing ability. Half the ratings in all these categories are fair. Most writers have categories they are strong in, but are weak in at least one of two areas: character motivation or structure. So these will get the most attention in this book, with special emphasis on originality.

Each problem is followed by a brief alchemist's solution sure to transform your script into gold. If this doesn't help, send me a note and I'll exchange it for a wart removing spell.

The Reel Compleat Screenplay Test:

Use this test to help find areas needing improvement in your screenplay. Use other's feedback to help you answer. Not every question applies to every screenplay.

CHARACTER

1. Do the characters seem real, or are they larger than life or just plain boring?

2. Do the characters have enough depth for the story, or do they read like a cartoon characters?

3. Do the characters change emotionally or make decisions in applicable scenes and through the story?

4. Are the protagonist and antagonist well matched, or is the conflict unfair?

5. Are the characters likable or hateable, or are they just humdrum people?

6. Are character's intentions evident in their scenes, or is the viewer uncertain what they're up to?

7. Does the protagonist capture your interest, or could he be replaced with a cardboard cutout?

8. Does the main character seem to have clear objectives, or is he motivated only by the needs of the scene?

9. Does the main character take charge, or is he forced into everything?

STRUCTURE

1. Is the concept too big or complicated for a movie?

2. Is the story new and imaginative?

3. Does the viewer know what the story is about within the first ten minutes?

4. Do the first five minutes capture your interest?

5. Do the first twenty minutes capture and hold your interest?

6. Does the storyline seem real, or would it make a better animated story?

7. Are story events predictable?

8. Does the story confuse the viewer?

9. Does the story deliver what the beginning promised?

10. Does tension build until the climax?

11. Do the subplots seem related and interesting?

12. Does the viewer lose interest in the story anywhere? Where?

13. Are the conflicts and obstacles big enough to challenge the protagonist, or are struggles too easy?

14. Is the action too repetitive or boring?

15. Is the ending satisfying?

16. Is the pace too slow or fast?

17. Is three act development in evidence, complete with turning points, obstacles, conflict and plot twists?

18. Are there surprises, like plot twists?

19. Do things happen for no apparent reason, confusing the viewer?

SCENES & DRAMA

1. Do scenes seem to mesh with each other, or did they jump around and confuse the viewer?

2. Are there enough interesting settings?

3. Is there conflict in most scenes?

4. Do characters glide through scenes like nothing is happening, or do they usually react and change emotional states?

DIALOGUE

1. Is the dialogue crisp (short, focused) and real?

2. Are too many things spoken which should be revealed through conflict and drama?

SECTION I

CHARACTERIZATION:

PROBLEMS & CURES

Characterization is more than creating a character people can relate to. Most of us will relate to the character if the right elements are there.   First you need a solid character. Then you may have to dress up a character's personality - make him "hip," give him a little attitude - to make him big enough for the film.

Five things go into solid characters:

1) Every character must be motivated. Something has to make the character move through the story besides a pencil.

2) The character has to act consistently with what he is - dogs don't meow when they play with cats.

3) The main character and antagonist must be equally matched, and secondary characters must not steal the show.

4) In most stories, the character must change.

5) The main character needs enough window dressing to prevent him from being dull and stereotypical.

1

Motivation: Motivating Puppet Characters

Think for a moment about the main character in your most recent screenplay. What does this person want out of life? Security? Fame? Wealth? What about the near future, do they want to be married, divorced, have children, get wealthy, buy a house in the burbs? Who has hurt them in the past, and how? What were the big influences in their life? What do they want more than anything? What problems do they have - financial, marital, elderly parents, alcoholic in the family, a father struggling with cross dressing? How do they feel, secure, insecure, inept, comfortable, competent? When they exit the scenes, where are they going - the store, work, to apply for a loan?

If you are struggling to answer most of these questions, then you can probably glimpse your character in a mirror. The character is just another version of you, or someone you know, who you dress up as you go along. Is that bad? As you write, you are supplying the motivation for the character, but the audience never gets a whiff of what the motivation is. As far as the audience is concerned, the character is unmotivated. He just does things, or flounders, with nothing driving him.

General motivation: Give them a life

You may have heard that characters are just a writer's alter ego, or some extension of themselves. That's nice for a first story, but not for writers who create new characters every day. Now is the time to discard that idea. A writer uses experiential methods to understand and guide his character, but he is not the character. The writer knows how he himself would act and feel. He has gone through experiences and he has seen others go through experiences, so he knows how people act. But the character should be a new creation, totally separate from the writer, with different motivations - his own motivations.

Problem 1

For example, maybe you and your mirror character dislike night school. But if you create a real character, he may be driven to improve himself because he wants to impress his friend who is a college graduate, so he can get into the same career field - even if it will take seven years. So he goes to night school. What does that do to the story? He meets a man whosays he can get him into the field much faster, but working for a competitor. Whatever situation your mirror character was in before just got more complicated. Will he respond the same as you to the situation now that he is motivated by friendship, career, time, opportunity, and conflict. Give him a life.

Specific Motivation

The foregoing was general motivation - those things that are different about each of our lives, like career goals, that make us unique from each other. What about specific motivation - immediate problems, needs and desires. Many characters walk sideways through a story never confronting anything. They cast no shadow because they're not really there - they don't care about anything.

Problem 2

Jerry is a no-talent bum who occasionally makes a half-hearted attempt at stand-up comedy. Each time he tries and fails we go, "Ho, hum." Why? Because Jerry doesn't care if he makes it or not. Give Jerry reasons to succeed, and the audience will care: His Uncle, whom his late father always admired, was good at comedy. Jerry's father always thought Jerry a bum. They're about to foreclose on Jerry's house and kick him and his daughter out. Jerry loves comedy - Jerry is motivated and the audience begins to care. Each time he fails, it hurts Jerry and the audience.

Do the problems your antagonist throws at your protagonist really interfere? If the night club owner is the bad guy and he throws Jerry out, does it matter? For the first Jerry, who didn't really care, no. For the second, it matters a lot. Character motivation means everything.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Is your character just a different version of you? Divorce him. Withdraw your personality from the character and see what is left of him. Is he a living breathing entity, or just cardboard? Give him a life.

2) When any event happens in the story, you should be able to ask for the character, "What does it mean to me?" If it doesn't have potential impact for the character, then it isn't interfering with character motivation, so has no reason for being there.

3) Raise the stakes. The character may seem unmotivated because the stakes just aren't high enough. The unmotivated Jerry wants to be a stand-up comedian. No one really cares. But if Jerry is doing it for his late father because he wants his father to think highly of him, then it's more important. The stakes go up dramatically if his home is on the line. And if he really loves comedy, the stakes are higher. Want to make the stakes even higher? If he can't make it as a comedian, he sees his only other choice is to go back in the military, leaving his daughter with a relative, and the owner of the comedy club won't give Jerry another chance.

4) How long does it take to make a character who the audience will love or hate, or one they will understand? From the first minute to the first one-

hundred-twenty minutes. And this extremely important element often takes most of the story, overshadowing the most important element, the story. I often see scripts with scene after scene there only for characterization. It's obvious that's why they are there, and the story goes nowhere until the character is laboriously developed.

The solution is to make the trials that hammer out the people's character important to the story. If you need to show Jerry's honesty by having him miscount change at the grocery counter, make sure he's buying something that is going to be used in the story so the story continues to move. If he's there to buy chewing gum, who cares? But if he's buying charcoal lighter for an important cookout scene where he accidentally sets the comedy club owner on fire, it helps the story.

5) Strengthen your story by focusing motivation and conflict in the first scenes. For Jerry's story, open the story at the comedy club. His daughter sits at a table with her boyfriend and says she hopes he does well because Jerry's been saying they may lose their house and Jerry will go back in the military and leave her with relatives. Jerry goes on stage and is failing. His daughter is the only one laughing. The owner pulls Jerry off the stage and tells him not to come back. Most of the motivation and plot are set up in that first scene.

6) "Show don't tell," which every writer has heard over and over, doesn't mean thirty pages of character history showing every event that shaped the character. In Jerry's story, the first scene established most of it. In subsequent scenes, things like Jerry's honesty and the impact of his divorce on his daughter are established piece at a time, as needed.

Also See:

    "Excursus One: How To Raise Dead Characters"

    Chapter 23, "How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot"

    Chapter 21, "A Character Motivation Primer"

2

Originality: Fixing Stereotypes With Added Dimensions

Discussion/Problem 1

There are a number of people in Hollywood who get a lot of parts written for them. There is Mike the tough-guy biker who wears a leather vest, isn't smart enough to tie his shoes (wears boots), and has a girl friend as smart as his boots, (named Boots). I'm sure you recognize him. There is Ahmed the cab driver who can't speak English and always takes the longest route. We all know Ahmed and can recognize him on the street. Ernestine the waitress dutifully fills your order in your lap. We would recognize her in any city. Marsha the overprotective mother never lets her kid go out without boots on, even when the sun is shining.

These aren't real people of course, they are stereotypes. We could rename Mike, "A" and just put A in the script whenever we need someone like him. We always know what to expect from them because they are always the same. But that's just the problem, audiences want surprises. They want to see unique, original people who do unexpected things.

Archetypes are a special case. Mothers - nurturing people - are archetypes. Gods, angels and devils are archetypes. The policeman on the corner, doctors, nurses, teachers, scientists, and other authority figures are often archetypes, especially if they make brief appearances. These are people from whom we know what to expect. There is very little characterization and history needed for these. But even archetypes can be made unique by giving them personality, attitudes, a mission.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Give your characters a past, desires, problems - a life - just like other people. They will come right out of that stereotype.

2) When you find your having your character do the same old tired things other characters do, push yourself to have them do something unique. You'll be pleased with the result.

Problem 2:

"Non-dimensional" is a term applied to characters who have limited dimensions to their personalities. The writer needs someone who is angry, so that is the only dimension which comes through. Take Jerry the comedian. What things come through in his personality, and what other interests does he

have? Is he a comedian all the time? Is he always kidding around, or dead serious? When his daughter tries to kid him, does he react angrily? Does he spend his time at the horse races, or building an MG car from a kit? Is he constantly encouraging his daughter to do well in her first year of junior college? Is he hot tempered when he or a member of his family is insulted? What does this do to his performance on stage - make it better or worse? There are many dimensions to Jerry to explore which would add to a script.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Know the things going on in your character's life and explore them. Use them to modify your character's behavior. Real people have spiritual, psychological, social, physical, and physiological dimensions.

Problem 3:

We all speak "television" English, so how do you give your characters a voice? Speech mannerisms are one way. People tend to reflect their background. Once in a while you meet a guy pumping gas who speaks like an English Lord, but mostly they don't. If the guy pumping gas speaks like he is well educated, that's the audience's clue to watch for more from this character. Otherwise he probably speaks with less polish: more common word choices, possibly more four letter words, often more direct and less diplomatic, with conversation limited to the task at hand or the weather (except to his friends).

Dialect, which includes word order and word choice, is another way individuals differ. You have to listen to speech patterns in order to effectively portray this. Compare: 1) "God, I'm so tired, Elizabeth! Let's go home."   2) "I'm plum tuckered to the bone, 'Lizbeth! We best be gettin' on home."

Most likely your story will have several people from the same social, economic, and educational backgrounds. They will speak much the same. The main way to differentiate them is through their choice of subjects to talk about, their motivations, and their point of view.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Use individual differences to give each character a voice of his own.

2) Avoid misspellings to indicate ethnic or geographic pronunciation, as in "gettin' on home," used above. It is the actor's responsibility (and their coach) to create the proper accent.

Avoid extensive use of foreign language. It confuses the reader and audience.

Also See:

Index, "Character Dimensions"

Index, "Originality"

Chapter 21, "Originality"

3

Consistency: Resolving "Out Of Character" Problems

Discussion

Most people are very consistent in their lives. If Tom gives to a charity one year, the charity can usually plan on him giving the next - they just send the envelope. If he buys a new Triumph Spitfire when his old one is three years old, after three years he will probably buy another one, and the salesman will be waiting with a brochure in his hand. He will go home to the same house and sleep with the same wife every night. If he deviates from this pattern, there is a good reason.

A lot of inconsistent characters march through screenplays. One scene they fight someone over an insult, the next scene they wink at someone who punches out their mother. This is called "action that is out of character." If the character is drawn well, the audience should almost be able to predict their actions and they will be similar from scene to scene, unless something serious changes their motivation.

Problem 1

Trudy is a police officer who has just stumbled onto a car theft ring. In this scene she bravely goes undercover to identify the thugs. In following scenes she refuses to go near them as if she doesn't want to muss her hair. Why? Mirrored characters have no real depth. She is just a surface reflection and it is only the writer's whim which makes her do this or that. But if she has a real background and is motivated, then she will be consistent.

Alchemist's Solution

Give characters a life which includes real motivations. If a policewoman has a family to think of, she is much less likely to take risks. In every scene, the specter of her family will hang over her and temper what she does. She would be more careful in her undercover work and, as a more real person, less frivolous in later scenes.

Problem 2

Suppose I write the policewoman's storyline so that in the first scenes she is frightened of doing the undercover work, but in later scenes she boldly

confronts the bad guys. "Aha," says I, being no muddlehead, I can see clearly she needs a motive. So I make her afraid of the big ugly men in the early scenes, then have her take a karate course later to overcome her fear. Won't this work? This is called a manipulated or contrived plot. Instead of the character acting and reacting honestly in the scene, the character goes through moving his arms and legs and mouthing words to fit what the writer wants to make happen. It is usually obvious to the viewer.

Alchemist's solution:

Form realistic characters with full lives, then let the story reflect what would realistically happen. If the character has a real background with real motivations, and is allowed to act honestly in a scene, then she will be consistent. A policewoman, constrained by department regulations and a family, will enter every scene or situation hesitant to take unnecessary risks, and will always be looking for ways to prepare herself.

Problem 3

Trudy the Policewoman, with a husband and three kids at home, in scene after scene breaks regulations and goes after the auto theft ring leaders with no backup. Does she have a deathwish? Going in alone would be out of character for the police.

Alchemist's solution:

1) Get in tune with your character. Making a character do this would say you have no empathy for the character and her situation.

2) Make sure you know police procedures. If a situation calls for backup, then it will seem ludicrous to the audience if the character goes in without backup without a justified reason.

Also See

> "Excursus One: How To Raise Dead Characters"
>
> Chapter 10, "Manipulated or Contrived"
>
> Chapter 12, "Credibility"
>
> Chapter 23, "How To Use Motivation To Form Characters and Plot"

4

Main Character: Deciding Who Drives

Discussion

Imagine you are at a city park full of people. You don't have to enjoy yourself if you don't want to, but here, take this cup of cola. Now, follow me through the crowd and whatever happens, don't spill the cola. Just ahead, sitting on the ground rubbing his feet, is the guy who runs the shoe store. We shove him over backwards and he falls to the feet of a lady customer who knows him. She calls him a pervert and holds her dress closely to her legs. A uniformed police officer gazes stonily in our direction. The man sits up and reaches for your arm - the one with the cola - to pull himself up. You back away, stepping right onto the foot of a little child, you clumsy lout! You lunge forward. Watch the cola! Ah, gee, right onto the front of the child's mother - all dressed up in a white satin blouse and black slacks - she grabs your cup and pours the remainder on your head. I told you to watch the cola! The policeman moves purposefully toward you.

This story has conflict, characters, dramatic action, even a little bit of a plot: follow me and don't spill the cola. Who are the important people in the story, the ones the audience can focus on? The policeman who is going to arrest you? The child with the sore foot? His mother with the sore ego? The shoe store guy? They may all have an interesting story to tell, and may be very motivated, but they aren't going anywhere. The only ones who have a purpose are you and me. I'm taking you through the crowd. You're following and having a terrible time not spilling the cola. Who will the audience lock onto? Not the characters, but you or me, and until they know what our purpose is, neither of us. Which means, the audience has no focus and switches from person to person as the story unfolds. After a half hour of this, their brains may switch to another channel.

There can be more than one main character in a story. There can be several whose lives entwine and interest us, each with his own problems - subplots - that relate to the main plot. But there needs to be one, or at the most two, protagonists who are central to the main conflict. They are the ones who the audience hooks onto and who pull them through the story.

There should also be an antagonist - the opposite person who squares off against the protagonist to do battle. The antagonist may be the world or the system, or his own personal demons. Don Quixote fought windmills. The

opposition in a story doesn't have to take bodily form, but there has to be something to conquer, even if it is only besting himself.

Alchemist's solution:

1) Decide which character you feel is most important and write the story around her. She should be the one who drives the story forward and carries the main plot.

2) If your antagonist is not in physical form, make sure you know, and the audience knows, what your protagonist is fighting.

5

Change And Growth: Making Characters Change

Discussion

Suppose a friend hands you a script about a war between ants and humans. In battle after battle the humans step on them, spray them with insecticide, flood them, burn them, and ultimately triumph over them. The humans have superior intelligence, strength, and size. Would the outcome of any of the battles, or the ultimate outcome ever be in any doubt? No, the humans would only do what they normally do any other day. Would they learn anything or change in any way? No, they aren't required to discover anything about themselves or to stretch themselves or to become different. Would the story be interesting to anyone? Probably no more interesting than watching grain being fed into a grinding mill.

If nothing new is required of a character, no interest is created. A character must grow in knowledge, in strength or in capacity. The man who can't forgive his wife, learns to forgive. The woman who steals to buy expensive clothes, sees the error of her ways and changes. The detective on the weekly series outwits the culprit; and when he continuously fails to grow in ability, the series fails. Even predictable archetypal characters, whom we know are paragons of virtue and always win, are challenged to the max by their opponents, show us something new and lead other characters to change.

Problem 1

Suppose you have written a story about a King who had won the throne by conquest. He was an excellent swordsman who defeated the previous King's enemies and became next in line for the throne, but he knows only the power of armed force. He now faces three problems. First, the King is opposed by a ruthless villain, a mediocre sword fighter. He easily defeats him at the climax. Second, the King can't bring himself to trust his wife. It was a political marriage bringing two political factions together. In the story you have him suddenly start trusting her just in time for the climactic battle. Third, the Church is demanding he behead his favorite comrades in arms for plundering and raping a nearby village. You have him settle this by having him arrange their escape. Three subplots, but none requiring any change or discovery on the part of the King. What to do?

A mediocre sword fighter opposing the King is not going to make the King stretch. But suppose the King has lost his skill, because of an injured arm, and must trick the ruthless villain into using a different form of battle. What if he provides the villain with an army - secretly the King's own men - who are to turn on the villain at the last moment. A tactic more fitting a King. Of course, the villain catches on and brainwashes the new men. The King notices their change in manner and ponders why until he realizes what is going on. He exposes the villain's lies about him and regains his men. The King has grown by becoming more knowledgeable and shrewd. He has changed from using the power of the sword to the power of the mind.

The King can't trust his own wife - what a worry! But he can't just suddenly start trusting her because he's in a crisis. Trust is built over a period of time, so he must test her several times before he gets to the point of trusting her with life and kingdom. Three times he must hold her to the fire and see what she does. Or some incident must happen that makes him trust her. Of course, the King catches her secretly talking to the villain (she's warning him to stay away from her King or die, but the King can't hear this), and she seems to be a flirt with the palace officials, which gets back to the King. But through the three tests, the King grows in trust of his wife.

The Church - God, of all opponents! - wants the King's best comrades dead. You had him use deception to free them. Suppose instead, his wife opposes this idea, saying he will lose face, which makes him furious. He rants and raves, and decides to forgive them, but she fights with him. He goes to see them and they convincingly declare their innocence and beg the King's help. He has scarcely said hello to them since becoming King - has forgotten his roots - and at first he doesn't know what to believe. Then days later he remembers heroic acts by his comrades that convince him they could not have done it. At this point he trusts no one, so he plans to investigate the crime himself, planning to pose as a beggar mooching a meal.

He dresses as a beggar but talks like a King and a soldier, so then he must mingle with the beggars to learn how to be a beggar. Being a beggar makes him more compassionate for his people. Finally he learns that three other men did the crime disguised as the King's comrades. Of course, they are working for the villain, who believes his moves will divide the King's army. So the King tells the Church of his men's innocence and requests they remain quiet until after the confrontation with the villain. The King grows in skill and compassion from his experience as a beggar and realizes being a King takes more than military might. He also grows in knowledge and appreciation of his comrades and appoints them to higher positions.

Alchemist's solution:

Make sure your protagonist, or a main character, is challenged by something which will require him to learn something, or find a reason to change, or acquire new abilities or discover inner resources. Through the course of the story, characters who change or who grow in capacity should do so step at a time, not all of a sudden like knowledge just rained on them from the heavens.

Also See:

    "Character Growth" in Chapter 21, "A Character Motivation Primer"

    Chapter 22, "The Process Of Change"

6

Dull And Uninteresting: Making Characters Sparkle

Discussion

Where do you turn if your character is identified as dull and uninteresting? To the library in search of good characters in books? To a park bench to watch for "characters?" How much character do you need? Make the guy eccentric or too unique, and you need a character actor to play him. How much character do you put in to satisfy people?

What gives people charisma? Why do we find some people spell binding? What turns some actors into sex symbols and others into superstars? Why is one person able to sell anyone the Brooklyn Bridge, and another couldn't sell papers on a street corner? Why do we like some people, and not others?

Is it glitziness? Just the superficial image gained from a good looking and well cared for body, great clothes, and a smooth tongue? Glamour, perhaps, from being in the right environment? Money? Power? Good breeding and education? Something charismatic we just can't describe?

There are well bred people we can't stand, people with money and power we wouldn't want to be caught dead around, glamorous people who turn our stomachs when we get to know them, and beautiful people who are rotten to the core.

We like Charlie Chaplin's *Tramp*. Why? On *Mash*, why did we like Radar O'Reilly and Hawkeye Pierce? two totally different and unusual people. Why do people like Kojack? And it isn't just people we like who fascinate us: JR Ewing was the character we loved to hate. Or consider the fascinating characters Jack Nicholson plays - vampires and devils with a sexual slant, or even a Joker. We want to see a good villain - are they charismatic?

Obviously it helps to be a good speaker, or a good actor, to do well in front of people. Speaking takes movement, surprises, challenge to the listeners to get their involvement, a modulated voice and color (variety). Acting takes a great deal more. Superficial things may get a character's foot in the mind's door, but after that something has to click. Those things are identifiable personality traits that can be included in characterization.

If the character is a "good guy," there are some traits he will almost have to have. Good people are people we can depend on, people who can be trusted.

Certain things make us trust people: First of all, they are like us. There are human qualities in them we can relate to. If nothing else, people get to know each other by lighting up a cigarette or talking sports, or having coffee. Second, they are honest, competent, and even authoritative. And they are decent and brave. That doesn't mean that they obey every law, worship God on the right days, and jump into every battle. Everyone has faults, and those who appear perfect aren't approachable - they're intimidating - so a good guy is better if he has an obvious flaw.

Normally we're going to like people who are people oriented and have some empathy for other people. If they are reclusive, sociopathic, or totally selfish, we won't like them. We like people who are warm, caring, and giving. However, Dustin Hoffman played two characters who weren't people oriented: an autistic man who was emotionally flat, and a hero with a very negative personality. With the autistic man, we were intrigued by his plight and were sympathetic toward him and his brother. With the hero, we saw through his rough exterior to the goodness inside.

Some personality traits are more difficult to pin down. If a character, or person, is genuine, we are more apt to like him. What does genuine mean? Not pretending to be something they are not. Not false, like people who will lead you on or are two-faced. Self-assurance is a trait likable characters often have, but this doesn't always hold true. Attitude is another trait that is difficult to pin down. We like characters with a little attitude, we like them a little rebellious, a little cocky, a little devilish, a little different than the average "normal" person. But push attitude very far and you have a "character," and probably a dislikable one.

There are three things characters need which come directly from the writer. First, the character should be unique. Just enough different from us that he intrigues us. It might be his work, his attitude, his problem, his past, his future, his hobby - something to separate him from the crowd. Second, there should be surprises. If we know the person so well that he is totally predictable, then we're bored. But if he is totally unpredictable, we will hate him, so it's better not to make the surprise his erratic behavior - make it something a little mysterious about him from the first that gets illuminated later. Third, give him a life. If a character has a fully developed life that we get glimpses of, then he is motivated and interesting to us.

If the character is a bad guy, give him a life, too, and apply many of the above personality traits to him.

Identifying with characters.
Is it necessary to write twelve minutes of characterization related drama just to make us connect? Is it essential to have a good looking person or a "personality" in the role ? Or are there things that help people connect? What is essential is that the audience can identify with the person.

First we need a few cues that the person is like us. Watch what happens when two strangers who are smokers meet. One lights up a smoke, then the other lights up. They instantly become more approachable because something is "known" about the other - they share something in common - they're "all right." It doesn't take much: petting a lost kitten, smiling compassionately at someone who is not so likeable, avoiding something that is dishonest. Some little thing like this will demonstrate that the person is like us, they are "all right." They share with us being in the human condition.

We don't need a lot of general character development. We will assume that the person is just like the other people in his peer group, and that they are a lot like us. The mind notices things that are different. What we will need is examples of how the character differs from his peers, or how they differ from us. Preferrably the peers will be a little shadier than we, and the main character will stand out because he is better than they, and is like us. We will identify much more with him, because now it's us against them and we want him to succeed.

But don't make the character perfect. We're not, and we're intimidated by perfect people. So, instead of giving him a moral problem, like dishonesty, give him a weakness - something to overcome. We will identify with this, because we are all in the same boat. We all have things to overcome. We identify. Once again, we will want the person to succeed.

Alchemist's solutions:

1) Push your character as far as you can push in the traits listed above, until they seem unrealistic. Then pull him back until he seems realistic but still vibrant.

2) If you have reached an impasse in your writing, sometimes the only solution is to shake things up a bit. For example, what do you do if you find it difficult to write strong female characters? If you can only see women as the mothering type or airheads (or can only see men as macho spear chuckers), what do you do? One way to compensate is write the role using a male character, then change it to a woman. After changing the name, go back and change some of

her responses to show more feminine qualities. But after having drawn the character one way, you are unlikely to be able to make more than superficial changes, so you will end up with a strong character of the proper gender.

3) Weak characters can often be strengthened by combining two characters into one. The characterization will blend, yielding a much more colorful character.

4) If creating characters seems an irksome and frustrating process which for all practical purposes prevents you from writing, try just getting right into the story. There is so much background and characterization inherent in writing from scratch that about thirty pages will be dominated by it. Then set those first pages aside and begin again, drawing on them for character and situations. It isn't wasted, you will use most of the material.

5) Another way to get around your own weaknesses is to ask another writer to suggest ideas or even write a character or portions of the story. This way you will get a good story written, but the downside is you learn less about strengthening your writing.

6) Consult books like *Encyclopedia Of Literary Characters*, or *Oxford Book Of Villains*, for patterns. It isn't necessary for a writer to always make totally new and unique characters if the mold already exists, especially for the less significant ones.

Also See:

> Chapter 22, "Developing Characters Using Motivation
>
> Index, "Motivation"

Excursus One: How To Raise Dead Characters

My favorite line from a movie comes when a writer is asked why he got married. He replies, "Because I'm a writer and I felt like I hadn't suffered enough yet." I was raised, in a rural community in the fifties and sixties where suffering was something to be endured and not complained about. In fact, showing emotion was generally considered out of place. Emotionalism from the Church pulpit, or from an insurance salesman tightening the screws, or even in a story was seen as very inappropriate. Feelings were better kept hidden.

I have woken slowly to the value of feelings. I recently asked a famous Russian playwright how he would get inspired to write. He replied that he walked the streets and saw the misery and got depressed. Then he sat down with his bottle of vodka and his typewriter and began to write. I was amazed that anyone could write when they were depressed. But the Russians have a grand tradition of emotional theater, and are disappointed if their emotions aren't touched. Is it any surprise that modern Method Acting sprang from this tradition, from the Russian Stanislavsky who put actors in touch with their feelings?

Do Characters Really Feel?

Is it really important? Doesn't the average viewer just want to escape from his own humdrum daily life, or life of troubles, with a little vicarious excitement? A little sexual titillation? If that were true, James Bond movies would fill the screen. Computers could create action plots where two opposing machines crush each other to the last machine. But no one would care. Did Robocop have a heart? Yes. Did the Terminator have human values after all? Yes. The movie that gets made touches on what it means to be human. (To overstate the true nature of theater, women usually select the movies and they want to see men who are heroic but sensitive. Men with feelings. Women doing the movie selecting is one reason why there are so few strong female roles.)

Writing illustrates the human condition. Even *Star Trek* stories are about the human condition. Though set megamiles from earth, using science hardly imaginable, on a planet with creatures totally unfamiliar to us, Paramount still wants the stories about the human condition. One of their best series of storylines involved the android character Data and whether or not he was

human. I think the writers could not have let him be declared a machine. The audience would not have stood for it; they even want Data, an Android with no feelings, to know what it means to be human.

Even in humor we want our characters to portray the human condition. Especially humor. Verbal gymnastics are funny for a while, but not for an entire film. I remember hearing Alan Alda say about the hit series, *Mash*, he wished they had delivered fewer one liners and taken time to be more serious. Better humor is based on laughing at the human condition and the situations we find ourselves in - laughing at life. What about horror thrillers? Especially horror thrillers. Does Steven King instinctively know what scares the hell out of us by his own reservoir of feelings? Yes. If he didn't, he couldn't write it.

How do you rewrite movies and scenes so they touch on some aspect of humanity? Quick, name something that is human. Try an emotion. Try suffering. One common theme in all the world's religions is that suffering is basic to change - not that all life is suffering, there are very positive motivations as well - but most stories are about the struggle for change. Yet too often the story reflects only the kick and not the pain.

Step One: Show The Pain

Take emotion out of the bottom drawer and put it with the action. In the movie, *Unforgiven*, Muny assassinates a man in cold blood. The man doesn't die immediately, and in a humanitarian gesture not typical of Muny, he allows the dying man to be given water. People suffer when they die, but Muny had always hidden from it in the past with drunkenness. This time he wasn't numbed by drink; he had changed. Neither is our prospective audience numbed to emotion, so the writer can't leave emotion out and expect the movie to grab.

If you identify with your characters, you can make them suffer. Or when they reach an impossible goal, you can make them blow the top off in celebration. The writer has to feel the character reaching for the goal and know that when he's reached it he's done something exceptional.

I suspect many writers never identify at all with their characters. They are just puppets manipulated at will to make the story go this direction or that because the story needs action here and romance there. The character makes the right moves and it happens. But it has the same bogus impact as decaf coffee because it doesn't follow from character motivation. The character is actually lifeless, as in dead.

Step Two: Raise The Dead

The second step in rewriting is to identify those dead characters and give them a life. Why does Uncle Heathcliff suddenly decide to join forces with Nephew Philbert when for the last fifteen scenes he didn't seem to care? Without compelling motivation, it looks contrived. Why does Randy suddenly kiss Paulette when for the first half the story he hasn't noticed that she even existed? Because it was time for romance? The audience will be painfully aware something just happened for no reason at all.

Are you likely to root for some lifeless person whose only motivation is to make money and manipulate others? No. Then how about the man who was prevented from reaching his goal of being manager because of unscrupulous coworkers? He is now struck with a crippling illness that could be arrested if he had the money. He would have the money if he was promoted to manager, but one of his coworkers also wants the manager job - the same scoundrel who stole his wife ten years ago. The good guy is a kind person who would treat the mistreated employees with respect if he becomes manager, that is, after he cleans house. This is a guy we will root for.

Shallow characters, who have no purpose in life, who want nothing, have nothing to care about. There are no real obstacles for them to encounter. What is good and bad is just a point of view, and they are about as engaging as branches striking each other in the wind. The character needs to develop a life with roots in the community and family, and want things, just like real people. To breathe life into zombies, redefine your character giving him a past, a present, and a future.

Step Three: Make Them Live Longer So They Can Suffer More

One of my wife's favorite sayings is, "If you complain, God makes you live longer." Does your character die half way through without a complaint? Lacking specific motivation, the character dances frenetically to page sixty, then drags his own corpse to the end of the story, unaware he expired back there somewhere. Chances are you didn't care enough about the character to bring him to a good ending. To fix it, start looking for clues why you don't care for the character. Chances are you'll find it in character motivation.

It might be you have an unappealing character. Redraw your character so he is someone you care about - either love or hate. It could also be you just aren't interested in the story. I have difficulty writing stories about injustice and reprisal. I get the story started then lose interest - other kinds of stories appeal to me.

The opposite also happens. The story doesn't get going until page sixty because it took that long for the writer to identify with his characters. The answer to that is to set the first sixty pages aside and begin writing fresh. The

good stuff will come back to you and the character has enough life now to present a challenge.

Step Four: Who cares?

If your character is good, when you look at the halfway point in the story, do you really care how it ends? Have you written a compelling story or just a movie? Does your story have purpose? Does it tell us something about life? If not, maybe that's why you have no interest in it - it really doesn't make any difference to anyone, including your character - and you need to clarify what your story is about. The best way to fix this is to get in tune with your characters and find out what they want. Work on the character profile some more. Write a scene where one character shares with another why he is alive and what he wants from life, and how he got that way. (Set that scene aside and don't use it in the script; they don't play well.) Characters usually determine what a story is about and drive the story to its conclusion.

Step Five: Be Decisive

Another frequent problem is the character never really decides to do anything. He just wanders through the script and no one knows how motivated he is. He supposedly worked up a thirst, but it was a weak one and he's just going to satisfy it sip at a time. Yuk! Chinese water torture. Like a thirsty man crawling across a desert, the protagonist must work up a strong thirst for change and be driven to a decision. Tension should mount to the bursting point, then the character removes his glasses and puts on his Superman cape. We know he's finally had a bellyful and he's not going to take it anymore.

The point where a character makes a decision has to be identifiable by an actor. An actor looks meticulously for decision points so he knows how to direct his action. His entire persona will change once he has reached a decision point. He may have been tense and tortured but compliant one moment, then becomes irate and forceful the next. But the character who moves from scene to scene with no emotional change and no decisions commands no attention.

The decision point has to be especially well developed for the turning point at the end of part one. Everything that happens in part one should be pushing the protagonist to the point he must make a decision to do something about it. In every scene the character should suffer more intensely than the scene before until he can't stand it anymore and has to do something.

These five steps should help you identify the dead and breathe life into them. Most of these problems have to do with lack of character motivation because the character has no life. If they have no life, don't care about anything, then

they can't suffer. But suffering is only one emotion to work with. Lovers fall more deeply in love, or fight the feeling, until one decides to do something about it. He chases her and part two begins. An athlete may reject hard workouts until he goes down in bitter defeat. He decides to try harder - part two begins and he finds the obstacles to success are just beginning. A cop may find compelling reasons to become more and more absorbed in a case until he realizes it's an obsession he can't give up and part two begins. A woman discovers she loves criminal law, but each day finds it more difficult to get into law school until it seems only an elusive dream. But she commits to the dream, leaving her job and only income, and part two begins.

Reader Profile: Andrea Minnieweather, Writers Workshop Reader. Independent Writer

Andrea is one of those few writers who actually get to support themselves by writing. It must be the California weather (blame it on anything - I'm just a little jealous here). She says, "I will write just about anything and sell to anyone." Her list is long. She writes magazine articles ranging from "how to's" on crafts for women's magazines to movie star interviews in Playboy. But recently she burned out on an article on the cryogenic (freezing) preservation of heads for eventual reawakening, when she found breathing life into research people is more difficult than bringing back the brains of the dead. (Only in California.) What genre does she love? You guessed it - horror. She has two romance novels to her credit under a pseudonym. She contracts to write movie "one sheets," which are the posters you see in theaters. She critiques romance novels and screenplays.

How did she decide her place in life was to be a writer? She has been serious about writing since she was eight. She still has her first diary, and still enjoys reading it. (I wish I could write like that). Her mother wanted her to be a concert pianist, and she trained from age six. Now she doesn't even own a piano and has written very seriously for about six years. Yes, she has the writing disease.

How did she get involved with Writers Workshop? She was at a major studio doing critiques when she saw a brochure requesting volunteers. She remembers the brochure mentioned an ethnic minority screenwriting contest and she wanted to be a part of an organization like that.

Movies, she believes, are wonderful vehicles which take you to exciting places. If it's in you to write one, then prepare yourself by reading books like those by Syd Field. Don't mark yourself an amateur by the overuse of camera shots, and if you're dreaming of writing a horror movie, you have to scare the shit out of us on paper first - it's really great when it works! And when it doesn't, don't fret. Not everyone can write a great movie.... some of us were just meant to enjoy them!

SECTION II.

STRUCTURE: PROBLEMS & CURES

The second most frequent problem seen by Writers Workshop readers is deficient plotting. Imagine you are about to walk through a mountain park. You find a trail, but don't know where it goes. You get on the trail and soon see the trail branch off in three directions, but with no indication which trail is the right one. You explore two and find they are dead ends. You take the third and it brings you back where you started. Big deal, huh? Many stories do the same.

Now, imagine you are in a park and you and a friend pass a refreshment stand and are tantalized by the smell of food. You decide to have a picnic. You set out for the picnic area, following the signs. A well marked trail takes you in the right direction, and several loop trails take you past interesting sights on the way. You get to the picnic area having enjoyed several views. This is the way stories should work.

In a story, as on a trail, you see what propels the story (tantalized by food), you move toward a goal (picnic area), the plot takes you there (well marked trail), and the plot and subplots keep you interested on the way (trail and side trails). When any of these elements is missing, audience attention is missing.

7

Plot: Strengthen Weak Or Unfocused Plots

Discussion

A plot can be weak for many reasons. It could be weak because of a missing element. At the end of this section on structure is a guide to all the elements that go into building a powerful storyline. But what happens if you remove one element? The plot becomes weak, unfocused, or wanders. For example, what if the people at the park were never tantalized by food at the refreshment stand? They would have much less desire to go anywhere specific. They might wander through the park, eventually ending up at the picnic area. They might wander the trails until dusk. Their day would have no focus. Something must happen to trigger their motivation to reach the picnic area, propelling the story onto the right trail.

Problem

You have begun writing a story about a middle class woman who robs a bank. The story is all about planning the robbery, committing the felony, and spending the money. Will people enjoy the story? Adventure stories work well, but probably not this one. Why? Because several things are missing that gain audience interest. What triggers the robbery? She walked by the bank and smelled money? Very weak plot. She needed a new car? Too weak to make a middle class woman rob a bank. Her house was repossessed? There are better solutions.

A stronger plot might begin with her son in a coma in a hospital. They can't get good medical care without medical insurance, and her husband lost his job two months ago because he is in jail for throwing their son out the window. She has no money to pay a good lawyer, and can't convince the prosecutor that their son was setting their rented home on fire, and her husband was throwing him into the swimming pool to put out the flames. Desperate for money and stung doubly by the system, her mind turns to robbery. She has a goal to reach: saving her husband and son. Add subplots about why her husband lost his job and why her son wants to burn down the house, and you have a good story.

Alchemist's Solutions:

The strength of the plot is directly tied to character motivation. Smelling money, needing a car, and the threat of having a house repossessed aren't

strong enough to make most people rob a bank. Remedy: Make the stakes high enough to motivate the character.

Plots wander when the character doesn't know where she is going. Early in the story she needs to decide exactly what she is after. If she needs money for medical and defense expenses, no one wants to follow a long winding path about the expenses involved and all the possible ways to get the money. She needs to find out right away how much money she needs and that she doesn't have any legal way to get it and get right to planning the bank robbery. Remedy: Move the decision point to the first twenty to thirty pages, make it clear what the character is after, and put her hot on the trail to getting it.

How long can we watch a pleasant walk in the park? Back to the trail analogy, if the goal is reach the picnic area and it is only a pleasant walk to get there, how interesting is it? But what if the path disappears? What if a sudden shower turns the dirt path to mud? What if the bridge has fallen? Now to reach the goal, you have to conquer these obstacles. A plot might be weak because there are no relevant obstacles to conquer and they don't get harder as you get nearer the goal. Plots are usually devised so that tension rises as things get more and more impossible. Remedy: Arrange your plot so your character is faced with increasing difficulty the closer she gets to the goal.

Also See:

> *"Excursus Two: Five Power Points In Three Act Drama"*
>
> Chapter 25, "Using Concept To Focus The Story"

8

Originality: Outrun Tired, Predictable Storylines

Nothing New Under the Sun?

"There is nothing new under the sun." Heard that one before? Or how about, "There are only thirty six basic plots?" And of course, "I knew what was going to happen from the first minute." Or, "Another multiple personality story." But around four hundred movies are made every year, plus all the TV sitcoms, and video stores are seeing a lot of movies made specifically for them. How can they be called original?

Yes, human beings are basically alike and face mostly the same array of problems. There really are only about thirty six basic plots. And you will find it very difficult to find a topic that hasn't been done before. And undoubtedly if you write a story or a scene, within three years you will see something very similar done in some other writer's story, even if your script sits in a closet where only telepathics can reach it. Several years ago I wrote a spy novel set in the Middle East. No one was writing about Arab/Israeli relations at the time. Before I could send it to a publisher, John LeCarre hit the market with a novel with a similar theme. Great minds think alike (unlike his, mine sputters and backfires a lot).

Problem

What makes stories different is the outcome and subplots. Let's say John (not LeCarre) is involved with a mistress. What will his wife do? What will his mistress do? What will John do? How will it all be resolved? His wife might: kill him, fight for him, divorce him, ignore it, join them, mutilate him, become hateful, kill the mistress, kill herself, move them, change her repulsive behavior, take a lover, have a child, get a travel job, leave temporarily.... Each character has a wide range of actions they could take, but these will be determined by his history and his motivations.

Each action a character takes will draw a reaction from another character. If a character has a choice of at least fifteen actions, and the other character could react in fifteen different ways, then each action could result in at least two hundred twenty five different story lines. The next reaction could result in three thousand three hundred seventy five story lines. Then 50,625; then 759,375.... So the number of original stories is limited only by your imagination and honest characterization.

Subplots add another dimension to stories, and if two subplots are used which intertwine with the main plot to help develop it, there are millions of variations to the main plot. Why then do writers create material that jumps into the same rut as other stories? Probably because the writer has limited interests and creates characters who mirror himself. So stories tend to be like other stories the writer likes, and the character has a limited range of choices.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Choose themes that are fresh and not overdone - don't write westerns if the season has been saturated with westerns. By the time you get your script to an agent, Hollywood has moved on. Don't write plots with parents seeking adopted children if recent stories have already fully explored that theme.

2) List a large number of character actions your character could take, and go with it. List the reactions the other character could choose and go with one.

3) Try to put surprises in the story so it isn't predictable. When Trudy is about to do the natural, predictable thing and leave her cheating husband, have a friend suggest she do the unnatural thing and show up to join them. How will John react? Your story will be a lot more fun for you to write.

Last Resort Mind Stretching Techniques

Can't come up with a unique plot? Everything normal has already been done? Real life is often stranger than fiction, so try these techniques for building a plot:

1) Go to unique areas and meet some unique people. Get to know them. Talk to them. See how they think and act. Find out the bizarre things they have done. Ask how they would handle different situations - many people would carry through with what they say. A guy who got fed up with his TV actually shot the TV. A man who got tired of having his watermelons stolen, actually shot a young man stealing watermelons. In recent history, three different people involved in financial frauds left the St. Louis area. One left the state with his wife, faked his death, and disappeared, to be discovered living in another state. Two brothers escaped with their fortune to Argentina, where they have evaded deportation. A man accused of real estate fraud simply disappeared.

2) Think up three completely bizarre, zany, far fetched actions your character could take for a situation. For example, faced with being fired from his janitorial job, Zulu: 1) Starts a competitive company and takes all the other workers with him. 2) Convinces the board of directors to make him CEO. 3) Holds the Sears Tower hostage to get his job back. None of these things are what a janitor would normally do, but a credible story can come from any of them. To start a competitive company, Zulu might know that most of his fellow employees are disgruntled because of poor management and

mistreatment.   He might have insider information (gleaned from waste baskets and overheard conversations) which will revolutionize the business, and he might know of a competitor being driven out of business, so their structure is available.

To convince the board of directors, he might romance the CEO's daughter plus have incriminating evidence on the CEO; so the CEO is motivated to bribe him by making him Vice President. Once in the office, he quickly gains the counsel of disgruntled employees, consolidates his power base, and unseats the CEO.

To hold the Sears Tower Hostage, he might accidentally damage the electrical room while cleaning and cause a power outage. Out of fear of being fired or arrested, he might lock himself in and refuse to open the doors. Only a few people at a time can leave the building because the elevators are out. Word spreads through the entire building what is happening and why. His boss, a tyrant and an unfair taskmaster, is taken to task by everyone in the building and is asked to resign for creating an atmosphere in which such a thing can happen. The story is written up in the Chicago Tribune and he is a workingman's hero.

 After coming up with bizarre actions, eliminate the ones that won't work and keep the one that will. You can always tone it down if it is too far out or too incredible.

Also See:

> Chapter 21, "Originality: Stretch Your Writing Skills"

> Index, "Originality"

9

Confusing: Watch For Contradictory And Unexplained Actions

Discussion

"Now why did he do that?" That was my most often uttered question as my children grew up. When I asked them why they did something, they had no idea. It's kind of like the characters in some scripts. It's as if some people are guided by some mysterious force, like the wind. When the wind changes directions, so do they, but no one can see the wind, so no one knows why.

Those stimulus/response folks in the Behaviorist branch of psychology prefer to treat the brain as a black box. They don't get excited about all the motivations swimming around inside the brain; they are more interested in what kind of response comes from various stimuli. For example, bad behavior can be modified by negative reinforcement, and it isn't especially important what fearful image the pain conjures up in the brain: a malevolent father, a menacing dog, sheer blinding pain, or the sky falling in. In contrast, the psychoanalytic approach might dissect the menacing dog image to deduce that the person's behavior resulted from fear of dogs. Somewhere between the unfathomable black box and dissecting the mind is what the writer has to reveal.

Problem

Action that is contradictory has to be explained. Few viewers have blind faith that characters do strange things for rational reasons. If Billy sees mean dogs guarding the fudge factory, but the following day to get the fudge he leaps the fence into the midst of the dogs, we're going to think there is a kink in Billy's brain. In the writer's mind there might have been a good reason for it, but to us, Billy is an idiot. Billy's action will make more sense if his friend told him that the guard dogs are trained not to bite.

More often than not, it isn't absurd actions which don't get explained, it is a character decision that never becomes known to the audience. To illustrate, take a sequence in which Tim is afraid to approach Elizabeth for a date. After missing two opportunities, he finally connects on the third.   Why? What finally clicked in that black box? If the explanation is missing, the audience is robbed of the experience and the sequence is robbed of power. Did Tim have a talk with Elizabeth's friend? Another guy? What did they say? That he's an attractive guy? That courage is the measure of a man, and

he is wimping out? This is the part that is more important than Tim getting the date. Getting the date relieves the tension, it is anticlimactic. Building to this point and seeing what influences Tim's decision is the important part.

Characters sometimes do things that are confusing. To wit, on his quest to gain courage, Tim begins taking a course in pottery. Or Marge, while searching for meaning in her life, slaps a street vendor for asking her for a date. Or Sherry, while trying to help her Uncle recover from a debilitating illness, cuts off her beautiful long hair. None of these actions connect with their storylines. When the character does them, the audience is confused. Actions like these have nothing to do with the storyline, and don't move the story forward.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Watch for actions that might seem absurd to the viewer because the reason for doing the action is obscure or not evident.

2) Make certain the character has motivation for his action which is important to the story. If the character is doing a little dance just to fill up time, the padding should be removed from the story.

Also See:

> Chapter 12, "Credibility"

> Index, "character actions"

10

Manipulated Or Contrived: Avoid Quick Fix Or Mechanical Solutions

Discussion

I remember a movie about a writer who frequently ended his program with a cliffhanger that looked impossible for his characters to get out of. The next week he would be miraculously saved. One episode ended with the character falling from a plane without a parachute. The following week he was rescued by landing on a bird in flight. This raises three questions about validity. 1) Was this coincidence or divine intervention? Not coincidence. 2) Could this really have happened? No. 3) Do we live in a cartoon world? The world isn't Toon Town; when you fall out of a plane, that's all folks.

We could have God fix everything. All we have to do is reach the point where we don't know how to end the story, then have God reach down and set it right. But the last three times I called down fire from Heaven, it didn't work, so I think Divine Intervention in stories is just a copout for "I couldn't think of an ending." Whatever you have to say, better let God send His own messages.

The Hand of God often shows up as some coincidence that makes the story work, when normally it wouldn't have. It's having a thirty-nine-inch car show up just in the nick of time. It's having it rain just in time. It's Aunt Louise dying and leaving an inheritance just in time.

When God isn't the excuse, the writer's hand is. For example, a traveling man on a train has a series of chance encounters with three different people who bungle around and get him in trouble. In comedy it might work, but not drama. Why? What are the real chances of meeting one person who gets you in trouble? It does happen. Two people - highly unlikely. Three - forget it. Too much coincidence is the mark of a story which has been fully manipulated by the writer.

Where do you draw the line between plotting a story and contriving it? Plotting should be the intelligent foresight of what should happen, given the characters and situation. Contriving is arranging outside events to manipulate the character. In a normal story, the characters create their own destiny by their own actions. The antagonist throws everything he can at the good guy. The protagonist fights back with all the strength and wits he has, using all the resources at his disposal.

Problem

For example, story YZ is set at a munitions factory that makes conventional bombs, tucked into a small hamlet in rural Pennsylvania, in a very hilly, well forested area. Turk is a munitions manufacturer and arms the bombs. His assistant, Fanny Brightenberry, assembles the arming mechanisms and tests them. Fanny, desperately needing money for her kids education, gets recruited by a hostile country to supply information. Turk notices her copying documents and begins to spy on her. She is informed Turk is on to her and is told to be more careful. Turk sets a trap for her and confronts her red handed. She threatens to blow them up and the entire factory. He talks her out of it and secretly helps get her out of trouble with the foreigners. All of this would be relatively within reason.

How would a contrived story look? At the munitions factory, Fanny gets recruited. Turk "senses" something is up and gets suspicious. He watches her. She steals the information and he follows her to a drop site. Turk confronts her, but she has been trained in a special Middle East terrorist camp (we now learn) and drowns him in a nearby river. He survives and arrives at the factory in the nick of time to prevent her from escaping with all the documents. He is secretly ex-CIA (we now learn). He holds her at gun point and calls the local Sheriff. The Sheriff enters, but he is in cahoots with Fanny (we now learn) and disables Turk. Fanny heads for the company jet (wasn't in the original - too hilly and company too small), carrying with her a nuclear bomb she just happens to have access to (factory originally made only conventional weapons), and just happens to know how to load it on the plane and how to fly a jet. Turk, of course, has had flight training. He goes up in a friend's jet and forces Fanny to land while convincing her over the radio that all will be well.

To write the contrived synopsis, I ignored half my intelligence (which isn't hard for me) and just put down anything convenient to make the story do something exciting. At the right times, Turk senses something, Fanny is terrorist trained, Turk is ex-CIA, the Sheriff is in cahoots with Fanny, Fanny can fly a jet, the company has a jet, the company has a nuclear bomb, Fanny knows how to load a nuclear bomb, Turk can fly a jet like a fighter pilot, and Turk's friend has a jet. All totally unbelievable.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Establish a realistic setting with only specific resources. Create character profiles and stick with them. Allow your characters to use only the resources at hand.

2) Your characters must be the instruments of their own destiny.

3) The things your characters do must be believable. The plot must follow an intelligent path.

Also See:

"Crisis and decision points" in Excursus Two

Index, "honest characters" and "honest action"

Chapter 23, "How To Use Motivation To Form Characters and Plot"

11

Payoff: Make Every Scene And Setup Have Punch

Discussion

Advertising can be incredibly misleading. Advertising raises expectations, then the product doesn't deliver. Movies are a typical example. The advertisement shots are of action and nude people. The real movie has one short action scene that ends in compromise, and the nude person was being prepared for surgery. We know we can't believe advertisers - we expect them to lie, but not writers. If a writer sets us up for something, we expect it to happen.

Problem 1

Sometimes a writer sets things up inadvertently. He has an innocent conversation about saving a bank robber from going to jail, because he wants to show character. We just know there is going to be a bank robbery. He shows us a special gun that won't kill anyone, to show how harmless his character is. We just know that is the gun that is going to be used in the robbery. He shows us a hot car that can outrun any police car, because his character is into racing, and we just know that will be the getaway car. The guy's dad has a police scanner, because that is his hobby in retirement, and we know it will be used for the robbery. But none of it ever happens and we leave the script thinking, "I thought this story was going to be about a robbery - wait, maybe I missed some pages...." Audiences know that everything that is shown or said is relevant, and are prepared to see something happen.

Problem 2

Another problem, in successive drafts of a script, is when things are removed that followed from a previous set up. In the original, Aunt Bertha had quintuplets and this became an obstacle to Tim leaving the area. Later, Tim was removed from the script, but Aunt Bertha still had quintuplets. Readers will be wondering what relevance that had to the story.

Problem 3

The most disastrous false lead is the misleading introduction. The first five to twenty minutes of a story tell the audience what it is about. A bad example: A character spends the first ten minutes languishing over a soured romance, fighting with his friend about what tune their rock group should

play first, and seething about military land mines killing innocent civilians twenty years after a war has ended. We think the story is going to be about a guy who makes his rock group successful by removing land mines, with a romance subplot. It all turns out to be characterization and the story is really about a musician who becomes a big brother and eventually writes a hit song about it. The story doesn't deliver what it promises - adventure and romance. The audience will feel misled.

Problem 4

Writers occasionally put in a scene with a setup or a conflict that doesn't pay off. For example, Tina spends most of a scene telling Karin what a loser she is. Nothing ever comes of it, and the story ends with Karin still being a loser. It was set up for something to happen - a conflict fully developed - but it is never used or resolved. These things stay with the reader until the end of the story, and he is left wondering what the setup was for and why nothing ever happened.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Don't use elaborate scenes and situations for characterization, this only misleads us about what the story is about. Let characterization come from the story. (See the section on characterization.)

2) If you have a conflict or a set-up in the story that doesn't pay off, remove it. It has no function in the story and is misleading.

Also See:

> Chapter 15, "Consistency: Making Action Follow From Previous Drama"

12

Credibility: Make Your Premise And Plot Believable

Discussion

An audience willingly enters into the dramatic action on the screen and temporarily holds their critical eye at bay. It's called entering into the fictional dream, and is often a light state of hypnosis. An audience is willing to ignore some minor structural problems to see a good story. But when something doesn't ring true, the sham detector goes off in their brains, red lights flash, their eyes bulge and they are jolted out of the story and lose interest (or cease to find the story entertaining). The writer may not have written down a premise, but one will be there anyway.

A premise can be put in the form of an "if.... then...." statement. If this happens, then this will happen. If people are put under too much pressure, then their brains will collapse. If Trevor is forced to leave his home, then he will become self sufficient. If Alex is given too much money, then he'll develop extravagant habits. If Paula flunks out of school, then she'll become a brain surgeon. Wait a minute. If you were watching a movie right now and Paula became a successful brain surgeon by flunking out of school, would you buy it? No, it's a bad premise.

The premise in a story is what the audience can infer you are saying would happen with that type of character in a given circumstance. If the premise is bad, the sham detectors go off and you lose the audience.

Problem

Sometimes the entire storyline, or plot, is whacko. For example, Desmond wants to earn his way through Harvard, where he wants to study philosophy/ethics. He sells six pints of his own blood a week, steals three gallons of blood from guys in the dorm while they sleep and sells it, robs convenience stores in remote areas in stolen cars, steals books from classmates and resells them to the book store, and works as a legal aid on weekends because his father was a lawyer. So, following a lot of narrow misses, he graduates Harvard with honors.

Several things don't ring true. If the story was properly researched, the writer would know there are only ten pints of blood in the human body, and he would be staring death in the face if he sold six at one time. Also, blood collection centers will only take one pint a week, and he would have major

problems selling them blood. Next error, could he repeatedly extract blood from several people in a dorm while they slept without getting caught? Probably his very first victim would strangle him. And the multiple skin punctures would certainly arouse mass suspicion.

Next error, would a person attending Harvard be likely to steal cars and rob convenience stores? Ethics and morality aside, if he's smart enough to get in, he is probably smart enough not to do stupid crimes. Out of character. And he would be unlikely to get away with it over a four-year period. Research again: could he sell used books? Campuses vary, but most likely he would only be able to return them during semester changes, and large or frequent returns might mark him as a thief.

Research again: can just anyone work as a legal aid, even if his father was a lawyer? Cambridge, the home of the elite Harvard Law School, would probably not be a welcoming place for an ethics student masquerading as a legal aid. Next error, all of his efforts would not have amassed the hefty tuition for Harvard. So if you're headed for Harvard, don't try this.

Alchemist's Solutions:

1) Use honest characters. If the character wants to go in a different direction, ask yourself if your premise was really true. You may have disproved it, or you may not have set the situation up properly to get the desired result. (See the section on characterization and on character motivation, and on premise.)

2) Use plots and storylines that are believable. Or write fantasy. Usually if you have written a story and part of the plot doesn't work, it isn't necessary to rewrite the entire story. Something plausible can be substituted for the errant plot. In the Harvard example above, selling blood might be one way he covers meal expenses. To earn more money, he might keep tabs on people leaving school by those moving from the dorm, and request they donate their books to him, so he can legitimately resell them. Using his legal exposure and background as an ethicist, he might write and sell a weekly parody on Harvard legal scholar's experiences as legal aids, which creates a lot of debate. This might make up the gap in funding above financial aid and his parents' contribution. At the end of four years his classmates might give him an "honors" award for entrepreneurial effort.

Also See:

Chapter 23, "How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot"

Index, "Character: believable"

13

Anecdotal Stories: Avoid The "Storyteller's" Pitfall

Discussion/Problem

Anecdotes are wonderful things. They are little stories that often have some kind of punch line at the end. I often read scripts that use anecdotes to develop the story. First is the anecdote for opening the movie: Johnny gets strange looks for poking flowers up his nose. Everyone wants to know why - the plot. The second anecdote is a short vignette about a crazy friend Johnny remembers from ten years ago. This totally incidental scene has absolutely nothing to do with the story, it's just interesting. The third anecdote is for characterization, and through five minutes of scenes where Johnny shakes hands with every professor on campus, we learn that Johnny is normally sane and respected. In the fourth anecdote Johnny is having his nose pierced so he can have a flower stem inserted. Fifth anecdote, Johnny remembers how Uncle Steve used to push his horse's noses under the water while they drank from the watering trough. We're in trouble here, this writer has no sense of relevance and direction.

Storytellers often have a hundred anecdotes in their repertoire just waiting to be told. Excellent ones. But everything in a script has to move the story forward. If it's a story about Johnny's desire to be a nonconformist, then the anecdotes need to be about Johnny's deeds, not something dredged up from Johnny's memory. Some amusing stunt Uncle Steve pulled ten years ago is irrelevant and doesn't move the story forward.

A scene is usually a microcosm of the main story, and during the scene the character learns relevant things, makes decisions, and takes action. But an anecdote is usually just an example; it just supplies information and has no dramatic action. This can be very valuable for one scene, but a series of anecdotes leaves the story dead in the water. So building a story with anecdotes doesn't work.

Alchemist's Solution:

Rather than get rid of favorite passages, try this exercise: Combine your anecdotal scene with the next important scene. You may end up with a very busy scene with a lot of texture, that seems very true to life. If it doesn't work, set the anecdote aside for possible later use and write something in its place that both works for the story and entertains.

EXCURSUS TWO: FIVE POWER POINTS IN THREE ACT DRAMA

A powerful plot may sell even with weak characters. Plot is that valuable. In a recent survey, most moviegoers listed plot as the single most decisive element in what drew them to see the movie. In the highly competitive screenplay arena, good plots must be exceptional. In this excursion into a related area, I give clues to strategic points that make powerful plots.

Avoid formulas

Caution! Don't use this section as a formula. I often read stories which sound like they originated from a plot point machine, and they are so predictable and stereotypical in form that they sound unreal. Instant story in a can, just add water. These clues to creating stories are a guide, not a blueprint. For example, a contractor who builds a house knows there are certain characteristics a functional and aesthetically pleasing house will have. He has guidelines that tell him about these things and a budget to work within. Load-bearing walls have to be properly constructed in order to support the house. There must be adequate windows for light and visibility. Heating and ventilation must have the proper force to work properly. But how large he makes the rooms and where he puts the load-bearing walls, and where he puts the windows and how many and what size, and what type heat he uses and where he puts it are all at his discretion. He might build fifty homes that look nothing alike. Similarly, a storyteller knows the guidelines for a good story, but every story looks different.

How important are these story development elements? I examined an excellent movie, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, because it doesn't follow a straightforward development, but it works well. Following are my observations: The opening hook, pulling a car from a river in bygone days followed by a shot in modern day of a woman hearing a nonexistent train, seems to be an attempt to blend the two time periods and create mystery - mystery is a great element in snagging interest - but it failed for me because there was no character set up. There was nothing at stake. However, the mystery and train whistle would have worked as a motif, but didn't recur. (The haunting sound of a spiritual that recurred was an excellent motif.)

I expected the first ten to twenty minutes to tell me what the film was about. An elderly woman in a nursing home, Ninny, begins to tell the story of why it was once thought that Idgy killed a man. But what follows for much of the movie has little to do with that and has everything to do with friendship. So it

doesn't follow a pulse elevating trail. The murder story hinted at by the dripping car in the first scene is actually a subplot, but I stayed interested because the protagonist and her relationships were interesting. I looked for a plot point at twenty minutes. It arrives halfway through the movie, after we follow characterization and the development of relationships through childhood into adult married life. Then Idgy rescues Ruth from her battering husband, which propels the story forward.

This part of the story develops more typically, with Ruth's husband appearing repeatedly to take the baby, ending with a confrontation that mysteriously ends his life. A few scenes later, Idgy is put on trial for the murder, but is acquitted. So in about the second half of the story the murder plot is set up and brought to a resolution. The events in this would more typically be spread through the entire story instead of compressed into the second half. But it works.

The story is told in flashbacks by Ninny, at a nursing home. Flashbacks aren't recommended. When a story is moving backward, it isn't moving forward - the momentum is broken. Flashbacks in this story worked fine. A subplot running along with this of a middle age woman, Evelyn, to whom Ninny is telling the story, deals with: trying to regain her TV sports obsessed husband, with weight control, with learning to be assertive and not a victim, with facing menopause while coming to grips with her own sexuality - generally getting control over her life. How many major topics can go into one subplot? Usually one, but these all work.

Idgy's acquittal isn't the resolution. The resolution is longer than normal, but more typical for drama. After the murder conflict is resolved, Ruth dies. Back in present time again, Evelyn invites Ninny to come and live with her. Ninny reveals the mystery of what really happened to Ruth's husband. Our suspicion seems to be confirmed that Ninny is actually Idgy.

If we hadn't gotten the message yet that this is a movie about friendship, not about who murdered Ralph, then Ninny comes right out and tells us that friendship is the most important thing in life. Can you state the premise of your movie in the dialogue like this? Anathema! Verboten! Unforgivable! It must be shown, not spoken? But it worked fine.

Fried Green Tomatoes is a poignant portrait of three lives and how their friendships interacted to help everyone. The concept seems to be that friendship helps people resolve problems. Ruth helped Idgy. Idgy helped Ruth. They helped their friends, their friends helped them. Ninny helped Evelyn, who in return helped Ninny. Do we feel rooked because it didn't turn out to be an action flick about who murdered the man in the car? No, that was never a major component in the hook or plot, it just grew out of the main story and made the movie more interesting. So let your story be what it is, and use the following not as a formula but as a guide to developing plots that work.

Your screenplay is first going to be read. If you don't quickly get the reader's interest, the script may be quickly scanned and set aside. So the first important point is the first few pages. One of two things must happen during the first few pages. The basic storyline must be so powerful that it immediately draws the reader in, or there has to be a hook.

How do you draw the reader in? By immersing him in gripping drama on the first page. Many writers open with a life and death situation. Most people want to know how that turns out, so by the time the character lives or dies, the reader is into the story. This was hinted at in *Fried Green Tomatoes* with the car being lifted from the river. Every story can't open with life and death, but most stories can open with drama that mesmerizes by entering right into the basic conflict that is at the heart of the story. If the story opens with scene after scene of characterization and background, reader and audience involvement may be minimal. We need to be fascinated by something. We can relate to interesting characters and developing situations if they are really that good.

Hooks are a device to snag the audience until they can get into the story. The best hooks are just getting right to the drama. On the series, *Quantum Leap*, Sam Beckett landed in an unknown body, time, and place, putting him in a crisis situation. This occurred at the end of the weekly program, making us tune in the following week to see what happens. The next week the same hook opened the program, immediately snagging viewer interest. However, the immediate situation Sam found himself in usually had nothing to do with the central conflict of the story. This is a perfect example of a hook as a device to hold the viewer until he is into the story.

 Mystery is another excellent device for keeping people involved in the story. In *Quantum Leap*, when Sam entered a new body he had nothing but questions: who am I, where am I, why am I here, who are these people, what am I doing? How am I going to catch that guy swinging toward me on a trapeze? These mysteries slowly unraveled through the entire story. It isn't difficult to put mystery in a story, and even if the basic story isn't a mystery, it can be worked in as a subplot, as in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Crisis and decision points: Using Crisis To Develop Crucial Scenes

How much motivation should it take to get characters to decide to do something? Do-gooders, who have to rectify every wrong they see, usually aren't likable characters. On the other hand, the lazy duff who requires dynamite to move him is not that likable either, except in a comic sort of way. Should people be boxed into a corner so the right decision is the only one? How does this make the character look if he can't stand up for what he wants unless he is cornered? Shallow? From ten to thirty minutes into a story the main character has to make a decision to do something about "the problem" to

make the story work, so do you make him a do-gooder or a duffer? The answer lies in how your character responds to crisis and whether he is reactive or proactive.

Reactive people generally don't make good protagonists. Something happens so they do something. They watch the world happen until finally the earth moves and they have to make a decision which way to go. For example, Roger Milquetoast sees a teen accosted on the street by a drug dealer. He ignores it. Later he hears about drug killings. He ignores it. His children are approached by dealers to buy drugs. He tells them to ignore them. His son becomes an addict. He sends his son to a rehab program and ignores the dealers. The dealers start drive by shootings. He ignores it. They start shooting out his windows, almost killing his infant daughter. Finally he decides he has had enough and joins a neighborhood watch program.

Proactive people, on the other hand, decide much earlier to resolve a problem. They don't go looking for problems to correct, but when they see one, something within them makes them want to resolve it. For example, Roger Truehart sees a teen accosted on the street and calls the police. When his children are approached by drug dealers, he starts the neighborhood watch program and tries to recruit Roger Milquetoast. Proactive characters are much more interesting to watch because they make things happen.

Movies aren't about the mundane things in life. They are about moments in life when people change, or make changes. Reactive characters are cornered and forced to do something. Proactive characters come face to face with an obstacle and decide to do something about it. Whichever way it happens, these are life changing situations, and are called "crisis." A crisis is a time when people have to make a decision. They can't just ignore the problem, they have to decide how they will deal with it. This is a turning point in the story. The conditions that focus on this point are called a "plot point." For a character, it's a "decision point." For the audience, it's the drama that propels the action into part two.

Part of being able to draw poignant scenes with decision points and turning points is understanding the role of a crisis. Real people do drift through life, often in tune with themselves, and make effective decisions. True to life, yes, but dramatic, no. Just as often other people are thrown into a crisis because they either made a wrong decision, or they want something that is out of reach. The crisis comes because it is not within them to continue going in the direction they were going. They want something so badly they commit their entire being to reaching it.

Look at your protagonist (and antagonist) at the end of part one. Is he in crisis, or could he just as easily continue the same as he was? If he's not in crisis, it's doubtful the story is going to have any drama, any tension, any climax.

Usually the crisis is precipitated by the bad guy. He wants something in direct opposition to the good guy. He may also be in crisis because the good guy is in his way. Two people who want something so badly that their entire being is dedicated to it makes good action. It doesn't have to be heavy drama. It can be humorous, light, good escapism. Sports teams do it every day. But the characters have to want something.

The crisis is just the beginning. The next power point in a story is the main section of the story, between the crisis and climax, which drags and puts people to sleep if it's not properly constructed. Typically the protagonist is going to face about three obstacles, each one more difficult, the tension mounting with each one, as he struggles to attain his goal. Maybe he's struggling for the love of a woman, but first he doesn't have enough money, so he prints some. Then she doesn't like his kind so he polishes his image. And finally she decides he is too old for her, unlike the young rich guy who is courting her, so he proves youth is a state of mind.

In another story, the protagonist needs to make a good grade so he can graduate. The antagonist, who wants to see him fail, throws a party to use his study time. He studies all night. The antagonist gives him a flat tire so he can't make it to school for an important exam. He somehow makes it. The antagonist reports him to the principal as having broken into the locker room and vandalized the place, so the police are waiting at school for him. These things are the meat of part two, the main part of the story. The crisis begins the struggle and conflict builds tension as the hero faces obstacle after obstacle.

But the three obstacles aren't the true test of the protagonist. A fourth obstacle suddenly appears on the horizon like a monster from Hell, bringing a major crisis. The bad guy unleashes the ultimate weapon and the good guy appears doomed - he may as well lie down and die. In fact, for a moment he may give up. But then he finds his inner strength and fights for his life with every ounce of courage and determination. For example, the man trying to win the woman, after having fought three obstacles, now finds she is already married. All is lost. But wait, he decides to find out more and discovers she hates the guy but he has her tied up in legal knots. The good guy has a better legal strategist and they manage to outwit the man she hates.

Or the guy who needed to graduate. He faced his three obstacles, managed to convince the police he couldn't have done the vandalism, and returned to school. Alas and alack, the principal, who hates his guts because he caused so many problems during the year, won't let him in because he is late, so he can't take the tests. He collapses on the school steps, defeated. All is lost. But wait, he remembers evidence that would place the principal's son at the scene of the crime - the same son who had gotten him in trouble all year. He confronts the principal, who confronts his guilty son, and then allows him to take the tests.

This second crisis drives the story into the climax. The climax is the final confrontation where the tension is at its peak. It's the final battle or the final test. By making sure the character is in crisis, the drama has a lot of captivating power.

The final power point is the ending, called the "resolution." Resolution means all the conflicts are resolved and there are no loose ends. This is a power point because it will make the viewer tell others to watch the movie. If the film wasn't satisfying, he will tell others to avoid it. People love happy endings. Why? Not because we all live with our head in the clouds, but because happy endings tell us there is a solution to our problems. Life is not just endless torture, there is hope, and life is after all, worth living.

Summary: Five power points in three act drama

> Power point 1: Hook that engages viewer interest
>
> Power point 2: Crisis that motivates the main character into action
>
> Power point 3: Mounting tension through three obstacles
>
> Power point 4: Climactic challenge that seems insurmountable
>
> Power point 5: Satisfying resolution

Reader Profile: Scott Manders, Writers Workshop Reader, Independent Writer

Scott fell in love with movies and began writing screenplays at sixteen. His first three or four were for the ABC *Night Stalker* TV series. He laughs, remembering he sent those unbidden to the producer. After months of delay, in fact after the series had gone off the air, he received the standard form letter from the producer's office telling him they don't accept unsolicited submissions.

His love of writing and film led him to a Master of Fine Arts degree in screenwriting at the University of Miami, in film. The department at UM is headed by Paul Lazarus, producer of *West World* and *Capricorn One*. Paul leans heavily on Scott for "coverage," which is the standard synopsis and critique of screenplays. A prolific writer, Scott will write just about anything, including letters to the editor, reports, and short stories.

Does anyone ever win screenwriting contests? Scott was Runner Up in the Writer's Digest contest in 1990, and found it very satisfying to get the recognition. When he isn't swearing off contests, or preparing for one, he consults on scripts, polish writes for others, and does film reviews.

An article in AFI magazine about Writers Workshop led him to become a reader. There is an aura of professionalism around Writers Workshop that he is proud to be a part of. And since he loves doing coverage, he is a natural for critiquing.

Advice? He boasts that he probably has Florida's largest independent collection of books on the screenwriter's craft, then he laughs and adds that few of them are any good. Not all good films follow a paradigm and when you artificially stick in a plot point just because someone says there has to be one at that point, the story looks contrived.

How do you get started, especially if you're a teen? Go to movies, see as many as you can - you won't have time later. See the good ones and the bad ones. The bad ones help you know what not to do, and they're inspirational - "I can write better than that!"

Young people are natural storytellers, so write. Then rewrite. This is what writers do and how they make their script better. And expose yourself to as many cultural things as possible because the biggest problem he sees is the inability to create authentic characters and conflict. If you don't know a real, unique person, you can't duplicate one.

SECTION III.

SCENES & DRAMA: PROBLEMS & CURES

The scene is the basic building block of a story. It is an artificial device that only in some ways reflects real life. Only on TV do most conflicts get resolved within thirty minutes. Most conflicts go on for days, months, or years, and episodes of it occur in different places.

A scene is a chunk of dramatic action that happens in an unbroken time period at one place. Change places, it's a new scene. Let a little time interrupt, it's a new scene. Scenes have no time limits. A stage play might have just one long scene. But typically scenes for film average three minutes in length. They might last from a few seconds to several minutes, but too many short scenes tend to make a story that is choppy and the viewer can't get involved in the action. Too many long scenes tend to weigh the story down and make it drag.

A well prepared scene moves the story forward just a little. The characters begin the scene in one frame of mind - happy, depressed, angry - and because of what happens in the scene, they end the scene in a different frame of mind - excited, furious, tense. During the scene the characters either learn something, something happens to them, or they make something happen. In more complicated scenes, the subplot might also be involved. But if too many things happen in a scene, tension doesn't build, and important happenings get drowned out by all the busyness.

14

Originality:

Using Conflict And Viewer's Imagination To Develop Original Scenes

Discussion

There is nothing more stereotypical than dull, humdrum, everyday life. Too many scenes copy that and end up looking like too many other scenes from other movies, or from life: Here's the situation, what logically is going to follow? I hate it when I see a scene from some other movie, or when everything is so predictable I can't wait for the scene to get over so it can get on to something interesting.

The first way to improve a scene is to use conflict, action and reaction. When I first began writing stories, I had pleasant characters who saw all sides of an issue and they stood around and had friendly chats. There were no bad guys. For example, when the good guy was standing on the other good guy's foot, he might say, "You are standing on my foot." Response: "Oh, very sorry, I'll move." Now I write, "The villain inched closer, getting in the good guy's face, squashing his foot, holding him in place. The good guy shoved him away, shouting, 'Get off my *#? foot.'"

When people are on opposing sides, they clash - fireworks! For every action that one person takes, there is an opposite reaction from the other person. So when one character steps on another's foot, the guy in pain doesn't continue making comments about his dislike of guys with blond hair pursuing his girl friend, he responds to the immediate problem.

Action and reaction don't happen just because people are a little testy. They come from conflict, and conflict happens because people have needs that clash. In every scene you must know what your character's long term, short term and immediate needs are. If not, your dialogue will become friendly chats and the audience will be bored stiff. See the section on characterization to get a good handle on character needs. Conflict draws the viewer in - it's interesting and entertaining when people work out their differences.

Another way to be original and draw the viewer in is to use the viewer's imagination. You might think that with a medium like film, where you can show everything visually and synthesize every sound modern technology can produce, it would be up to the film makers to thoroughly saturate the viewer. Just the opposite is true. The more you engage the viewer's imagination, the more interested he becomes. Add the element of mystery and the story

becomes engaging. Add suspense and the story becomes gripping. Leave the monster off screen and you have the most horrifying monster you can create. Describe Aunt Bertha as a six-hundred-pound Summa Wrestler with a foul temper and a mean disposition, and show characters cowering in fright while she attempts - but fails - to squeeze through the door, and you have a great character who never has to appear in a shot. The viewer imagination will create the image for you.

The foregoing ways of using the viewer's imagination are overtly obvious, but typically in scenes it is much more subtle. Each scene should be part of a puzzle which keeps the viewer wondering and anticipating. The conflict should be a direct result of the character's needs, and the actions and reactions should reflect the character's temperament and judgment.

Alchemist's solution:

Make scenes original by using conflict, action and reaction; and by engaging the viewer's imagination.

Also See:

       Chapter 21, "Originality: Stretch Your Writing Skills"

       Index, "originality"

       Chapter 29, "Visual Writing"

15

Consistency: Making Action Follow From Previous Drama

Discussion

Question: What does one scene have to do with the next? Answer: Everything. Scenes often switch to another part of the story, and viewers know this has happened. When a person is ready to blow up the world in one scene, but in the next he is puzzling over his car engine as if nothing had happened, the story doesn't make sense.

Problem

Imagine you are watching a movie in which Trent leaves the scene, furious with his wife, because she beat the cloth off his pool table with a pool cue. The pool table happens to be where he spends all his time. She has an explosive temper, we know from early in the story. Next scene, Trent is all lovey-dovey with his wife and they talk about having a child, as if nothing had happened. Next scene, Trent is playing pool with friends, it is dark outside, the clock says two A.M., and in walks his wife in a negligee. Trent continues playing and she goes back to bed. The action doesn't follow correctly from scene to scene - it's as if the scenes were written individually with no knowledge of things that happened in previous scenes.

If Trent is furious in a scene, then there is a reason for his action. It typically would be worked out in the next scene through heated debate that cuts to the heart of their conflict. Trent has a way of life established that he likes and he needs to continue it. She is lonely and needs time with her husband. So in the second scene he would confront her about tearing up his pool table and she would accuse him of making love to it. They might decide it is time to have a baby - just to satisfy her.

In the next scene, she would burst in on them at two A.M., tear off her robe exposing her negligee to Trent's friends and scream, "Is something wrong with me? Why doesn't he want me; am I too fat and ugly for him? Would you want me?" Trent's friends would run out of the place never to be seen again, and after a few days angrily sulking, Trent would make up with his wife and teach her how to play pool, which would lead to the bedroom. The action in one scene led to the action in the next.

Alchemist's Solution:

Ask yourself what action the viewer would expect to follow from your scene. Make certain that the expectations you set up are followed through. Action should follow a logical sequence.

See Also:

16

Movement: Making Action Move The Story

Discussion

Action is not an active word. It is a noun, a descriptive word. Action doesn't mean to start moving around on stage or do something. Action is the behavior of the characters that follows from the plot. The action of one character gets a reaction from another. For example, Mary and Lark are talking long distance on the phone. They decide never to see each other again. There is very little physical movement that goes with these actions and reactions, but conflict forces decisions, and the story moves forward.

Problem

Consider the alternative. For example, say Petrov is a Russian immigrant to Brazil. His father is a farmer and relocates his family to a section of rain forest. Petrov is dissatisfied with his existence, but is isolated from others by geography and language, so he lives a mundane life and dies. Petrov has a need, but has no way to ever express it. Nothing ever moves the story forward.

In another story, Alphonso moves with his father to a farm in the rain forest, and is dissatisfied. His older brother is a civil engineer. When his brother visits, Alphonso talks to him about engineering and some of the problems they are having with water drainage. Alphonso is very dissatisfied and expresses it by frequently arguing heatedly with his father. He finally leaves to live with his brother, causing his father much heartache, and leaving him with only his sister for help.

Alphonso goes to college, but he returns later as an engineer for a large company and resolves the water drainage problem for his father and the other new farms in the area. In this story, Alphonso has a need: to be an engineer. His father has a need: loneliness, help on the farm, water seepage. Their needs lead them into conflict, they separate, and finally their problems are resolved - a long trail of action. Without needs, conflicts, opportunities, there would be no action and the story would never move forward.

Alchemist's Solution:

In the scene, make sure the character's needs are known and that the needs are what are causing him to behave the way he does. Make sure the conflicting

needs of the other character are known and that the other character acts because of those needs.

Entering: Making an Entrance

I read some stories in which there is a lot of coming and going and talking and laughing, which apparently is supposed to be action. If these things don't follow from the plot and relate to some character need, they are not action that is relevant to the story, they are just so much beating the air with thrashing arms and legs and hot breath. The best place to start a scene is similar to the best place to start a story: enter the drama at the last possible moment. The longer you take to set it up, the more the scene is going to be sapped of energy and interest.

Avoid the coming and going syndrome. If a character is at his ex-wife's house, we'll assume he had the good sense to take some rational means of transportation, stopped for gas if he needed it, rang the doorbell when he got there, and got through the customary salutations. These things don't move the story forward, so, unless it is necessary for her to react to his arrival, start the scene with them having a pleasant lunch together and her reminiscing about old times and saying she wishes they would get back together. Then he announces that he is leaving for Alaska to live on an offshore oil rig. Answering the doorbell would not have improved on that action.

Also See:

> Chapter 23, "How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot"
>
> Index, "action"
>
> Index, "reaction"
>
> Index, "character: action and reaction"

17

Risk: Increasing Emotion And Tension

Discussion

I like writing "smiles" in character instruction lines. I guess I'm just a happy person and that is my typical response to most things, so my characters intuitively mirror that. So I have to go back, take "smiles" out, and if necessary put a behavior in. When someone wins a high stakes poker game, a smile isn't exactly an appropriate reaction. Something more meaningful needs to occur.

Emotion is a very human gauge of how important things are. In real life it isn't always the best gauge. Poker players try to keep a poker face when they get a terrific hand that will win them a few thousand. Children scream as loudly over a missing sucker as they do over not being allowed to play all day. Many people keep their emotions in check so others can't see how they are affected.

In business, education, and the professions, too much emotion is a sign of inability to control oneself or keep things in perspective. Reacting emotionally, particularly displaying anger, is considered immature. But the display of emotion is generally what tells the story. A man might learn his wife is leaving him and show her no emotion, but as soon as the door closes we see him crumple over in pain and collapse on the floor.

People show emotion in a variety of ways. For some, it's shown outwardly, written all over them in their facial expression, their tone of voice, their demeanor, bearing and energy level, their behavior, and their choice of pastimes. For example, in response to a first kiss, Joy might jump up and down, get physically very close to Corey, begin steering him all over the setting and introducing him to others, shove him playfully into a fountain, and later buy the guy a new tie. Others, not openly demonstrable, internalize emotion so their mood, attitude, energy level, behavior, and choice of pastimes are affected, but no one sees it coming.

Corey, in response to a first kiss, may be embarrassed. He shows nothing in his face. He becomes dull and moments later shoves Joy into a fountain. Still others suppress emotion. Afraid of kissing, they refrain from doing it until one day the dam breaks and they suddenly attack the other person and

kiss them to death. Eventually emotion is expressed in behavior, and that is what goes into the script. The actor gets to choose most of the rest.

Few of us dance for joy in real life, but in a story a character might. The show of emotion is one thing that tells us how much something means to a character. Sometimes it isn't written in the script, but unless it is "stage business," or something that is the actor's choice, then it should be indicated.

Problem

Another common problem is that whatever happened didn't mean much to the character, and the script is brimming with similar scenes. For example, Todd can't hit a softball, so he has to sit on the bench. In one scene he manages to hit the ball, but it is a foul. Another scene he hits one out of six, and they are all foul. By the end of the movie he is hitting two out of six, they are still fouls, and they let him go for it when they are in the bottom of the ninth and leading by twelve points. For a real child, this could have meaning, but for a character it is meaningless because most people won't identify with his accomplishments. The stakes simply aren't high enough. Hitting home runs - that's significant. Winning ball games is a big accomplishment. Being the kid who had a rough start at the season beginning, then being the next person at bat with two outs, bottom of the ninth and trailing by a point, the league championship at stake - a home run at this point, if he tries hard enough, must be just within reach - the stakes are high.

Each accomplishment along the way must be similarly surrounded by stakes that gradually increase. If he doesn't hit enough he doesn't make the team. If he strikes out too often he is on the bench. If he doesn't make enough runs for the season he can't dress for the championship game. The stakes have to be high enough to raise the level of tension, and with each obstacle they must get higher. Otherwise no one cares, not even the character.

Problem

In the words of Bobby Mcgee, in a Janice Joplin song, freedom means having nothing to lose. If a character owns nothing, wants nothing, cares about no one, then raising the stakes for that person will be nearly impossible. If the character isn't willing to invest himself in life, then he can learn nothing from it and will probably view life as hopeless. Of course, the challenge with a character like this is to try to make him want something. Let a man, indifferent toward money, live with wealth for a while and see if it catches on. Indifferent toward responsibility: give him a responsible job where he can see his impact on the world - he may run from it. Indifferent toward relationships: make him hopelessly entwined with someone for a while - again he may end up running from it.

Alchemist's Solution

1) Make sure the character's motivations are clearly understood.

2) Make sure the character is able to display how important something is to him.

3) Make sure the stakes are high.

See Also:

Index, "stakes"

Index, "emotion"

Index, "tension"

Chapter 1, "Motivating Puppet Characters"

SECTION IV

Dialogue: Problems & Cures

Dialogue is when characters talk - that's all it can be. Information important to the story can't be given in the scene description/instruction lines because if the characters don't say it, it will never get to the audience. So avoid making remarks in the scene instructions like, "It was ten o'clock on a sultry August evening in an isolated beach community. John had been watching TV and Phyllis, who worshipped him, had left an hour earlier...." None of this information gets to the viewer so it is totally irrelevant. If the character doesn't say it in dialogue or make it obvious through some action, then for all practical purposes it isn't in the script.

18

Relevant: Moving the Story Forward

Discussion

If a piece of dialogue can be cut without losing anything relevant to the story, then it should be cut. For example, if Jenny is getting married and while picking out wedding dresses she goes into a long discourse about types of fabric, then something important should come up later in the story which depends on the type of fabric, i.e., she buys material that catches fire easily and gets too close to a candle. If catching fire doesn't happen, then the discourse on fabric wasn't important to the story. However, if Jenny is the type who goes on and on about things, always eager to explain things to others, then the discourse on fabric is part of characterization and might be included. Another example of this, part of an act might be included by a stand-up comedian because it is part of his character. However, it's better if the comedian's subject matter has some relevance to the story.

A little bit of conversation goes a long way. I read one phone conversation that went on for five pages - five minutes - and contained almost nothing relevant to the story. The conversation was true to life; but movies aren't real, they focus on what is important. A page would have been more than sufficient.

Alchemist's Solutions:

Don't write information important to the audience in the scene description lines. Focus dialogue so it says what is necessary in a realistic way. Leave out all the beating around the bush most of us throw into actual conversations, and get to the point. If it can be cut with no impact on the story, then it should be cut.

See Also:

Chapter 20, "Length, Less Is More"

Chapter 13, "Anecdotal Stories"

Chapter 7, Plot: Strengthen Weak Or Unfocused Plots

19

Showing: Avoiding Exposition and Sermons

Discussion

Writing dialogue often becomes a search for ways to pass along important information. Recently in a reunion episode of a TV family, the writer had fallen into that trap and I had to stop watching because the dialogue was so phony. Every sentence was written just to fill in ten years of history. Not one word was important to the story - it didn't move the story forward. Following are some examples of dialogue that should not be used, and how to fix them.

Wrong:

John looks around the room, then picks up a picture and shows Mary.

> JOHN
>
> Five years ago my wife died, so I
> keep pictures of her around to
> remind me.

Fix:

Mary picks up a picture.

> MARY
>
> Who is the lovely woman in the
> picture?

> JOHN
>
> My late wife.

> MARY
>
> Oh, I'm sorry.

> JOHN
> It's OK, it's been five years.

Wrong:

> JOHN
> Oh, by the way, I'm traveling
> tomorrow. Anything I can pick up
> for you?

Fix:

Mary is printing and the printer stops. She fiddles with it for a moment.

> MARY
> The print head failed. I'll never
> get this job done in time now - I
> won't be able to get a repairman
> way out here for days.

> JOHN
> I'm traveling to Chicago
> tomorrow, I can take it with me.

> MARY
> You're traveling to Chicago? And
> leaving me here alone? But what
> about our honeymoon?

> JOHN
> It's just a short trip - business
> won't wait.

Most writers have "show don't tell" tattooed on their knuckles like "love &
hate." They seldom forget this important maxim. But it is still very easy for
writers to fall into the pitfall of telling others how to live, even if it is through a

character. Most people don't relate well to being told how to live. But two things happen in movies that people can relate to. They can identify with a situation and character responses, so they are touched at a deeper level. People understand this and have "been reached." And to some extent people can be shown the consequences of doing, or not doing, certain things. And to this extent people are reached. Following are some examples of dialogue that should not be used, and ways to fix it.

Wrong:

                          JOHN
                  You have been cheating on me. The
                  Church says you will burn in Hell
                  for that.

Fix:

John sees a man's tie under the couch and pulls it out. He looks at Mary.

                          JOHN
                  Isn't this the tie that the computer
                  service guy wears?
                                    (Continued)

Mary looks down and says nothing.

                          JOHN (Cont.)
                  That's why they could find nothing
                  wrong with the printer at the shop.
                  That was just an excuse to see the
                  repair guy. You're cheating on me.

                          MARY
                  So what? You left on our honeymoon.
                  I see the way our marriage is going
                  to work - you're married to me and to
                  your job. Now you see how I'm going
                  to handle that!

                                        JOHN
                        We have a relationship. I need to
                        depend on you, and you on me. Just
                        how many people do you think you're
                        going to be married to? Two, three,
                        four? You think those other guys
                        aren't going to depend on you, too?
                        That isn't marriage, that's chaos!

                                        MARY
                        How many marriages are you going to
                        have? Me, your job, what else - a
                        hobby?

The above passage of dialogue, instead of pointing out in an authoritarian way a belief of "how" people should live, instead explores one of the roots of why people cheat and the result. Telling isn't palatable to most people; it forces a moral judgment or creates conflict, and erects a wall. This is basically not acceptable in the movie industry, and usually doesn't work anyway. But being caught up in a situation and seeing how it turns out is very acceptable to most as long as it is real and not contrived.

Also See:

20

Length: Less is More

Discussion

Too much dialogue, however good it is, does two things. It slows the action and loses the point. Playwright Samuel Beckett employed a very stylized but brilliant technique. The same words or motions would recur over and over until finally something would change. What stood out? Not the repetitive action, but the one that was different. The repetitive action only highlighted the different one.

In a crowd of fashion models, men and women all dressed in the same black suit, with one standing among them dressed in red, who stands out? Or when walking down a busy avenue full of pedestrians, with one waving a yellow flag, who stands out? The different one. The brain catches what is different. Much speaking and repetition don't make an impression. Highlighting does.

....!..

What did you notice in the above line? Did you count the periods? No, the exclamation point stands out. How do you highlight like that in a scene? You make something stand out from the rest. First stop writing. If you continue writing dialogue for another half page, then it becomes no different from the rest.

When someone pulls a gun, don't have someone make cool remarks and spring into action heroics. It's serious business. It's a major turning point. The person holding the gun feels life and death strongly about the issue and everything is going to change right then. Slow the action by pulling the gun slowly, hesitantly, from a hidden location, with sound from cocking the gun, and with reactions from the people on the receiving end. With resignation and terror, they freeze. One sits down, about to faint, and begins crying. The person holding the gun is frightened, uncertain, but going with the action he started, unable to turn back.

If pulling a gun is an every scene situation, there is no way to highlight the action because it is just more of the same. Less is more. If your characters are all robots manipulated by the writer, then drawing a gun will have no more impact than any of their other actions - repetition just grows monotonous. If you have drawn full characters and identify with them, you know how they're going to react.

Problem

For example, how do you highlight a woman breaking up with her lover? With a telephone scene? In person after a long series of fights? Spilling it all in a pub? Try this: She is furiously clearing her room of his items. She pitches one after another into a waste basket, breaking them all. The last item she picks up is his picture. She stops, looks at it sentimentally, hugs it to her heart, tears flow, she kisses the picture and slowly, tenderly lets it slide into the trash. What is highlighted? Her true feelings about him. She loves him but he is out of her life. Would a page of heart wrenching dialogue have said it any more effectively? No, we probably would have lost the real point in a mad rush of heated threats that she may have never carried through. Less is more.

Alchemist's solutions:

1) Think the action in your scene through visually. Could the characters get their point across without words? Sketch this in first, then add only the words that are needed.

2) What is the point that needs to come from the scene? Focus your dialogue on making that point, then stop writing.

Also See:

Reader Profile: Judy Cochran,
Writers Workshop Reader
Independent Writer

Judy's mission in life is to become a successful film maker. She works with the Community Access Channel in Denver, Colorado, creating and producing her own material. (No, it isn't *Wayne's World*.) She has been writing in screenplay format for about nine years. Her current obsession is creating a TV pilot. She has some network interest and will either shoot it through network facilities, or using facilities available to her - but one way or another it's going to get made.

How did Judy get into writing? A love affair with film, and student writing, may have done it to her. She worked thirteen years as a psychiatric nurse and met enough "Hannibal Lectors" for a dozen films. She saw the Nichol's Fellowship Screenwriting contest and thought she could do it. About her first screenplay she says, "I fell flat on my face and skidded." Brutal! But the Academy sent her a bibliography which included authors like Syd Field, Linda Seger, Lajos Egri, and books like Aristotle's Poetics. She studied and practiced.

Judy recommends being part of a writer's group for support. She is Vice President of the Denver chapter of *Women In Film*, and has begun an apprentice program for "Girls and guys in film and TV." More than supportive, Judy is often swamped with teaching writing, "doctoring" scripts for others, raising capital for potential productions, and other producer type work

Like most readers for Writers Workshop feel, Judy comments, "Reading for others teaches me so much." She believes strongly in the Writers Workshop method and that's why she does it.

Lack of character motivation is the most common problem she sees. She advises writers to flesh out characters. Make them live and breathe. They must be people who can wish, dream, defend, but also hurt, lie, and have the flu.

PART 2

THE WRITING PROCESS

Developing Honest Characters And Powerful Plots

How is writing a process? There are many elements that go into writing and they all interact. To state the opposite, you might set a goal of writing a story where a man goes after a fish and encounters several obstacles along the way and finally gets the fish. You have established a simple goal and can probably write the story from beginning to end without a stop. Some writers write this way. But most of us underestimate just how complicated a good story really is, or how much work goes into creating it.

Managing the story is like managing a process. When I was a manager of a 2.5 million dollar business, two things had profound impact on my goal setting practices. One was a manager who taught me to limit the number of goals I was working on so I had focus. When I focused my time and energy, I accomplished much more, and in contrast saw many people floundering around completing nothing because they had too many goals. The second was the book, *The Process Of Management* (Prentice-Hall; 1987), which helped me understand that you miss more goals than you achieve when you see goals only as a fixed objective with a fixed path to them. When you become flexible in your goals, and see getting there as a process you must control and adjust, you set yourself up for success rather than failure.

You look toward your target, define the steps you think you will take to get there, and establish checkpoints along the way to assess your progress. When you find it necessary to change your strategy, you find you have to change many things because they all interact. In writing, you have a topic, or group of topics, that interest you personally. These are things you enjoy writing about. You develop a set of characters, some of whom get used in the story. You write a story line which includes a plot, complete with obstacles, turning points, and plot twists, and you make sure there is rising tension throughout the story.

None of these elements are developed in isolation. For most writers, none happen completely in sequence. A story will demand certain characters with certain attributes. On page fifty-eight, you may find your character will be much more exciting if he has less money. You have to rewrite his past and may find he acts a little differently for those first fifty-eight pages. Then an

obstacle that you had planned, which could have been resolved with money, becomes a much larger obstacle and will be better placed farther into the story. Things interact.

When I write a story, I usually have something to write about. I develop a set of characters I think will work well with the topic, and give them an extensive past that describes the major influences that have formed that person. I include a physical description of them, their personality, some of their hobbies, likes and dislikes, and flaws and strengths. Then I write some sketches of scenes that excite me.

Next I write a fairly complete story line with a plot and, if I haven't already, I develop a setting. Finally I go for the symbols and motifs. I write part one, stop and have a look. Every element in the story is dependent on the other elements. If I write glamour characters, I go for a glamour setting, and develop a storyline that will work for that type, unless I'm shooting for a fish out of water story.

Part one is the most important part. It sets the hook, introduces and develops major characters, establishes the plot, and drives the story into part 2, hopefully with the audience still there. I go back and further develop my characters, add characters if needed, delete ones who don't work, change the plot, sharpen the hook, etc. It's a process.

In this section, I thoroughly describe the process of writing, including getting a handle on one of the most important parts: character motivation.

SECTION I

MOTIVATION

Why try to understand human motivation - aren't people very complex?

The more real a character is, the more engaging he is, especially if he is unique and addresses a problem we identify with. So it makes sense to develop a character as fully as possible. Characters, I believe, are created mostly by instinct.   Writers tend to have an instinctive - subconscious - feel for motivation, and perhaps can create many good ones.

But here is where it falls apart: Analysts who study such things have noted that people who are competent at something tend to fall into one of two classifications.

The unconscious competent does things well by instinct and can usually repeat them simply because he has had experience. But he doesn't know how he does them. He can't tell you how to do tricks on a bicycle, but he can do them just fine. He can't tell you how to sell, but he has little problem selling.   But when he tries a variation on the bicycle trick or runs into a different obstacle in sales, he fails because he doesn't know how he did it.

The conscious competent can not only do something well, he knows how he does it. When he needs to adjust, he is able to do it just fine. So becoming a student of human motivation will help you make good characters every time.

21

A Character Motivation Primer

I'm not the definitive expert on human motivation. But motivation has been a topic of serious inquiry and study most of my life. My first hint that some might be wrong was when I noticed they all say different things. I've tried a lot of what the definitive experts say is true. Following is what to me is "tried and true," and to which you can probably find some definitive expert who agrees.

Becoming Free to Explore

Characters aren't real. If we were to write down all of the things that go into influencing a person, we would be writing all day just to nail down a few details. For example, we write a story in which Sara loses her marriage because she took a second job to buy home furnishings. At one point she decides not to buy a refrigerator on credit, leading to a big argument with her husband.

What went into this decision? She was alarmed at the interest amount on the credit application. She saw her father agonize over making payments. Her refrigerator still works. She needs a new range worse. Her mother taught her to save up her money for what she needs. Her husband thinks they should use credit because they need so many things right away. He says they should skimp on gasoline and he should be getting a raise next month. But she can't feel good about any of those things. Her neighbor has all new kitchen appliances and a new living room outfit and two loans, but is always arguing over money. And on and on. Probably no single factor was primary.

 Writers don't have the space to write about every motivation in a character's life. Writers clarify human motivations to single issues that can be dealt with within the time limits of a story. The Sara in the story would probably just tell her husband they aren't going to live with continuous arguments over money, like their neighbors, at which point they begin arguing like their neighbors and end in divorce. Money is one of the leading causes of divorce even though it is probably more of a symptom than the root problem of who controls things. So writers clarify the important things that motivate people, like power and money. When I create characters, I write a one-half to two page profile telling about the important influences in the person's life - those things that influence

their behavior and decisions. I don't make every influence strictly plot related so they are more unique and interesting.

So what is so hard about that?

Why do people create cardboard characters? Why is it so difficult to create someone with a different point of view and purpose in life who acts differently from others - a unique individual? Partly because characterization takes work which is outside the flow of putting one word of dialogue in front of another. And partly, I think, because it is very difficult to see others as being different from ourselves.

Don't other people have the same wants and needs as we do? Aren't we all really the same? The cookie cutter character isn't really a blank to us, it is our self - an extension of our psyche (the essence of our mind) that does what we want if we were that character, a *mirror* image of ourselves. "The writer is every character he creates," states this theory of writing. But does this create unique and honest characters? For the writer who creates characters every day, I think creating unique and honest ones is a larger step.

Unique and honest characters are ones who are capable of responding to the challenges we put them through - reacting and changing uniquely - to become a more unique person. But if every character is just an extension of our self, limited by a range of behavior and wants and needs we impose on them, which are only minimal extensions of our own, the character can't become unique. Can a character ever be totally unique? I doubt that very much. I see writers struggling to create unique characters and they typically just act differently - their actual motivations are missing. We usually don't understand why people act differently. It is very difficult to write about people and experiences about whom we have no knowledge. However, we can remove the blinders we wear about human behavior so they are not a limitation, and let our characters be free to grow.

The purpose of this section is to help free the writer who is trapped by mind sets and unable to explore character and situations because his field of vision isn't wide enough. This isn't a challenge to anyone's faith, (I carefully excluded my own beliefs from this section) or their personal views, or their way of life. But writers create characters with many dimensions: spiritual, social, psychological, physical, and physiological - all combined in the psyche of the character. For example, if you can only see one set of social values, then you can only give your character one set of social values.

The pitfalls - how to get trapped and untrapped

The approach I take in these pages is philosophical. "Yech! He's going to turn the air gray with intellectual hot air." I won't belabor you with philosophy, but when faced with Freud, who tied everything to hidden sexual motivation, then B.F. Skinner who can see man as only a mechanistic animal, we're not sure whether to use one in preference to the other, or merge them and see man as a

sex machine. There has to be some way of understanding them, and that's philosophy. Philosophy is a much misunderstood science. It is often identified with those who strain endlessly over word definitions in order to void some belief system of all meaning; the seeker of truth for whom truth does not exist; the ultimate enemy of all religion. It is sometimes even misidentified as a religion. But those who speak of "their philosophy" aren't talking about philosophy as a belief system, but rather something they have acquired independently, supposed through philosophical reasoning. Philosophy is not a system of beliefs of any kind. It's a system of inquiry. I like to think of philosophy as the science of knowing the right questions to ask. It is the thinking man's defense against being misled. Once you are reasonably certain of the absolutes in your life, you have a basis for asking questions that get to the heart of a matter.

For example, if you are certain that your "truth" must include: Unselfish love, kindness toward others, the pursuit of ideals in godliness and right, self protection, the value of self, and the need for self growth, then these beliefs form a nucleus that other ideas can be compared to. If some other belief fell short, then the holder would know those beliefs had no place in his world - they were not truth - at least not for him. So a religion or view that seemed momentarily appealing, but under philosophical questioning was revealed to fundamentally oppose the above ideals, could be held at arm's length. However, the Klan could just as easily swear their beliefs were the ones listed above. But frame questions using the rigidness of philosophical inquiry and the Klan would present very narrow definitions to love, kindness, and ideals.

Wait! Don't we need religion and psycholgy?

It is very helpful sometimes to buy into a system of thought so it can help you get from point A to B. It is also very easy to get trapped in systems which are appealing, but long term are detrimental. Writers today necessarily sit at the feet of modern psychology, more so than religion, sociology, or anthropology. Besides experience, psychology is probably the most useful tool a writer has. But we can become trapped by prevalent popular directions in psychology; for example, the so called yuppie psychology. It is comprised of stereotypical situations - cause and effect relationships - which are common to a number of people in similar circumstances, experiences, and in similar stages of growth. This isn't to say these subjects aren't worthy topics in stories, but they are stereotypes, and generally show us nothing new.

The images are easy to identify with: the repressed child within, sexual abuse, toxic parents who poison their kids, a sense that love will conquer all, codependent relationships which keep Johnny addicted to chemicals and Mary addicted to abuse, which they both learned from their parents. There is truth in all of these. But while these situations apply to many of the people who are going through them, the field of psychology doesn't generalize these psychological conditions to all the rest of the world. There is a clear danger

in seeing others only through, for example, a favorite talk show host's attitude about how things are. Writing about addiction serves a worthwhile purpose and is entertaining, but writing as if the entire world has an addictive personality will most likely prevent your script from ever being seen - it just doesn't hold water.

Embrace psychology, don't throw it all in the trash.

I don't write about motivation from any one school of psychological thought. The psychoanalytic branch gives us a deep understanding of complex behavior and the inner workings of the subconscious mind, including the very important areas of personality integration and transformation. I happen to like Jung and prefer his overall view of personality to Freud, which was too sexually oriented. Yet insight often takes years to achieve and often doesn't resolve a problem. Insight only sets the stage for integration.

Carl Rogers' People Centered Psychology has proven to be an excellent tool for individual focus and personal growth. But was his theory as applicable to everyday behavior? Consider the views of the behaviorist B.F. Skinner. Skinner was right on target about many of the decisions we make being just stimulus response, and conditioning being a useful therapeutic tool. Once the motivation (or instinct) that created thumb sucking is long gone, we are stuck with a *behavior* we can't get rid of.

Often very pragmatic solutions - just do it - are far quicker and more effective, as with Gestalt psychology. When motivation for a behavior ceases in our psyche, but the behavior continues out of habit strength, it is often most effectively broken by just summoning the chutzpah to just stop it. Many other problems we encounter don't have any real solutions; understanding them doesn't help, and there are no effective coping mechanisms for them, so we must live with them. We get a little tougher, a little stronger - we build character.

We are gravely mistaken if we think others don't influence our decisions - we didn't develop as islands. Social Psychology is as valid as any of the rest. Isolate someone on an island with no hope of ever seeing another human and his life slowly becomes devoid of meaning. Every day is no more than a dance with survival.

Possibly all of these theories may one day migrate into a new Cultural Psychology approach (see Bruner in "Reference Shelf"), especially as the melting pot becomes more diversified in its homogeneity and psychologists have to deal with cultural meaning systems that anthropologists have been describing for decades. A world of very insightful people from Adler to Zajonc have made significant contributions to psychology, and often grandmother had the most effective methods, and six-year-old Johnny can cut to the heart of a matter more easily than I. And every one of these have their failings.

My point is, psychology is a very effective tool in the quest for creating unique characters.   Embrace the field of psychology but avoid the trap of falling for one. My biases are few. Like most people, I don't believe we are just psychological mechanisms. There is a difference between the brain and the mind. The brain is influenced by physical things - we live in a real world. And the mind is influenced by spiritual things: we are motivated by concepts, morals, and ethics, if not a "higher" connection. Yet in spite of physical or spiritual influences we can control ourselves and   determine our own behavior. Spooky, huh? The brain is where we perceive both the physical and spiritual. In the following pages I hope to challenge your thinking so you can create characters who have a different mind set than yourself, whether it is psychological, spiritual, or social.

Writing as Discovery and Integration

Why do people write? Lets look at ourselves first and possibly it will give us a handle on an important mechanism that is always at work in us and we can use that insight to good use in understanding others. Writing is a bizarre behavior. Why would anyone want to sit and talk to a piece of paper or a computer all day? Are writers basically antisocial? Loners? Supreme egotists in love with their own thoughts? Totally insecure monks in hiding? Savior complex - hoping to save the world with their words? What would drive a person to put words on a screen?

There is often a subject the writer feels passionately about. For some it's a way of expressing creativity that has no other outlet. It can be a way of feeling connected with others. Most writers I talk to love it; it's an ambition that doesn't go away; it's a lifetime pursuit. They may do other things in order to support themselves, and may skip years at a time to do other things, but they write. Some do write just because they have the skill and they make money. But others love it and are almost driven to it.

I don't know why anyone writes, or even for certain why I write. I think I have written for all of these reasons, plus I enjoy helping people develop, helping them become what they want to be. I enjoy exploring knowledge. I enjoy sharing what I know, and I enjoy entertaining. I've enjoyed writing since I was a teen. So I write. Writing can be a way of being persuasive, of sharing experience - people do learn from other's experiences; they don't have to make all the mistakes themselves - and it is a way of integrating knowledge or experiences that people have had.

Integrating? Yes, I think it has a lot to do with many people's writing. First, I should say that if you set out to show people "the way," as you feel you have come to know it, your writing will probably be overbearing and have a contrived look about it - I have to watch for this in my own writing. But everyone has a unique outlook on life and writes from his own perspective.

Writers should feel comfortable writing from their own perspective, and they should say what they want to say - that is what you add to the story. The danger is in the characters and plot all being a mirror image of the writer. By coming to understand more fully the process of personality integration and transformation, you can more fully develop characters and plot in a story.

Integrating? What is it? It is taking the experience and knowledge you have gained and making them an active part of your psyche. It isn't necessarily an automatic process. Sometimes we're much too busy to allow ourselves to absorb and become something new. I was caught up working in management for a major corporation which kept me busy night and day for thirteen years. I rarely had time to grow. I finally decided I didn't like what I was becoming or what the rat race was doing to me and my family, and the fact I couldn't pursue any life except business, and I moved on. At the end of that time I had to integrate - let myself become what my experiences had shown me and reevaluate where and what I wanted to be.

At other times, we're not ready to integrate - to deal with experiences we have had. When I was just ten, my best friend, my dog, Pal, was run over by a car. I was very pained. I grieved a lot. But I never accepted that experience and let it be part of me. Not until I was first married did I do that. My wife and I considered getting pets. She wanted a cat, but I didn't think much of cats then, and got a dog. But she still wanted the cat, and her position became, "No cat, no dog." That triggered a very emotional response, "Please don't take my dog away!"

I had no clue where the depth of that feeling came from. But twelve years after the fact, I was ready to deal with having lost Pal. Probably I had the security of friendship and love that I needed in order to be able to deal with it. Or I had entered into a relationship that brought me face to face with the potential for great loss again, and the new dog symbolized my fear. Who knows? we naturally integrate without being aware of how or why.

Psychologists differ on when is the proper time to "deal" with something. Some believe in confronting it immediately. Some will help you deal with it when it causes problems and will help you through it. Some believe that forcing you to confront things before you are ready is equivalent to mental rape and there is nothing to be gained but pain if it is done too soon. I don't know when the best time is. I do know that experiences which are not fully integrated will resurface later, carrying a representative load of emotion, and I know that people integrate things most successfully when they have the foundation which will let them deal with it.

Integrating isn't complete until there is acceptance. It isn't enough to read a self-help book explaining the possible basis of a problem you have, or even to know it is true. It isn't enough to see a counselor who helps you determine where your feelings are coming from. It isn't enough to lay on a psychoanalyst's couch for five years and expose some deeply hidden problem,

or even to see that experience in a different meaning structure that the psychoanalyst suggests. It isn't enough to regress to a problem time by hypnosis or sodium pentathol and relive it. These things are all called "insight" - gaining knowledge - and that doesn't nullify the problem or change you. (Actually sometimes it does.) Integrating and accepting the problem is a major necessary step, possibly followed by therapy aimed at coping and change.

For example, the grief process, which takes place when you have experienced a major loss - job, divorce, death of a loved one, way of life, disease - may proceed through ten steps. The first eight steps are negative reactions to the loss. In the final two we begin to see hope and struggle to affirm reality. We have begun to accept life without whatever we lost. The experience has become a part of us and we are no longer rejecting it or stumbling over it. We may not like it, and it may have long lasting influence, but it is part of us and we continue taking positive steps forward, probably stronger and more able to live than we were before.

The opposite of integration is ignoring or rejecting the experience: denial, panic, anger, resentment. These may lead to physical problems, violent behavior, inability to function normally (paralyzed into inactivity), and even burnout, personality disintegration and schizophrenia when the person is forced to be something they are not for too long a time. Integration often must take place when a person is in a supportive atmosphere, as with close friends or relatives, or with trained professionals, because much emotion is released when painful experiences are accepted.

An example of integration

A young girl, June, may start out her early life as a thief. She discovers at age eight that she can get things she wants by taking them, then lying. Her parents have no success convincing her that stealing is wrong - nothing they say makes any sense to her. They tell her it is dishonest and irresponsible to steal, but their words have no meaning to her. Honesty and responsibility have little value except as a vague association with her parents approval (which she knows is basically unshakable) - she is much more interested in getting what she wants. She has integrated into her psyche (mind) the concept of getting what she wants through stealing, lying, and having a measure of acceptance by others in spite of it.

At age ten, June experiences a loss when her bicycle is stolen. Three months later, she steals a bicycle from several blocks away. The young owner comes knocking on doors to see if it has been found. June sees the pain in her face and remembers her own pain. She integrates the experience and later returns the bicycle. But June continues getting what she wants by stealing from "emotionless" stores - things she believes can't be hurt.

At age eighteen, an inhabitant of a mostly honest social group and having seen several thieves go to jail, June feels a strong disparity between herself and her friends. She always has to hide her behavior of stealing. She now wants to believe herself to be an honest person like those around her. Stealing things from stores isn't consistent with honesty, (unless she manages to rationalize her theft by justification). She chooses to stop stealing things from retail stores. She integrates this experience into her psyche. She likes the experience of being an honest person, but she still lies to get out of trouble. She justifies this because she believes everyone does it, and she believes it never really hurts anyone.

At age twenty-two, June begins to wonder if lying really is consistent with honesty. The next time she is late for work, instead of lying to her boss, she says simply that she overslept because she was out late the night before. Her boss asks her what she is going to do about it. She decides to try to avoid staying out all night.

Reflecting on these things, June realizes her lying not only isn't honest, it is a way to avoid responsibility. She avoids being responsible for her behavior, avoids consequences, avoids having to change her behavior. This insight she finds threatening, so she puts it safely out of mind. She goes back to oversleeping and lying about it. A year later her boss, having seen her out the night before, confronts her about it and calls her a liar. She integrates this new experience, of being known as a liar, and knowing herself as a liar, and confronts the fact that she avoids responsibility for her behavior by lying. She apologizes to her boss and agrees not to be late anymore. She makes a pact with herself to not lie anymore and put herself in such awkward situations. But within a month she is oversleeping and lying about it. June integrates this experience and accepts the fact that she is a liar, and believes that she can live with it because she rationalizes that lying keeps her out of trouble for things she can't do anything about.

Two years pass, and at age twenty-five, June parties less, has to lie less, but still uses lying to avoid responsibility for her behavior. She meets a man who becomes her fiancée. While with the man, he meets an old friend on the street. The friend promises to stop by and repay a loan. After the friend leaves, her fiancée speaks very derogatorily about him, calling him a liar and a thief who is totally irresponsible. June integrates this experience into her psyche. She decides she must not be a liar at any cost.

A month later her fiancee asks her a personal question - why is she always an hour and a half late? She is very embarrassed and wants to lie because the reason she is late is because she never washes her clothes on schedule, so she is always washing them at the last moment. She is trapped. If she lies, he might not like her. If she tells the truth, she may have to take responsibility for cleaning her clothes on time. She knows she would feel better about herself if she ceased lying and started doing the things she should. She tells

him the truth, which he laughs about, then tells her what an inconvenience her chronic lateness is to him. She begins washing clothes when she should because she doesn't want to inconvenience him. She integrates all these experiences into her psyche and feels better about herself, seeing herself as honest and responsible.

Within months June took responsibility for many areas of her life, and got a much desired promotion. By integrating experiences about honesty and responsibility, she became an honest and responsible person. By seeing herself as responsible, a whole new world opened up to her psyche, and she was able to pursue many new challenges. At age thirty, June was happily married and reaching many goals she had set, and lived happily ever after.

In the example with June, she integrated things when experience made sense of them and when they had value to her. Responsibility means little to an eight year old. But at age twenty five, June can see her behavior through the eyes of experience and realize that her dishonesty was a means to avoid responsibility for her own behavior, which was a destructive influence in her life. Honesty and responsibility made sense. As soon as she began taking responsibility for her behavior and her life, she began to become the dream person she hoped she would be. Integration involves growth, knowledge and experience (experiential insight), and acceptance.

A writer integrates for people

What does integrating have to do with writing? When you create honest characters (real people) and honest situations (real life situations), and allow the drama to unfold honestly (not manipulated to prove your point), what results should be honest action. There should be surprises and discovery (insight). At the first turning point the protagonist stops denying he can live with the situation and he must change it. He has to go forward. It may require change on his part (insight and integration) - character growth. The characters, to some extent, take over the story and write it (acceptance, motivation). At the second major turning point (climax) the protagonist reaches the limits of his current personality. He has met his match. He has given up or is about to give up. To be triumphant he must grow - he must become more than he was. He must find the inner strength to make the jump. Sometimes this takes insight. Sometimes insight is the result. But he integrates the new experience. He changes. Without character change and growth there is no movie - it won't get past the readers. Integration is part of the mechanism of change, and a writer uses it by instinct or by knowledge. When characters change without integration, the story rings hollow to the viewer.

How many of us allow our characters that much freedom? How many of us are open to disproving what it is we think we want to say? Personally, I'm very opinionated and I find it difficult to get out of the way. But if you allow your writing to follow an honest path, the thrill of discovery is present from beginning to end, and no matter how much you have outlined your story it

remains fun to write and interesting. This is why a writer has to remain open, not trapped in a mind set that says, "The world can only be this way."

Integrated writing is not real experience. I have often thought I would act a certain way if I was ever in certain circumstances. I thought it through and knew all the things that would influence me - I knew how I would act. But when these situations later happened, I didn't act the way I thought I would because I couldn't comprehend the depth of the experience before it happened. As I get older and more experienced, I am more able to comprehend the real depth of those situations and I am better able to predict what I would do. But you can't really be in a situation until you are there. By fully exploring situations through other characters, the result is much better than, "If I was in that situation, this is what I would do." That statement comes from a need for power and control. Writing in this way is closer to real life because some people really will act as you have written.

Destiny?

We are not all the same. Having had three children, I have seen definite tendencies in them from birth - not self fulfilling prophesies that because I reacted a certain way to them, they became that way - but pronounced tendencies. Some people are unable to accept that. After all, babies are totally innocent creatures, absolutely new creations... aren't they? What you believe about babies, believe it or not, will affect your characterization. If you believe all people are born evil or born good, all of your characters are likely to mirror that. Well, if babies are born good or evil, then they aren't absolute new creations - they carry some baggage with them. We all seem to have that feeling of absolute destiny that somehow overshadows the innocence of babies. What is our destiny?

Some believe we are all born evil people and the goal of religion and growth is to overcome the evil within and become good in some measure, but we can never become perfect. How many movies do we see where a devil and an angel perch on the shoulder of the protagonist? If this is your view, you're probably going to have characters change for the better by admonishing them with strictures of right and wrong, and showing them the destructive results of their behavior. Or by using guilt to push them away from evil behavior while showing them benefits of good behavior. Right and wrong battle within them.

Some believe we are all born with goodness inside and that the world - parents, siblings, peers, society, temptations - corrupts us. God is within us, therefore we can't be bad. How many movies do we see in which a basically good and innocent person goes wrong because of the influence of some evil person. He wasn't bad before he met the person. He ultimately turns the bad guy in and rescues himself with only a little help from his friends. There is that sense that

he isn't at fault and all that is needed is to forgive him and put him back on the right road. You're probably going to have those characters change by rebelling against wrong and forcing others around them to change. Evil may tempt them, but they ultimately learn from it and survive. They are able to see the good within themselves and try to maintain it.

Others believe we are born as blank slates and begin writing experiences on them at birth. This person is much like a computer: garbage in, garbage out. Good things in.... This person is programmed by his parents, peers and environment, and his behavior is the result of his programming. If he is born to a den of thieves and murderers, he will naturally become one. This view relates more to the cognitive - pure science - perspective. This person is neither good nor bad, and learns right and wrong by experience. His life is not a struggle between good and evil, he just gathers experience and learns what works best. In this view the parents seem to have a major role in forming the child's beliefs and in what the child becomes. The child learns more directly by the parents molding and modeling. In a sense the parent owns the child and sees the child as a reflection of himself, which the child is. You will probably have this person learn by having them removed from the evil parents and reprogrammed by his new parents. He discovers less and has fewer insights with which to integrate - he simply is written on by others. Least of all is he responsible for his own behavior, which is simply the programming of others, so he isn't guilty. How many movies do we see in which Johnny is simply a product of his environment, so his behavior is excused?

Many believe we are reincarnated, carrying into this world a load of Karma and problems which will bring suffering we have earned in a past life. This person is no blank slate. This character's suffering will end when his Karma is spent in teaching him the needed lessons, and when through his own actions and maturity he climbs above this earthly plane. To some, Karma is a law akin to retribution. To others, Karma just brings conflicting people together to work things out. How many movies do we see in which the character seems to have no motivation from this life, but experiences come his way anyway? You will probably have this person learn by struggling through the experience as a survivor who faced a challenge that life brought him unbidden. He has changed from the experience, he is stronger. He can climb above his troubles.

Still others believe we define our relationships and experiences before we enter this world, so we live what we have scheduled for ourselves. This person changes and matures because he has experienced. This character may be less concerned with absolute right and wrong, and more concerned about the experience. The people he hurts or who hurt him or who help him, are all part of a play - very real at the time, but for a purpose. Only the experience and learning are ultimately important. How many movies do we see in which the protagonist struggles repeatedly with an experience until he finally comes to grips with it and integrates the new way of being? (*Groundhog Day* comes to mind.)

Then there are those who look to the stars for the influences that shape our lives and believe life is influenced by the date of birth and by the movement of planets in some cosmic rhythm which teaches cosmic lessons. This is a good wild card. There is no end of variety to the combinations of beliefs people come up with. For example, the ancient Mayan calendar sees the cyclical nature of the universe.

Regardless of religious beliefs, some believe that after we have aged a few years, we are then products of our past, and our behavior is dictated by what we have become. We have no free choice, but must react from what we are. Others believe we always have free will to choose and that we are made to do nothing, by God, the stars, our situation, or our needs. What do you believe? What do you want to show?

Whatever you believe, when you look at the innocent face of a baby you are already seeing a great deal more there than you think. And when you create a character, you already have a great deal more there than you think. You have a lot of expectations of what that person's life is about and what influences will shape it. But now you can ask yourself what your character's belief system is and how will he learn. You can give them entirely different ways of looking at things and changing.

Forget destiny, you mealy-mouth muse, just why are we here?

What is the purpose of our lives? Why are we here? During the earlier phases of my life, I felt I needed to be engaged in work that was a direct benefit to other people, such as repairing communications equipment or serving in the military. Later I could understand the value of indirect work, like managing. Then I got to the point I felt like I no longer needed to be of benefit to anyone, so I write. (Meditate on that one.) If you are prevented from seeing value in certain kinds of activities, then it is difficult to create real characters who do other things. Let's work on that.

Some would say we are here to serve God. But what does that mean? Are those folks here to sit under a toadstool night and day, praying, meditating, reading the Word of God? That would certainly leave one to wonder who is to cook, turn on the air conditioner, and entertain the mentally impoverished masses (like me). Can doing these other seemingly less spiritual things, and having fun, in some way also mean serving God?

Others might say we are here to serve each other. Relationships are the all important key to the universe, the only important activity in life. If so, then can an activity have important meaning to others? Who is here to defend the world in the military, build skyscrapers in remote cities, lead the nation, and devote night and day to gathering news? Some activities people feel compelled to do, may necessarily exclude building relationships.

There are a great many who are here to serve themselves. They take without giving and have no concern for the welfare of others. The sun shines on them

just the same. Monsters who have terrorized their own nations and attacked others, have led to the deaths of millions of people. What meaningful activity or relationship were they were supposed to be working on.

Some believe we are here to learn. Does that mean they are to be career students at some university? Or does it mean collecting experiences like some collect bugs, just to know we have had them, regardless of who we use? What does learning mean, absorbing knowledge, having experiences, growing?

Some think we are here to accomplish some task. How would we reconcile that with the sage wisdom that everything we do comes to nothing - all we are is dust in the wind. Do our efforts mean so little? What about the day to day experience we have in doing things, and the others that we impact along the way?

The answers are within you. Please consider the following as your first integrative story. Develop the story as little or as much as you wish. The characters will be designed around the previous questions about why we are here. I take you now to a condemned block of a medium size city. Most of the buildings have already collapsed or have been demolished. On the corner in a two story frame retail building, is an active soup kitchen that still services the neighborhood until tomorrow - the day the wrecking ball arrives. Next to the building is an abandoned five story brick structure with most of the windows and doors gone. Ten homeless people find shelter within it.

Meet the characters: Tanya and Eric, early thirties, brother and sister, operate "The Mission," the soup kitchen. Tanya is attractive, but never married. She can never "find a guy with his feet on the ground - someone real." Eric asks little of life, has few expectations, only wants to operate the mission, where he has worked since he was eighteen. Together they have a very supportive relationship and they care deeply about the homeless, transients, and temporary indigents they support. When the mission closes, they lose their income. Tanya will go live with their mother and sleep on the couch. Eric has decided not to overcrowd his mother's place, but doesn't know where he will go.

Mr. Ugly is the dishwasher. When he was a boy of eight, he played with matches and an old kerosene stove. Mimicking his dad, he put the fire out, then relit the stove. The hot oil exploded, leaving his face a mass of scar tissue. After regaining consciousness, as the house roared in flames, he valiantly tried to waken his father from a drunken stupor, but finally had to flee, leaving him there. He never forgave himself for starting the fire or for leaving his father. He talks with a raspy voice, and grew up in institutions. At the Mission, he never ventures out of the kitchen, but spends his breaks reading religious works. As he walks home at night, he is frequently taunted and ridiculed by teens. He never minds, but considers it his service to others, rasping to them, "Don't ever play with fire." He believes God has made him

the perfect object lesson. When the mission closes, he has no job and may have to go on welfare because his looks will prevent him from getting another job.

The indigents finding shelter in the old building have no place to go. A sparkling office building will engulf three times the land as the old building. Mary Stewart is the banker - board of directors - who is overseeing this project. This is Mary's baby - she championed this investment. The board has the responsibility to make sure the bank's money is safely invested. But Mary likes to do "good works" with the money entrusted to them if she can. What Mary sees is a blighted area they can put to good use. Hundreds of jobs created that are much needed in a neighborhood on the brink of losing its economic base and becoming a waste land. Mary's one fault is she can only see the big picture - she never works with individuals. She has never met any of the people on the block and has no idea that indigents live in the old building.

Roland is a college student. In his fraternity he is nicknamed "The Happening" because he launches one big project after another. Roland doesn't identify a whit with the people he helps, he just enjoys wielding power and making things happen. They are good "experiences." Maybe this is his destiny, or maybe he is just exercising power.

Today, the day before demolition begins, Mary is at the block for a ground breaking ceremony. Tanya and Eric approach her after the ceremony, set to attack her for being a megalomaniac who builds empires while ignoring the plight of the little people - like the indigents inhabiting the building. How will Mary feel when her good work is belittled? Roland, hearing about the job losses and indigents, decides to make this another project. What will the other characters teach him with this experience? Will Eric become a stronger person after being separated from Tanya for a while? Will he and Mary become friends and lovers? The purpose of this little story is to identify with the feelings of each character and understand their motivations; i.e., what has meaning to them - purpose. All of these characters have cross purposes: Tanya and Eric, the relationship people; Mary the builder; Mr. Ugly the man with a mission from God; and Roland, the experience person. Is only one right?

 The peacemaker in me says, we desperately need those beautiful writers who can show us the value of relationships. We also need those awesome writers who can show us the value of accomplishment. We need writers who can write passionately from their point of view. What we don't need is writers who are frustrated and stymied in their careers because they can only see life from one point of view, so can only create the same old character in the same old story over and over again.

No sure answer to *why*, but a difficult role for every person

Everyone ponders that great question, "Why are we here?" Our lives are often shaped by the people and institutions around us - parents, teachers, schools, religious institutions, ethnic groups, governments - until something finally gels and we begin to set the course of our own lives whether we know the final outcome or not. Few of us are struck over the head with a brick accompanied by some voice from the heavens saying, "Now I'm going to tell you why you are here." But understanding why we are here has a great deal to do with understanding human motivation.

Implied by the very definition of why we are here is the state we are in. Are we happy? Suffering? Growing? What state should we be in, or seek to be in? Psychologist's offices are filled with people wanting to change the unhappy state they are in. Why all the unhappiness? Because people are sick? Because the world is a sick place? Because they had sick parents? Is it because life is about overcoming problems and growing, so we all have problems and we all have pain?

In his book *Freedom and Destiny*, Rollo May addressed the question about the role of psychology in people's lives. We would like to live without anxiety. He counters we should seek to live without paralyzing anxiety. Normal anxiety is a stimulant to a vital existence, is a source of energy, and is life enhancing. We would like people to see therapists to adjust themselves so they can live with society. He counters, the therapist is not the psychic policeman of society. We all want to be happy. He counters that happiness can be purchased only at the price of repressing and denying too many of the facts of life, working against mental health. Then what should we be seeking? He says, to be free to be aware of and to experience our possibilities.

That tells us nothing and everything. Nothing in the sense that nothing specific comes from it. Everything in the sense that "why we are here" is wide open - possibilities for humanity. Personally I like Rollo May's work, that's why I quote him. But now I'm going to throw rocks at him. What do psychologists really know? What can psychology tell us? Psychologists aren't here as religious leaders. Psychologists have a specific task to accomplish: helping people become what they wish. They devise the most appropriate framework for accomplishing that task. But if the framework requires having possibilities, does that mean we all have the same possibilities?

Applying life's roles to characters

We generally all like to think so (all men are created equal?). But what about the fifteen-year-old kid whose life is smashed by a drunken driver? What kind of possibilities does that kid have? What about a four- year-old child starving to death in Somalia? What possibilities does that kid have? Or the child struck down by a fatal disease, or a woman whose life is strangled from her by an oppressive husband who won't let her live - not really live; serving

him, yes, doing something for herself, no? Or the child born so mentally incapacitated he can hardly function? I like the idea of possibilities, but it doesn't seem to be what life is about for a lot of people.

Are some here simply to make others see? Are some here to love and give until they are depleted, spent, gone, for the sake of someone else? Try creating a character like that: Plain Jane is a doormat for her husband and kids. Her husband knocks her around, expects her to work like a slave, and teaches his kids to expect the same from her. In today's world, if you don't show why Jane is a doormat, script readers and the audience will tell you the character should stand up for herself. There are many Janes, but why must there be?

To continue, are some here to make us laugh because they have felt the pain themselves? Are some here to drift and take, and seemingly never give in return, their contribution to this world never revealed? Are some here just to cause pain, but never suffer themselves? Are some here just to end pain? Colorful characters often come from just these kinds of circumstances. Not the typical person who has a world of possibilities open to him, but the exceptional person who has limited possibilities, who can make us sympathetic and painfully aware of our own possibilities. Mr. Ugly in the integrative exercise may have more to tell us than any of the other characters.

Mind sets

Heard any good slogans lately? Slogans are typically supposed to be bits of wisdom encapsulated in pithy words. *Love is blind.* Is it really, or is that just a phrase that we use to easily explain the behavior of people whose behavior is a little off. Slogans are often created by politicians as campaign vehicles because they know people will recite them without giving them much thought. Slogans have a lot in common with mind sets. *Love conquers all.* We get a popular idea stuck in our mind and suddenly we oversimplify everything in life with that one phrase. He's a bad husband, he beats her... Love conquers all. If the company won't give us a raise... Love conquers all. He wants to marry her, but she lives on the wrong side of the tracks... Love conquers all. Suddenly we have a simplistic solution for everything in life, and things require no more thought or action on our part.

My purpose in this subsection is to shake you free from the typical mind sets most of us are stuck in, so you can write real characters instead of the fantasies we choose to see. We hear the fantasies in the slogans we recite to each other. "Love conquers all; all we need is love." What are the limitations of love? "Life is fair or we can make life fair." We have a very acute sense of fairness - especially when we want something someone else gets. Yet individual needs can't be addressed if society is all treated the same. "The law is just." Television reports on prosecution deals, police

corruption, informants who continue to break the law, judges with an ax to grind, and racial and wealth bias are dispelling that notion. The law is not about fairness. Should it be?

"Kids are products of their parents - bad kids are from bad and unloving parents, good kids are from good parents." "Most adults have problems because their parents ruined them while raising them." I'll address these later. These are popular concepts and the way we want to see the world - assumptions people tend to generalize to everyone because they are true for some. Persuasive writing comes not from telling one side, but from telling the truth of both so the hearer can decide. A writer can't be blind to the truth.

Believing in fantasies about the world might best be explored through the following example. Freud, father of modern psychology, discovered that many of his patients sooner or later got around to having memories of childhood sexual abuse. Later he uncovered a common element to many of their memories. They were spurious and erroneous. The abuse had not happened - yet in the psyche of the client, it was real when she related it. History repeats itself in modern day with accounts mounting at an alarming rate of family horror stories in which members have been accused by children, or adult children, of abuse that never happened. In an era of openness and militance against abuse, such memories are often encouraged. Reminiscent of witch hunts?

With the real incidence of women who were sexually abused as children at 25 to 50%, and with the incidence of rape at one in four adult women, can we afford to discourage such memories? A writer can be totally polarized and write on one side or another of these issues. Or he can explore them in search of a more definitive explanation. For example, those who believe in reincarnation might answer that these victims are learning not to hate, and they may have been the perpetrators in another life. Thus as a society we need not address the issue. Others may explore what feelings and perceived events were congealing in that person's psyche to create those memories, and why?

Are the erroneous memories an expression of fear? What could generate such feelings? Failure of parents in some other area? Distrust of all men? Why? Too many news reports about abuse and other violent crime? Too many criminals escaping capture, prosecution, rehabilitation or incarceration? When lawlessness seems to run rampant on city streets and people figuratively lock themselves behind bars for protection - afraid to go to the store, parking garage, unlit area, or even go out at night or to drive through a neighborhood - what kind of psychological climate does that establish? That we live in a world which can't be trusted - no one in the world can be trusted, not even our own family? Do we live in a world which is so permissive that people are trained from childhood that they can get away with anything? Has ignoring economically troubled areas created so much hate and discontent

that violent crime is inescapable? Do we have family structures that promote abuse of women? Do we have values in society - competitiveness, violent sports, material overemphasis (greed) - that encourage violence from a violent nature animal, while discouraging taming the beast? Who knows what the integrative process used in writing a story might reveal?

Law and order are the politicians' battle-cry. Victim's rights have swung to the forefront, and victims are consulted about what is the minimum "justice" they must see in a convict's sentence. Crime is on the rise and prisons can't be built fast enough. But I question if there is any such thing as justice, and not because of problems in the justice system. Once someone has done something against someone else, violating them, destroying their sense of security, can anything ever repair it? Especially if a death is involved. Correction doesn't seem to work, and the law is supposedly not about retribution. What does our overheated quest for justice accomplish other than to put politicians in office for crying, "justice.!"

Are we too permissive? Should Johnny be caned or have his hands cut off or be hung in public? One person on TV news who had been caned said he would never even think of doing the crime again. Does correction really work that way, or will the person's problem resurface in some other way, possibly worse but without drawing the attention of the cane? Our military leaders are the first to admit that force is a last resort because it is very ineffective for forcing your will on others. Kill a leader, create a martyr people will follow forever. Strip a nation of its pride and it will fight you another day to regain it. Punitive actions are force, and often engenders forcefulness - violence - in return. Like pouring oil on a fire to smother it, force can suddenly ferociously return. When is force effective, and when does violence teach violence?

Abuse of all types should be stopped, but if punitive actions are considered abuse, what are the effective alternatives? Teachers no longer have control of their classrooms and live in fear of attacks by children. Parents are afraid to correct their children because any child knows he can run to the courts and cry abuse. The juvenile justice systems are throwing up their hands in despair because they have no effective tools for dealing with delinquent teens. Afraid that incarceration or punitive action will "teach and generate violence," their hands have been tied. Is it better to allow unrestrained violence and destruction by teens to put the entire world in fear, isolation and turmoil, teaching these ways of life to aging teens because we permit them to do it, than to allow a child delinquent to "suffer." Is this even the real problem? Read on.

Childhood is described as humanities' most formative years, when people are most susceptible to learning values and behaviors. When they become adults, they are not as susceptible to "unlearning" violence. If people are taught violence, they learn violence. Ah, but the latest concern is over showing TV

violence without showing corresponding consequences. So when a violent dictator takes on the world by force, we then have license to sit in our living rooms and enjoy the show while the Air Force drops a bomb down his chimney. Whether or not we have to do it, should we enjoy it?

Are delinquent teens only acting out and they just need more love. Why should their behavior be dismissed and permitted? What harm will it cause? Psychologists and studies regularly change positions on such things. Recent studies have shown that people really don't need to express their anger, not even by watching a violent football game. They don't suffer any ill effects from it. But have we taught people in childhood - because a psychologist said so - that they must express their anger to get rid of it?

Children without limits do what has value to them, which means whatever they can get away with, because children have internalized few social values and many begin value testing - questioning validity and pushing limits - at a very early age.

How much range do children need in order to test and internalize their values? I can see the caption now, "Johnny broke into the White House, found the nuclear switch, and blew up the world, but parent says it's OK, he learned a good lesson from it." We're all dead. Everyone needs permissiveness in the form of patient love, understanding, and tolerance. Every society must have its rules that can't be broken without penalty. But more than these things, people need frameworks to operate within, to know the limits of society's tolerance that they absolutely must work within. Do our justice system and other institutions reflect this? Is this the real problem? Read on.

A personal example: I put my children into excellent elementary schools where teachers cared and helped them learn how to learn, and gave them a hunger for knowledge (some of it they hated). As a family, we held the value of education high and encouraged our children to learn. Then we moved near Chicago and again sought the best public schools. In the affluent area we chose, it turned out 80% of the children were from broken homes, abuse was prevalent, most kids knew the value of money and power, and how to work the system to get their own way. Many of these children had aggressively sought out the limits of the range of behavior society will tolerate. Ask them, and they could tell you their "rights" chapter and verse.

In that climate, the school system had an "us against the world" mentality. They harbored the child during the day, and you were expected to teach them at night - too bad if you traveled out of town. The children's conventional wisdom (common in their circles) was that all discipline was abusive and parents had no "right" to tell them what to do. Arguing over "rights" is a handy way of evading real issues. Behavior problems were the norm. Academic learning became simply a matter for contention, and street fighting with parents for "rights" became the real learning experience.

This experience was an example to me that we as a society establish a climate which teaches those around us to fear, to emphasize rights, to abuse, to emphasize money and power, and to form relationships that exclude others, teaching selfishness (broken marriage with child abuse as a pattern). Children raised in abusive societies, abuse the society in return. The innocent parent, we're not as influential as we would like to believe in this constantly changing culture, with a constant stream of conflicting values coming at their children from peers, school teachers and counselors, other parents, the government, religious institutions, TV and movies, and older siblings.

We look for whom to blame. The school blames the parents, the parents blame the school and the legal system that has no teeth, and the legal system blames them both. While the blaming continues, arguing over who is at fault, the real issues are evaded. Society is attacked by the problem it created. Have I finally uncovered the problem? Read on.

What is the impact on individual kids? When you look at many of the great leaders in our world and look at their childhoods, by today's standards of raising children they should have died or become terribly twisted people. Instead, they overcame adversity and excelled. Yet so many people who are given all the "right" things end up dead, twisted, or simply unmotivated. As much as we would like to think we understand the central tendencies which shape our lives, we don't. In fact we often remove the very challenges from people that they need to excel, fearing they are being hurt.

What is the impact on individual parents? Many are quick to look at "bad" behavior and point to the parents with a self-righteous finger. Yet children raised in similar homes side by side end up "good and bad," and one child in a family of several will turn out "a behavior problem." People aren't nearly as alike as we would like to pretend. Ministers get to know the secrets of all families in all socioeconomic and educational strata. Ask one. People are all the same. I have seen too many proud parents disintegrate when their young adult child "got in trouble." "My child would never do something like that."

I say too many, because I saw the same parents ignore clues which should have alerted them that there were holes in their kid's value system. We would all prefer to pat ourselves on the back and think we are good parents. Some families are better at suppressing their problems or containing them, or have other avenues available to them to keep problems at bay until their children are older. Some families have children who inherently don't create trouble. But for most families, family situations are rarely ideal. Most people work too much and have too few activities the family members enjoy doing together, while teens have too much time on their hands and too few avenues to genuinely explore life interests, such as career goals. Yet society insists they not work, ties their hands from exploring, while allowing them nothing of value to them to do with their time.

Why do people expect others to be alike in behavior, reflecting a similar set of moral and ethical values, when everything says their other sets of values are different? My father was one of five boys with fifteen years separating oldest from youngest. Their individual personalities come through very well in a family photo. Each one was so uniquely dressed that you would never have recognized him from the same family. One became an electrical foreman, another operated his own truck farm business, the third was an athlete, Navy officer, high school teacher and principal. Another dropped out of high school his Sophomore year, fought in WW2, worked for industry and had his own farm. The last one served in the Army, then went to work for the post office. How much were they influenced by their environment? Their father, a gentle man, was a bandmaster and sometimes worked in the coal mines. Only one showed much musical inclination.

When someone says to me that children are a reflection of their parents, I just smile. They know what they know. But what I have seen is that only in some very broad ways is that true. It mostly isn't. Children do model behavior, and many will test family religious values and find them compelling later in life, but parents in this day and age have more influence on teens as a source of advice and not as a controller of behavior. Yet the mood of the courts is toward jailing parents when their children are truant from school. With parents busy trying to earn enough money to keep their kids fed, clothed, and housed, and maybe on the way to college, and street-smart kids who know they can skip school without any real penalty and without their parent's knowledge - we're going to have to build even more jails. The world has changed - we have created a society in which parents don't have much influence.

Other factors produce kids with behavior problems. Parents who are immoral or thieves and who don't reflect any durable values, tend to produce children just like them. Genetic inheritance and body chemistry are also being shown to play major roles. For example, alcoholics often tend to have hypoglycemia, which is passed on, and which not only creates cravings, such as for alcohol, it also creates mood swings and can lead to violent behavior.

Another example, Type A behavior, not necessarily recognized in the DSM3, but well known among people pulling their hair out trying to cope with these hostile people, is a trait that can be passed on genetically, and can lead to violence. (DSM3 is the "recognized" cataloging of psychological illnesses, which is necessary for insurance, etc. The physician who recognized the patterns of behavior inherent in Type A failed to label it in the correct psychological terms, confusing the term "personality" with "behavior.") It's characterized by unbridled hostility toward others and a hurry sickness that prevents the person from enjoying things, and often from doing well in school. It's like being very irritated (like being irritable because of hunger) all the time - "Just let me get this stupid thing finished and get everyone out of my hair!" It's like ADD with a multiplication factor.

The parents' ability to influence or help kids who are like this is limited because they never seem to have a rational moment, they are always rebelling against something no matter how trivial, and they tend to reject parents, values, rules - anything irritating. That doesn't mean that the learned or inherited tendencies are going to ruin the kid. It does mean that it is something which will influence them for better or worse. At some point the person makes great steps forward: it is better to control temper than to hurt someone and go to jail.

Fortunately, scientists are unraveling the underlying causes of many of these problems. Many children are unable to absorb certain minerals from their food. The inability to absorb zinc has been established as a major contributing factor in the development of Type A Behavior and similar behavior styles in children. People treated for zinc malabsorbtion begin feeling "normal" and not irritated all the time. Where does this leave the poor frazzled young mother when Johnny the mega-monster child is impossibly rotten and everyone seems to think it is her fault?

Hopefully, I have made you think - even jarred or irritated you from stagnant thinking - because writers are typically the people with vision who communicate ideas to the world. Writers must think creatively, explore life fully, and write passionately. If my personal feelings have come through anywhere in a "hidden agenda," what I have tried to say is simply that, just like in a story, some people are defeated by their obstacles, some are made strong by them. Some will grow into strong people *because* they come from an impoverished environment in which their parents showed them little love. Others in protective environments will sometimes become victims, forever pointing to others as the source of their downfall, as if an excuse was all they ever needed for never taking responsibility to get on with their lives. (As a parent of three, I have three examples that run the gamut of behavior. I have no *broken* children, I consider all three successful in their own way - they all are taking charge of their lives.) Had I locked into any one perspective I have no doubt all three of my children would have suffered for it. They are all different and each required different methods and insights to raise. I recommend the writer be able to see all points of view and not lock into believing only one is right for everyone. Watch the simplistic phrases and the mind-sets that go with them.

Theory Vs Reality - Discovering Meaning Vs Having it Defined For Us

What has meaning to us? The events in our lives? Relationships? Chances are, the best way to see what has meaning in another person's life is to watch their behavior. Meaning and behavior are inextricably linked. Writers don't send characters off in meaningless behavior. Meaning becomes motivation, which becomes behavior. For example, "acting out," in children becomes interpreted with the meaning: "I felt my friend was keeping the chocolates from

me because she hates me, so I bit her." "Hates me" has meaning, and to a child it is motivating.

Psychologists make frameworks of theories, called theoretical constructs, which they think might be true, and try to work within those boundaries. Students training to be psychologists are educated within those boundaries and work within them. The several major schools of psychology vary considerably in their beliefs about the basis of human behavior. For example, the psychoanalytic school (this is a generalization - don't apply it too liberally) overlooks such issues as religion, in relation to behavior, and focuses on things that seem common to all people, especially within a culture.

For example, sexual and power relationships between parent and child is typical of the Freudian school. Behavioral expectations are then defined by that construct, and therapy to fix problems is centered on those issues. The more cognitive branches are more concerned about how the brain itself works. They tend to define learning and motivation by the biological processes within the brain (again, this is a generalization). Often one psychologist's theories oppose another's. Carl Rogers and B.F. Skinner are nothing alike in their approach to human behavior. But they are "experts." (This isn't meant in a derogatory way, physicians and nuclear physicists do the same thing.)

What does this ultimately mean? To use a crude comparison, if you drown a fire with oil, it will go out. The air is smothered away so combustion and oxidation can't continue. For all intents, it looks as if throwing oil on a fire is a good thing. It works - it puts out the fire. We can go on to develop elaborate theories about why, and refine the method of dousing it - finding just the right measure of oil and exactly where to pour it and how widespread. Just like developing a psychological theory. Only problem is, after a while the lighter elements within the hot oil vaporize and explode into flame. The fire roars back with a vengeance and the fire is much worse than it would have been.

We deal with people as if life has the same meaning for all of us. We sentence people to prison for crimes and expect that when they leave prison, they will have changed themselves and become law-abiding citizens. We neglect to ask if laws and prison have any meaning to them. If you capture law breakers from an environment where they have really nothing to lose, have been trained that there are no real consequences for their behavior (a year tour behind bars), and they believe they have no hope of ever becoming anything more than law breakers, what do laws and prison mean? An inescapable part of life like eating, death and taxes?

Psychology as a corrective endeavor can't fix people who don't have a typical meaning structure, because it doesn't deal with meanings. If love is not part of their meaning scheme, except as the sign of a weak person, then "loving" some of these people only leads to more aberrant behavior. "Permissiveness" only leads to more lawlessness. "Talk and insight therapy" is an activity that

can only be a game, because it can't address what isn't perceived in the convict as broken. So, pouring oil on these people doesn't work - the problem only gets worse. (This is just an example - not the answer to high recidivism rates.)

Psychology as a voice - not therapists doing therapy - necessarily treats all the world the same and gets standardized results. We are all reduced to some common denominators. We all develop more or less a certain way. We all have certain needs that must be met. Certain things that are done to people are wrong because there is a correlation between doing that and a certain negative result. We should overcome suffering to end in happiness - free of pain. Theoretically.

Theory is nice. It does give us a way of understanding some human experiences, but it has its limitations. Abraham Maslow gave us the great insights about "peak experiences" or self actualization. It's part of Maslow's Hierarchy, a theory which tells us humans prioritize by an ascending hierarchy of needs and they theoretically won't address a higher need until more basic needs are fulfilled. It's a great list for writers for character motivation alternatives. For example, security (food, shelter) is a human need that will be met first. That theory breaks down when you look at the homeless, people who won't keep a job, and writers who work endlessly for nothing. Tell this theory to an aspiring actor living on hope in New York or L.A., who doesn't know where his next paycheck is coming from, and see if he goes home. All these people have found something that has more meaning to them than security.

People find things about life - a purpose, a freedom - that is more important than security. Meaning leads to behavior, and security becomes secondary. So is Maslow's theory wrong? No. It is a good model of central tendency for an employer who keeps wages near subsistence levels. When that same employer wants to put an emphasis on quality he will run into problems. Most employees who must meet a quota (numbers of items produced in a short time) in order to make enough money to keep a roof over their head, are not going to get seriously concerned about the quality of widgets until it interferes with their security.

Although psychology may provide a general framework for understanding human behavior, it should not be treated as a definitive diagram of human behavior. It doesn't attempt to give meaning to people's lives, and it doesn't pretend to. Psychology accepts people where they are and attempts to help them get where they want to be. It does this regardless of their beliefs about religion, family, law, morals, politics or anything else. Psychology is not the catalog of what life should be. And that is what too many people try to make it.

What seems to have meaning to most of us is not central tendencies, which our minds basically disregard, but exceptions. (See Bruner, in the "Reference

Shelf.) We are individuals with individual needs who find meaning within a culture that helps define meaning for us collectively. But the culture changes as the bulk of its people change to different meaning structures. Engendered by the historical seeds that produced it, the sixties generation put all values into question, and ever since we have been redefining them, gleaning away the outmoded, defining the new. The culture remains flexible to its people. Yet is the general movement in this country toward making all things the same for everyone - life regulation through government bureaucracy? Is it up to the government, the school system and its agendas, or even talk show hosts to define what has meaning in our culture? What honest writing is about, I believe, is developing characters who believe certain things and have certain problems, putting them into a story and letting them illuminate the human condition. This is a bit different from a few forcing their idea of meaning onto others, whether it is through forcing characters (and viewers) to realize certain things in the context of a story, or through influential people and politicians defining what has meaning and forcing it onto others through regulation.

Defining Normal, Developing Characters

If we are able to point out the "exceptional" through characterization, then it helps to know what normal is. Most of us can be defined by a range of behavior considered "normal." There is no absolute yardstick for what is normal. Normal just means it doesn't deviate too far from the central tendencies of the rest of us. Just as twenty-twenty vision doesn't mean perfect vision, as if this was the eleventh commandment carved in stone, it just means average. Twenty-twenty is what most people can see, so it is the standard, even though some can see better than that. Most of the stories we write are about reasonably normal people. (Thrillers are an exception.) We'll get back to the normal range in a moment.

What falls outside the range of normal behavior falls into the classification of abnormal psychology. I spend very little time on abnormal psychology because I have no interest in it, but I'll mention it with relation to character change. Abnormal psychology covers psychotics: people who probably have a physical cause for their aberrant behavior. And neurotics: people who have become so entwined in complex behavior (usually coping mechanisms which allow them to live with impossible circumstances, or which prevent the real problem from being resolved) that they have lost touch with reality and aren't able to function normally.

Normal people can become "abnormal," but it usually doesn't happen overnight. The only "normal" overnight Jeckyl and Hyde characters I know of are those suffering from PMS, hypoglycemia, allergic reactions, and Type A

behavior (which usually has no placid Dr. Jeckyl to it). So it's best not to make characters who have an occasional attack of neurosis or psychosis, unless they are truly schizophrenics. Most people are reasonably predictable and don't change overnight.

Between the poles of the antisocial recluse who stays away from everyone and offers no help to them of any kind, and the martyr who sacrifices himself for others, is where most of us exist. Some of us are purely hedonistic; that is, we avoid pain and seek pleasure and are very self oriented. If we help others, it is because we get something in return, like a boost in self esteem, or preferably money. Some of us are pro-social; that is, we consistently help others and may pay little attention to ourselves. The central tendency will be between the two poles. But will your protagonist step out of a crowd and help a victim? In real life, maybe not. When people are in a crowd, they don't feel individually responsible - their sense of self is less focused in a crowd - and they are less likely to act. But in a movie, it makes a good proactive character.

Once you have oriented your character on the social and hedonist continuum, there is one other important thing that most people seem to have. A sense of purpose. This is sometimes very broad and has to do with the person's basic identity. For example, being a mother or a father or a good provider. For some, only that role is important to them and what they do, for work for example, isn't important as long as it supports that role.

Some people seem to have a very defined, specific purpose. The best concession sales person at the baseball stadium. A talk show host. A writer about social issues. A corporate manager, but still the best mother and housekeeper. It is very important to these people what they do, and when they have found their niche, they want to be the best.

When you have created a character, can you tell what that character's sense of purpose is? If not, his purpose will probably reflect whatever your purpose is, and this may be very much at odds with the storyline.

So what makes one person become a psychopath who has so little regard for others that he can kill without emotion? What makes another person have so little regard for himself that he abuses himself to death in other's service, a martyr? Or what can drive a person so fiercely that he will give up his own life - way of life, or life itself? A writer needs enough experience to stay clear sighted. He needs to have some idea at what point people succumb to environmental and peer pressures so that their freedom of choice is overcome and they are forced to act.

Tragedy

What leads to tragedy? Tragedies have been written since the Ancient Greeks. The idea is, some people have a fatal flaw that drives them to their ultimate destruction. They are never able to overcome it. This idea fits well with those who are behaviorists and determinists and environmentalists (behavior is influenced by external - environmental - things) who believe people have limited freedom of choice - their decisions are forced on them by their genes or their environment, anything but their own self-directed experience. It is a very fatalistic view which says our destiny is not ours to control and things will happen as they have been programmed to do. In reality, this does happen a lot. People crash and burn because they have been unable to overcome their genetic heritage, or their environment. They may have failed simply because they believed they couldn't overcome their obstacles or because they weren't influenced (not by pressure alone) by others to change. On the other hand, many people do overcome their programming.

There is a lesson to be learned from people who succumb to a fatal flaw. But should we write that story? Tragedies are often tragedies at the Box Office, and so are not well received in Hollywood. Why don't people want to see tragedies? They tell us little about how to solve problems. The ending is not happy. Tragedies give us no hope that people can overcome. Interestingly, most of the tragedy stories I read are set in a completely existential background. The character usually has none of the normal roots that anchor people to life. His family doesn't love him, he has no true friends, he isn't part of a social group, he is irreligious, has no feeling of purpose, his mind is thoroughly confused, and he is sometimes on drugs or alcohol. It seems instinctive to writers that they have to set the character adrift in a sea of total meaninglessness before he can actually fall off the edge of the world.

Actually it's much easier than that. If you want something tragic to write about, write about someone who has established an identity consisting of something that is impossible for him to attain. A growing obsession that he is unable to separate himself from and it finally devours him. Examples: A businessman who's only satisfaction can be running the company, but the president won't retire for forty years. A housewife whose identity is a clean house, but she has five very active kids who won't help clean and she has to work outside the home. A military serviceman whose only mark of true valor is to take lives, but he lives in peacetime. A Church Pastor whose only measure of success is lives saved from Hell, but he can't get a single sinner on his knees. These people are all driven and they will all attain their goal at great expense, or disintegrate (as in nervous breakdown), or kill themselves, unless something intervenes and helps them redefine themselves.

Psychologists and books on psychology are excellent resources for writers who need help formulating a character with complex problems. Psychology has a firm place in the assistance of individuals who seek help. (Although when I was educated in psychology, I was told you should put "good friend"

at the top of your effectiveness list and psychoanalysis at the bottom, just after eating slugs as a psychological cathartic. Sorry, Jung, the college I went to was on a cognitive - pure science - bent at the time.)

As much as we would like to see psychology connected to a better life, and a tool for setting the direction of our life, psychology doesn't tell you why any individual is here, what his life is about, or what influences are going to shape his life. We would all like to think we are not here as a bad example to others, or that we won't have to starve in order to be free to do what we think is important, but in real life, sometimes that's the way it is. So don't make your characters all have the same needs and desires and all here for the same reason.

People are so complex and their motives so hidden that psychology is not a good predictor of behavior. It isn't a cure-all that will make the world live together. The late B.F. Skinner concluded from his utopian communities experiments that psychology is not the ultimate answer to human relationships. It won't resolve all of society's problems. For that matter, no psychological treatment can do anything for hedonism. It isn't a psychological problem, it is a reflection of values (usually spiritual, unless the person can buy into humanistic values). If you are going to make your character change, then you will need all your faculties keenly focused on the challenge. Change will probably be motivated by psychological, physical, physiological, social, and spiritual forces.

Character Growth: change, maturing

One thing is very common to most people. Change. The man who is here for himself is seldom altruistic. If he starts doing something for others, there is a reason. The person who absorbs knowledge like a sponge typically is not a people person who helps heal relationships. If he starts talking about joining a relationship group, there's a reason. The reason has to do with change. Most people, no matter what they believe they are here for, change and experience growth. They live, they acquire experience and knowledge, they integrate that knowledge into their minds and their personalities and behavior, and they become a new person. This is called growth. In a story, the character must change, and should do so gradually from scene one to the last. Sometimes characters refuse to change, or refuse to see the need to change. Their change is more climactic, and comes all at once at the climax.

Does a zebra change its stripes? Yes. It may take many years, but as surely as people's cells replace themselves from every few weeks to a few years, people do change and become new people. But growth always brings with it some pain - parting, changing, facing our weaknesses, stretching ourselves. Stories about change capture that magical moment when change occurs.

Stories tend to fall into three general categories. First is the adventure story with a main character who tends not to change. He is the archetype, the bigger than life, perfect specimen of humanity whom we can always count on to do the right thing and to triumph over problems. He reminds us that the struggle to accomplish our goals is do-able, is right, and is fun. He may be James Bond triumphing over world oppressors and countless villains. Luke Skywalker triumphing over universal evil. Indiana Jones triumphing over Nazi thieves. The TV cop or detective who always solves the case and puts the bad guy behind bars (*Knightrider, The Commish*). Or the countless average people like you and me who triumph over countless terrors from within or from outside, whether its evil spirits, (*Ghostbusters, Friday The Thirteenth, The Exorcist, IT*) or just evil people (*Fatal Attraction*) or natural disasters (*Towering Inferno).*

Adventure movies sell better than any other kind of movie. They are society's myths, the motivaters, the gods (representative), the positive message, the things that tell us we will succeed and have fun doing it. When you write an adventure movie, you must know what motivates your audience, even as a vicarious experience or release, because that is what must motivate your characters.

The second category of movies is about people who do change. It isn't about a super-hero or archetype; it's about real people and the process they go through in personal growth. It's about discovery. In contrast, in adventure movies you know the end. The good person is going to triumph in the end - you know that before you walk in the theater. But in other movies, you don't know the ending. You expect that it is going to be happy, but you don't know what will happen. That's because it is a process of discovery that leads to a unique solution to the problem. It reflects life. You hope for happy endings to your problems, you probably believe that in most cases things turn out for the best, but you don't know what the solution is going to be until you arrive there.

The third category of movie is about knowing. Exploring knowledge. Exploring the form of the universe and what it holds for us. Science fiction often falls into this category. For example, what happens if you suddenly tell an entire world that there is a better form of government or a science that will cure all their ills? What happens if you run into a person who was once two other people who literally merged? What does that tell us about our own world, and about ourselves? These movies aren't limited to science fiction. What dangers might we face from a buildup of nuclear weapons? What can happen if unscrupulous companies dispose of their hazardous waste in illegal ways? What is it like to dog sled to the North Pole? What are the limits of human endurance? What can blind faith lead to?

But even keener than these "what if" questions are those simply about the thrill of discovery and personal triumph. Movies are usually about

adversaries, about evil and problems and things that stand in the way of what we want. There are also movies about the joy of life - the thrill of discovery - satisfying the desire to know just for the sake of witnessing it, standing in awe of the universe around us. This is movie magic. Look at the settings used in movies. They are unique. Cameras take us to places we have never been before: within a Mosque, to the depths of the oceans, to the tops of skyscrapers, inside a human cell, to the depths of space. Places people want to see just because they are there.

Or things to do like skiing down a steep mountain slope, going over a cliff, falling endlessly, to land perfectly on another slope and continue down. Hang gliding. A luxury cruise. Mining gold by hand in the mud in South America. Sailing a Viking ship, a thousand years ago.

Or personal experiences like the Jamaican bobsled team going for the Olympic gold. Carving a path through the Amazon. Teaching college students to love poetry so they can have the joy of it. Proving an atomic theory just to advance the world's knowledge. Bringing cultures together to know and understand each other to diversify both. Bringing people together to broaden their perspective.

All of these things are subjects. Topics. But movies aren't about topics - that's a documentary. Instead of exploring these subjects in documentaries, they are explored through entertaining movies that raise a very important question. What does it mean to me? The implications are explored by drawing us in through human drama. They are interpreted through what we think we know about human nature. But they open doors of knowledge and opportunity to us. The best movies are those which focus on one of these three things while incorporating all of them.

What is life about? Learning, exploring, knowing, helping others, accomplishing, relationships, experiencing, growing, making choices. These are the same things that movies are about. Movies are colored by the characters you create, the adventures you put them through, and the goal you wish them to achieve.

Originality: Stretch Your Writing Skills

What would you write if you were writing purely for yourself? Romance? High adventure? No one but you would ever see it. Deep science? Sex? What aspect of human nature would you explore? Different relationships? Altered reality? How deeply would you look? A way to become able to write more uniquely is to push the limits of your writing as far as you can. If you can only write stories about honest people, try writing about a den of thieves, and don't let any of your characters be "good guys." If you are limited in scope about people who get high on life, write a story in which

that's all people are allowed to do. Explore the entire "high on life" world in depth.

If sex is a hang-up, write a few pages and embarrass yourself, then write a few more pages and make it worse. If all you can let in your mind is adventure, write a story that is all romance. Mark these stories "experimental" or "stretch," and don't let anyone see them. They were never intended for human consumption. But what they will do is make you able to write more fully about human experience.

For example, what is it like to become trapped in a mine shaft? Not exactly a fun filled story. Are the first hours filled with expectation of rescue, and picturing various cave-in scenarios? Is there a burst of hope and an attempt to dig out? Is the failure to reach anywhere followed by a sense of impending doom, and the certain knowledge of the worst case scenario? What are the thoughts of the person separated from loved ones? Does hope change to hopelessness and despair? What role do hunger and thirst play? How do they react when they die, or are rescued? After writing this story, you may never write another story with a character being trapped and gloss it over as just another event in the day - you'll have a dimension of realism.

Another example: most people have fears. How do these influence their behaviors? In a story about fear of being raped, how does that influence a woman's decisions? Does she walk several blocks on city streets to avoid parking in a dimly lit and isolated parking garage? Does she avoid going out at night? Does she limit her companions to females? Does she restrict her working hours to daylight only? Put yourself in the mind of a fearful person and trace his steps for an entire day - you may never again write a story in which someone just ignores his fears and faces them with no problem - you'll have another dimension of realism.

Another way to stretch your skills is to carry things to their logical extremes. Take a character you are already familiar with (whose situation and limitations you already know) and confront them with an obstacle. To conquer the obstacle, push them to the farthest extremes you think they would go. What things hold them back? What would they sacrifice to get what they want? This is a way to make things "big" enough for a movie.

Situations can be pushed to their logical extremes by switching to a science fiction or fantasy scenario. The "world" can be adjusted to let just about anything happen. If you want to explore what total freedom does to people, put them in a world where they have total freedom and see what happens when they confront obstacles. Or how do people react when there are no problems to conquer? Is this what life is about - overcoming problems? Put people in a world with no problems and see what they do. Do they get bored and kill each other, or do they go in positive directions, developing new skills to alter the world around them so it is more pleasing? Do they still get bored?

What if women ran the government, or people could no longer kill animals, or there was no longer money to steal? When you have explored a scenario, you can bring the characters and situation into a corresponding one in today's world. Usually there is something in today's world - the human condition - that corresponds to the situation, and when characters are pulled back into the reality of today's world, they (you) have the benefit of the old perspective with the constraints of the present.

Another way to gain ideas or develop characters is to take a topic you feel seriously about and debate the opposing side. When you have developed the opposing argument, ask yourself what would make a person feel that way - you now have a character past.

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The Process Of Change

In most movies the main characters, or characters directly impacted by the main characters, will go through a process of change. They encounter a problem. Overcoming the problem requires some change on their part. They often recognize something about themselves and find a way to conquer it. If you don't know anything about change in human behavior, it is difficult to paint a realistic picture of it. People will read your script and say it lacks credibility or the people act out of character. So the following paragraphs are about the process of change.

Do people want to change? Largely no. People are the sum total of their experience, their experience has shaped their attitude, and they are quite comfortable with their attitude and being what they are. The corporate raider believes he is making industry stronger, benefiting many people - he is comfortable with himself. The young single parent on welfare in the inner city believes the father has no opportunity, men can't support a family and she must live on society - she is comfortable with herself. The young man with an attitude about authority believes he should be independent and no one should make him do what he doesn't want to - he is a law to himself and very comfortable with himself. If someone or something asks these people to change, they dig in their heels and stubbornly refuse. Change comes very slowly, sometimes painfully, over long periods of time, unless something comes along to hasten it.

There are exceptions. Some prescribe to a philosophy that promotes growth in a positive way, and these people are about changing. Hooray for them. You can meet them at the self-help bookstand. In reality, most of us want to think highly of ourselves and try to improve ourselves to some extent. It's the things others want to change about us which are usually taboo.

I have always tried to be a person who can be a catalyst of change for people (and reconciliation), either to help them or inform them. Understanding motivation has been a twenty year pursuit of mine. I was pastor of a church (informative and persuasive motivation), an engineer (pragmatic motivater), sales (informative, persuasive), a youth counselor in an alternative to jail program (crisis counseling and outreach motivation), a counselor (educated in psychology and religious studies), and a district manager (motivating people in distant locations to perform and to grow in a career, informative, persuasive),

husband and father of three (my biggest challenge), speaker to writers (informative).

All of these required me to probe for obstacles to action. At this point I know a lot more about what doesn't motivate people than what does. Motivation is internal, and there is very little one person can do to motivate another. People usually don't do things or change until they are ready. What are the exceptions? Someone sweeps them off their feet with some charismatic response and becomes an instrument of change. They enter a crisis. Someone creates a crisis for them. Some days, as a manager or parent, I created crisis for others when other methods didn't work.

What is necessary to cause people to change? The most essential ingredient is that they have to want to change. If they don't want to, then you can't love them enough to change them, you can't talk to them enough, you can't counsel them enough, often not even religious persuasion is enough. They won't change. If I read a script where one person talks to another about their behavior and the person decides to change, I'm thinking, "This writer is very naive." People are what they are because of their experiences and because of opinions which they have accepted as their own. Those things are like concrete in the soul and they don't change until the person's experience changes them. A pleasant conversation does nothing.

I used to think that all we had to do to change bigotry and prejudice and political squabbles was to educate people. If they just knew the right things, they wouldn't be that way. What a laugh! Here is how it really works. People's behavior comes from their attitude. Their attitude has two major components. What they know. What they feel. How they feel about something often has nothing to do with what they know about it. And the emotional component is overwhelming for most people. If a weak elderly woman knows in her head that most young people are kind, just like her, but during the last four days she was kicked by four young people, her emotions tell her to avoid young people. When school gets out, she'll be hiding in her closet.

If a teen's head tells him that a roller coaster is safe and fun, but he had a bad fall from one when he was a kid, his emotions will prevent him from getting on. If a politician knows that most people from Orb are OK, but in the last year three of them have done him dirty, he's going to be very wary of people from Orb. If a Hollywood agent knows that most new writers have realistic expectations, but in the last two years he has been in legal squabbles with two and he has never had success with any, his emotions will prevent him from taking new scripts. You really can't change people's behavior by talking to them. You have to change their emotions.

How do emotions get changed? Most often by suffering. When people burn their finger, they learn not to touch the stove. The ancients recognized this in the saying, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Suffering is

a primary motivater. For example, a foul temper loses a friend, then a girl friend, then a job, then ruins a marriage. The suffering gets worse until the person decides he wants to change. In a movie, suffering is the main thing the antagonist creates. He makes the protagonist suffer more and more until the protagonist has had enough of it and decides to change things. As the fight begins, the good guy decides what he wants and that he's going to fight for it. Act Two begins. Suffering - tension - increases through Act Two until suffering is at its greatest and the good guy finds a way to triumph.

Suffering in real life follows a curve like the alcoholics curve. The curve is U shaped with the bottom being the critical low point - as bad as it can get. An alcoholic will begin with drinking occasionally. After a while he drinks to cope. Then the drinking starts to cause problems. Most won't address the alcoholism at this point. As he goes farther down that curve, he loses more and more, including family, job, friends, home - everything. At the bottom, he may lose his life. When he has lost everything, he may decide it is ruining him and begin to take control of his life and slowly work his way back up. (It usually takes help.) Two things can intervene in that curve. Family and friends may create a crisis and persuade him to join an organization like AA. Or there may have been enough crisis to get his attention before he reaches bottom.

I wish the world was a more positive place, but unfortunately suffering takes precedence over pleasure. Despite what people think they want, they won't have it any other way, they must suffer. Ask a person if they want to suffer, the answer is an automatic, "NO!" Yet the very behaviors we won't change are the ones that bring our suffering. So we're trapped.

Fortunately good things come along to motivate us. Affection is a great one. One person falls head over heels in love and will climb the tallest mountain for the other. Money and power - things that can bring pleasant things to us - are other strong motivaters. People will change their mind about a lot of things for love, money and power. They may hate the cold and live in a warm climate to escape it, but they'll be out there climbing that icy mountain to get one of those three.

Another thing that leads to change in people is a crisis. A man may smoke cigars year after year and put up with a minor cough. But when he sees a discolored spot on his tongue, he may think he has cancer. The threat of cancer is a crisis - a major emotional trauma. This may cause him to consider what he is doing to himself in earnest and he may give up cigars, even though the physician's report later says he doesn't have it.

The guy with the foul temper may live with telling off people around him and losing friends for several years. But when his girl friend leaves him, that is a major emotional trauma. A crisis. It may be enough to make him want to change. The janitor who pilfered light bulbs and other supplies from his employer for years, thinking it is justified, suddenly steps over the line and

takes home a thousand dollar TV, which are stacked in enormous piles around the warehouse. The police are called and he is caught. A crisis.

Some people are forced to change. For example, Johnny doesn't think much of managers, then his employer tells him to take a manager's job or be laid off. Johnny takes the manager's job and two months later he can't be parted from it. Best job in the world. It works like this: When people do what they think is wrong or not for them, their minds struggle to cope with it (cognitive dissonance). They are forced to do it, so their mind has to justify it. After a short period of time, they have adjusted and it is often positive.

It sometimes backfires. They disagree with what they are doing and take it out some other way, as in hating the people who made them take the damn manager's job. Sooner or later they are going to get them, and in the meantime they are going to be uncooperative and sabotage the business.

Another example of people being forced to change has to do with religion. Religious motivation is one of the most powerful motivations. The vilest person can "get religion" and completely change his behavior, becoming one of the nicest people. Strong motivation can also be seen in the fanatic. The more fanatical the person, the more likely he can be prompted to strong action. But is the person a fanatic or a zealot? Put that same person in an environment where his material needs are met or exceeded, around people who live in harmony, and let him adjust for a few years - will he remain as motivated as he was?

The zealot is unlikely to change because his motives are purely religious. But for the fanatic, there is nothing to fight over, no symbol of being aggrieved, and the person may grow very moderate or even liberal in his beliefs. What was the motivation? The emotional content says it was about symbols of aggrievement, not religion.

The fanatic's beliefs are mollified when he adjusts to a new environment. That doesn't mean that the person's faith was superficial. Spiritual things are a form that can be expressed with a variety of religious contents. Content and emphasis depend on a person's need. When people have a need, they turn to a variety of things to change the condition, and religion is one. Religion is a very convenient thing because it seems to have the power and authority of God behind it. So religion always appears to be a very strong motivater.

Some people are spiritual by nature, understanding the universe and their role in it in a spiritual way. Others are strongly religious because personal faith, guided by religious doctrine, and supported by a religious community, has made them what they are. And some simply use organized religion as a means for getting what they want. Everyone tends to do a little of each.

What does all this stuff about motivation mean to your screenplay? If you are writing a screenplay and it goes, "Bob is giving up smoking and drinking because his new girl friend, Mary, thinks it is bad for him and she's giving

him research articles that say how bad it is, and a counselor is talking to him about how to get through it" - stop. Bob likes smoking and drinking and really doesn't want to quit, and two months after marrying Mary he will start them again and try to get her to join the fun. That's real life.

Now, before you throw away your concept that knowledge or love or counseling can save someone - stop. Think bigger. Under what conditions might those prompt a character to change? To people who are honest with themselves, rational people, knowledge does make them stop and think and they often alter their behavior. To people torn by contradictory motivations working within them, counseling often will help them define a path forward. Sometimes love does save someone - sometimes it is so precious that a person will change almost anything about themselves in order to gain and keep that love, or in response to other's kindness, or even to please the other person. Love can't be ignored, it evokes a response of one kind or another.

Is your character honest with himself? Will some event force him to become honest with himself? Will events throw him farther and farther into dishonesty and greater suffering? What contradictory motives work within him? Will recognizing these through knowledge and counseling help him choose a path that he wants? What kind of obstacles will these contradictory motives present? Is there someone who will stand by him through this process and help him? A wife? A friend? Or is there someone's love that he is reaching for that motivates him to change?

Quick Cues To Character Motivation

Here are some quick cues to character motivation: Love binds people together and makes them want to help each other, and gives some incentive to change - gets them through the tough times - but it doesn't change most people directly. Talking about things brings head knowledge which may help, but it won't change anyone who has deeper reasons for his behavior. Counseling is great for people who are trying to change. But if they don't want to change, all the counselors in the world can't make them.

Get down to the nitty-gritty. Make the character suffer, or make him go after something so positive he can't escape it so he has to change, or give him the steely determination to go after those positive things he wants, or force him to do something so he has to change, or neutralize him by putting him into a different environment so he can change. Or find the valid exception. Even those characters who believe they are rational and think things through, are often blind to their own needs.

The person who marries someone, thinking they are going to change them, is naive. The boss who hires someone and thinks he can make him change is fooling only himself. The teacher who thinks he can motivate students to learn will probably experience a lot of frustration. The social worker who

thinks she can change people for the better may become very disillusioned. The Peace Corps worker who thinks he can change culture to eliminate ignorant and counterproductive behavior is often destined to failure. The parent who thinks he can make his child a success may be very disappointed.

In general we don't have the power to change or even motivate other people. Yet many people are successful working with people. Why? Is it because of the force of their personality? Charisma? Some mysterious power? Not usually. They motivate subtly, indirectly, by encouraging, advising, (helping someone define reasons) and prompting - especially if they are respected. Most often it's because they are able to see the obstacles that stand in people's way, and help them find ways to overcome them so they can move in positive directions. By interesting coincidence, this is what movies are often about. Seeing the goal a character needs to reach and seeing the obstacles that stand in the way.

Quitting smoking is a good example. Why does a person stick a foul smelling weed into his mouth, set it on fire, inhale irritating smoke, put up with watery eyes, a cough, nicotine addiction, burned spots, ill health and the threat of cancer? (Some find it calming.) A strong clue is in this fact: most children who smoke have parents who smoke. Beyond that, during teen years, many kids begin smoking like their peers. (I think peer influence is currently the larger influence.) People identify with others who smoke, and they duplicate the behavior. Their personal identity is symbolized by smoking. When you talk to them about quitting, you are talking about terminating who they are - changing their identity.

Look at advertising for smoking: the macho man sitting on a horse puffing away (that actor died of cancer), the independent free thinking woman, the cool animal personification (Turkish tobacco smells like burning camel dung - I even hated it when I smoked), young adults having fun, couples enjoying each other with sexual overtones. Advertising companies know what smoking is about - identification - the same thing most advertising is directed toward.

With that in mind, can anyone expect to stop another person from smoking? No, the behavior of smoking is a symbol of something much deeper. What has to be addressed is changing who the person identifies with. That is an enormous challenge because that involves seeing the basic needs within the individual and understanding his basic identity. Fortunately smoking often ceases to be an identification thing, becoming only a habit (relative habit strength is multiplied: number of incidents by length of time), which can more easily be cured.

Just remember that if a person's behavior doesn't match what they think, it is much easier for him to change his thinking than it is his identity. For example, if someone is part of a subculture that can't read, then illiterate is the preferred way to be even though evidence points to the contrary. This actually happens

in some remote areas of some states. Another example, to a military person accustomed to a disciplined life style and constant attention to appearance, the civilians they defend are slovenly and contemptible. You can force someone to this attitude. Put a slovenly young civilian in the military where he is forced to be disciplined, and after a few months he can't stand those slovenly civilians. Whatever a person's identity is, that's what his mind agrees is reality.

How could changing that behavior be handled in a screenplay? Create an emotional obstacle to smoking by demonstrating how foolish people look being so easily manipulated by advertisers. Cause the character to identify with a new group of people who don't smoke, and add pressure to quit. Help the character form a new identification for himself. If he sees himself as the cool, strong, James Bond always in control person, help him form an identity of coolness, being so in control that smoking is not only not necessary, it is a form of weakness; for example, The Fonz on *Happy Days*. But as you have one character form the arguments, expect the other to argue back vehemently and persuasively, because you are assaulting the idea that he is in control and threatening who he is.

Smoking is one example, but people surround themselves with symbols of their identity. What do guns mean? Strength, power, self sufficiency? The family protector? What drives that identification? A need for respect? A need for power? Identification in a community (hunters, certain religious groups, military types, ranchers). Another example, what do books mean? Identifying with an academic community? A thirst for knowledge? Driven by a need for power and control (knowledge is power)? Fear and a need to hide from action (reading vs. doing)? Curiosity? Self improvement and growth? Fear of change: student becomes career academic?

Most people have some basic motivations and some complex ones. Most will need security, love, acceptance, fulfillment. Many will extend these into greed, power, self actualization, religion or spiritual growth. Their involvement in the community and with life will influence them toward altruism, hate, misuse of power, theft, imprisonment, jealousy, fear created by war or abuse, insecurity and lack of esteem which may lead to control of others for selfish love, or to false esteem which leads to abusive control of others.

In time, people's bad traits often get more aberrant and twisted, driving them into complexes that support their way of life. For example, the oppressed person, frustrated because he can't control his life, but who can't confront his oppressor, begins undermining his oppressor's efforts. He finds this satisfying and becomes passive-aggressive so his lack of cooperation continuously thwarts his oppressor's efforts, driving the oppressor out of his mind. Another example, the person who can't stand up to another person's destructive behavior, becomes an enabler by excusing and supporting the

other's behavior. When his behavior or complex obviously flaunts reality, he either has a problem or has become neurotic.

The person is rare who doesn't have some very solid anchors. Most people have some sort of religious beliefs. They have some family and friends who are supportive. They have a job, or school, and career goals they are working toward. They have a larger society and government they can depend on and know what to expect from. The person who lacks these things is truly existential and is adrift in life, and will probably soon be shipwrecked.

OK, this is a test. Let's briefly test character motivation. Write out the major influences in the character's past. Suppose we develop a child from infancy. Her parents put her in reasonably good schools in a reasonably supportive social environment. The parents are nurturing and supportive and "give" her "good" values. They are interested in her life and active in her affairs. They educate her about drugs and the perils of life and let her make her own decisions, letting her take responsibility as she can handle it. They reinforce her for achieving and show her the results of bad behavior. Does she become:

a) A drug user who steals to support her habit, who remains an unmotivated slacker for several years, and who can't form good relationships?

b) A successful professional or skilled worker?

c) Maybe both or neither.

Is she motivated? All the things listed were external - done to her - hoping they would make an important impression. Loading her with information is like piling books on her; these things don't influence her to do anything, except to answer questions, but may influence how she does them.

But if some of the things done to her have accidentally wound her up, now what does she do? Dance around in circles like a wind-up toy until she becomes a burnout. This is similar to negative motivation, it drives a person away in any direction, whereas positive motivation pulls the person in one specific direction. Compare to pushing or pulling a rope. You can't push a rope, it goes in all directions. But pull on it and it follows along nicely. So this girl is all packed with no place to go. What does she need?

The character I described might lack at least four things. First, a sense of social concern which will give her an outward focus instead of solely inward. Being concerned with only yourself is not a psychological problem. Psychology doesn't establish rules about behavior, especially one that says everyone must have a social consciousness. Hedonism is a reflection of values (usually spiritual/intellectual). So her behavior will be for her self only - she won't be motivated to help others. In addition, one other comment about information. If the information took root, because of experience or

whatever reason, what questions does the information leave her with? Is she programmed to want more knowledge or experience of a certain type?

How can you correct this? Spiritual values may be accepted by many young people just as they are handed out by their parents and religious institution. But values are often not accepted as their own by young people. The only time they can become their values and influence their behavior is when they accept them as their own, integrated or internalized, which they won't do until they are ready (usually through value testing). At that point, all the good training and examples may make sense. But spiritual values are intellectual values. They may have an emotional component and be carried out through physical actions, experientially confirmed or reinforced, but they are intellectual. (Fortunately most young people accept spiritual values to some extent and go through a process of testing and internalizing through the years, not all at one time.)

Second, the child has no sense of purpose. Purpose gives people a direction to go in. With no purpose, any direction is fine and destructive behavior may be as good as constructive. How do you correct not having a sense of purpose? People are the product of their experiences and when one aspect of life is too far out of balance or incomplete they may not have any sense of purpose, or their sense of purpose may be misguided. Purpose often results from something at hand. Everyone has needs that can be met through doing things.

People want to be loved. To make a contribution - be found valuable to others. To be competent. To feel self-esteem. To be accepted. But when the purpose at hand is not enough, you may not be able to get a response. For example, when a young person can't stay with activities or projects so they don't build any self-esteem, and normal activities don't appeal to them so they look for easy ways to get major glory. Let the character find a way, it keeps them busy. It makes a good character - one who is always searching and never satisfied.

The third problem is the person's set point. Life is relative. All the things that the child received are "taken for granted" because these things seemingly come with life. If they are taken away, she may become hostile and doubt her self worth. Add something to her arsenal, like a husband, and things may remain much the same - this comes with life. But make her want something and earn it, and you have value and motivation - she can appreciate it. If she can't have a baby and has to go through years of struggle to get one, she will have a much greater appreciation for the child. (She'll probably spoil it rotten and it will grow up to be a druggy.)

Fourth, programming. I'm reminded of the robot character, Johnny Five who came to life in *Short Circuit* shouting, "I'm alive! Input, input!" Without knowledge, life has few directions to pursue. We respond naturally to basic values common to everyone, like love. But knowledge, which is proved valid to us by experience, gives us questions. It opens the mysteries of life to us and gives us a direction to go in to solve them.

Self-Esteem

What your character thinks of himself is a very useful tool for knowing how he will behave. It is easier to see the results of self-esteem that is too low or too high than to define it. The person whose self esteem is too low will allow himself to be used as a doormat. The one with self-esteem that is too high will allow himself to use everyone as a doormat. But what does self-esteem consist of? Nathaniel Branden (*The Six Pillars Of Self Esteem)* has investigated and written extensively on the subject, and I would recommend his books for a general treatment of the subject.

Psychologist's definitions vary considerably probably because they think in terms of healthy self-esteem and what it should consist of, then define it in terms of the theoretical construct they work within. But a writer creating characters may want to understand how people typically esteem themselves, whether it is right or wrong, good or bad. My approach is from the point of view of motivation. I regard motivation to be determined by values, often conflicting. Not value in terms of dollars, although money may be a value. But value that comes from things which have meaning to the person.

How do people value themselves, which leads to what do they value? Individual differences are probably one major reason self-esteem is so difficult to pin down, because everyone values different things.

For example, there are people whose value system is so incredibly narrow they feel related to only one thing. The soldier who can see value only in being a killing machine. All his time, energy, relationships, training, religion, etc., are devoted to fulfilling that one objective and are subordinated to it. Another example would be the corporate president who "is" the company. His earnings are reinvested in the company, he changes wives to maintain a corporate image, he moves in social circles that are beneficial to business, relates only to people he works with, and his esteem rises and falls with company profits and successes.

At this point in their lives, these two men don't personally value a winning Little League Baseball team, one or more people who will be around in thirty years to help them in retirement, a friend to go fishing with and to talk over personal problem, or the success of the church's search committee. These two men, for whatever reason, find value in only one thing.

Most of us find value in several things. A lot revolves around acceptance by others. How lovable are we? Lovable breaks down into how sexy, likable, pretty, how much affection can we get, and what are people willing to do for us (out of loving concern). How respected? Respect comes from title and position, job, knowledge attained, skills and talents, accomplishments. How competent? Competence concerns being rational - how well we use our minds, smart, creative, aware of our own motives. How capable? Capable

relates to control. Being in control of our faculties - able to give love, able to function in a work environment, or family, etc. How contributing? Everyone wants to be a part of something that matters, from raising children and supporting a family emotionally and financially, from helping build the empire and finding a cure for cancer, to writing a book on repairing screenplays.

Where does self-esteem originally come from? Are people born feeling inferior or superior? Is it genetic - a matter of body chemistry? Some people seemed predisposed to be more or less sensitive to emotional issues affecting self-esteem. Young people are great at modeling what they see around them. Their self concept dawns slowly, and if they have good models of esteem and aren't made to feel inferior or superior by parents, siblings and peers, they are more likely to have a healthy self image.

Mothers are the all-time instillers of original self-esteem. During the child's formative years, they accept the child, love it, make it feel worthy of all it receives simply by giving freely to it, and make it feel part of something, a contributor. (Then when the child reaches her teens and begins causing problems, her father steps in and lets her know what a worthless galoot she can be, heh, heh.)

Three example characters follow, which when charted will help clarify the mechanics of self-esteem: Martha was raised in a middle class environment which emphasized being intelligent and helping with the school system. Martha was successful at these things and accepted them as having value. She was also inclined toward neatness and organization and found value in those. She plays the harp, which gets her a lot of attention, so she values it. However her father abused her sexually during her teen years and that overshadows the value of everything else, causing her to believe she has no control over her body and therefore has no real value because anyone can treat her as trash and get away with it.

Ted was raised in a middle class family that spent most of its time playing sports and helping out in the community. He was no good at all at sports and saw the community as an extension of the sports world. He did well in the sciences. But his family liked him in spite of his differences, loved him, and encouraged him in school. He excelled in college and became a dentist. After four years in private practice, he had earned the respect of his peers and became a leading consultant. But he always felt drawn to community service, often tried to assist community groups and committees, but always came away frustrated and feeling less valuable because he couldn't seem to do anything for them. He could never really feel he earned the respect of the community because he thought they only valued sports. To compensate for these deficiencies, he brags and acts like he knows everything. He is known around town as a self-centered egotist because he seems to think he is better than everyone.

Jack is a moderate kind of guy who never takes anything to extremes and helps wherever he can fit in. He came from poor parents who spent all their time trying to make their small business succeed and took little interest in him. However, his teachers took an interest in him even though he wasn't that good a student, and the coach encouraged him in sports. He is usually active helping someone, and whatever he does, he does well. He tries hard for his family and usually resolves problems. A department store manager, he knows his job and does well at it.

On the following table, I'll set normal esteem at 100. Below fifty is low. Above 150 is high. As more time and energy go into any one item, its value rises.

Valued thing	Martha	Ted	Jack
Acceptance			
Love	5	20	20
Sex	5	20	20
Respect	5	50	20
Contribution			
Helping	5		30
Committees		40	
Helping school	30		
Vocation	5	90	15
Competence			
Intelligent	10	20	10
Academics	25	20	
Personal			
Neat & organized	15		
Plays harp	15		
Total	120	260	125
Negative Value			
Sexually abused	-100		
Committees		-30	
Sports		-40	

Balance   20   190   125

With these numbers and a dollar you can go have a cup of coffee and ponder the fate of the universe. The numbers are relative and have no real meaning, they are just meant to make you think. Jack, as a character, would be a "normal" person. Ask a nurse and you'll find Ted is fairly typical of many physicians. Martha has to work twice as hard as the other two just to feel halfway human. Has this made her a more productive person, or a crippled person who can't reach her full potential? I vote for crippled because she can't form normal relationships, until she can integrate her experience and get beyond it.

Sex

Two of the themes most often used for a subplot are sex and love. Most often I see them in screenplays as straightforward attraction, almost mundane, thrown in just to add spice (or pornographic titillation). Sometimes this works. Following is information which should challenge your thinking and hopefully stimulate you into creating more dimensional characters:

Sex is a biological drive that is made subservient as a physiological drive. The compulsion is more mind to genitals than genitals to mind.

On the one hand, the sexual response is anatomically independent. You can give a man a spinal block, so he doesn't feel anything, then stimulate him and evoke thrusting and ejaculation. But on the other hand, the mind can completely override normal sexual instincts and desires. The mind is the body's largest sex organ, and triggers the physical process and directs it. The mind, at both subconscious and conscious levels, decides what will stimulate it to sexual activity and what won't, and when. The mind can completely prevent a person from becoming sexually stimulated by anything for years at a time. Yet we would like to think that sexual desire can blind us into doing things we ordinarily wouldn't. It's a convenient excuse. What the mind wants, the mind gets.

The mind is in complete control. While preventing the one person from having sex for years, the mind may make another person insatiable, and another it will wake up during the night to an orgasm. The typical person can be stimulated by a wide range of stimuli, both mental and physical, which on the surface are difficult to control. It would seem the psyche has a huge appetite for sex.

The mind, when responding sexually, releases (or causes other organs to release) many chemicals, or hormones, into the body. Other experiences may also release some of these same chemicals, heightening the sexual response. Many emotions will heighten the physiological sexual response. Love, fear,

loss, pleasure, romance, pride, victory. Why does the mind want sex? Reasons vary: celebration; romantic love; power; guilt; lust/desire/sensuality; release; need for companionship, love or affection - this list is endless. Although one's sex life may be a key barometer of the health of one's relationship with a partner, people have sex for a large number of reasons.

Strange sexual practices are often shaped by mental processes. Conditioned response, like Pavlov's dog drooling at the sound of a bell because he associates it with food, can make a person associate almost anything with sex, if it has been used for stimulation or in fantasy, no matter how bizarre or distasteful to others. The "sex object" can even be something besides a person. Some people like black negligees, some like white, some pink.... Some are stimulated by nudity, some are unaffected or even put off by it. In some cultures, some body parts are always exposed and are not considered sexual. In others they are highly erotic. Some like thin ankles. Some need vibrators. Some just need to be held.

Subconscious desires often drive sexual stimulation. Subconscious desires, like a feeling of deserving punishment, or a desire to be restrained so that the person can feel he has no choice, or a need to be treated like a dependent, can push the person into acting out sexual fantasies. Things which stimulate the nervous system in other ways, such as danger and forbidden things, or fear of heights, often heighten sexual response.

If a person is sexually active, chances are he will express his problems in a sexual way. Read available literature about sexual problems and their symptoms and you will have better subject matter than just sex scenes to spice up your story.

Writers sometimes ignore the fact that for the typical person, sex is an intimate act that usually results from a relationship. Sex usually doesn't precede the relationship. When it comes before a relationship, what is it saying about your character? That acceptance, or power, or lust, or peer expectations are predominant in his life for some reason?

Love.

Love. One of those words everyone uses every day, from "loving a TV program," to "true love," but no one uses it the same. Parents love kids and each other. Siblings sometimes love each other, but usually not until they are twenty-six. We love puppies, and sometimes dogs. Everyone loves babies.... until they start crying. We fall in love and make love, and are encouraged to somehow love our enemies. We are expected to love our neighbors, but not be caught in bed with them. What does it all mean?

Many of the things we say we love, we actually like. To like something is to find it agreeable and pleasing.

Affection is fond devotion. It is probably how we feel about a new pet, or possibly a favorite flower or TV program. People in love often display their affection for each other through little favors or gentle touches.

Infatuation is a stage of love, usually preliminary. It often begins with an attraction to some feature or quality in the other person - sex, companionship, acceptance. During infatuation, the person finds the qualities of the other to be unusually pleasing and satisfying. Qualities that might irritate the life out of another person, are often glossed over. Infatuation can turn to hate overnight and those wonderful qualities irritate the life out of the lover. Infatuation is fickle.

Making love is not sex. Making love is a celebration or communion between two people which usually incorporates sex. Making love is one expression of a relationship. Good sex in a relationship is usually a reflection of the quality of the relationship, not the cause of a good relationship. Sex is not love, whether it "should" be or not. Sex is an expression of some need or emotion, which may range from lust, to power, to love. Need is not love. Needing someone for sex, for comfort, for companionship, for a maid or provider, is not love. It may lead one to love, but it is a self-oriented desire. Selfish love consumes other people if not controlled.

Compassion and sympathy and empathy are not love. These are simply feeling or understanding the emotions of other's within yourself and reacting by identifying with or sharing the feeling. (In modern day we usually say we "feel" compassion, sympathy, or empathy, as reflected in the dictionary definitions. Various words translated compassion from ancient Greek are usually coupled with the verb "have." The meaning of compassion in Biblical literature usually reflects an active quality of love called "mercy.")

The attraction that brings people together - it may be sex, infatuation, need, or love - is often selfish. But most people either strike this out of the definition of love, or define love as "mature love." Mature love is not a self-oriented emotion or motivation. Yet few of us are likely endowed with a mature love. After the infatuation wears off, most of us are in some stage of learning to love - learning not to be selfish.

Love usually has an emotional component accompanying it, and is chiefly expressed through a giving of one's self. It is primarily the willingness and desire to share another person's life, and is especially characterized by extending your efforts for another person, or even making sacrifices for them. For example, to do those things that support a spouse, to nurture a child, to send a young adult through college, to help an older parent.

Love for a spouse is usually the strongest and most intimate of these loves, and the most enduring. But in today's world, sex is bartered for love in extramarital relationships, families are split apart by conflicting needs, and love for spouse has statistically become the least enduring form of love. We

are, it seems, confused and selfish people. In my screenplay Cult of Superstition, I cite some enlightening facts about cheating in marriage. Most men who cheat and break up with their wives don't end up with the other woman, who supposedly broke up the marriage. Less than 55% do. The remainder either divorce and find another mate, or they go back to their wife. When they are cheating, they think the other woman is the answer to their problems. But all the cheating is doing is masking the real problem - which is usually dissatisfaction with some part of their life, for which they are erroneously blaming their wives.

Loving your neighbor, the stranger, your enemy, doesn't necessarily have affection attached. This love often begins from a teaching of what should be, and is experientially gained. It sometimes begins by forcing yourself to do what is right, simply because you think you should. If the love is genuine and not forced, there is a feeling of concern and responsibility toward others, and a willingness to act, that leads to doing the right thing for them. For example, helping with other's physical or educational needs. About enemies, I'm not sure if choking the life force out of someone who desperately needs it is the right thing, but sometimes I would like it to be. On the other hand, enemies and people who go through difficult experiences together often become the strongest of friends. Love blossoms from kindness. Often just the actions of taking care of others creates an emotional bond, which leads to more acts of kindness.

Few people will agree on a definition for love. But one thing people do agree on is that people get married for a variety of reasons, and love and family are just two of them. My personal opinion is, you shouldn't get married then enslave someone into a role they don't want, as in cook, maid, sole provider, mechanic, baby sitter, sexual outlet/object. People shouldn't suffocate each other as if they were positive and negative coming together to neutralize each other, or consume each other, or fulfill each other, as if being together was all they were meant to be. I believe people come together in marriage to help each other become what each can become, both individually and synergistically, and to share in all the rewards of togetherness.

Developing Characters using motivation

Following is a character profile from my screenplay, *Priest Of Sales*, which was developed using principles of motivation.

Gina Characterization, from *Priest Of Sales*

Gina's Father was a commercial artist. After a faltering career and a long period of no sales, he shot himself while she was away in college. He was a very outgoing person, very open, often very cheerful, loving, but at times coldly calculating. He was irreligious, often mocking organized religion, but

had a personal faith that endured. He gave Gina a love of art and graphic images, a fear that the world has no place for you, and hinted at a faith that transcended organized religion.

Gina's Mother teaches school three states away. She started teaching elementary school English and Geography, and now teaches High School French. She forced Gina to attend a Methodist Church, and contrary to the Pastor's wishes, made her attend a Catholic school, because it was the only private school in their small town. Because she taught in public schools and saw their problems, she had little faith them. The Pastor carped about the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church continuously invited her to join them and taught at odds to the Methodists. Gina's mother gave her a giant question mark about organized religion and a sense it is there to be used.

Gina found the nun's idea of decorum was not to her liking. It was difficult for her to restrain her enthusiasm. So whenever they made her do this or that, like sit down, she was standing up on the inside. This was seen as rebelliousness and they soon made a concerted effort to squash that. Yet one old Nun in her seventies found in her a kindred spirit and taught her how to control herself without suppressing her enthusiasm. This Nun became her close friend, but died when Gina was seventeen.

Gina frequently lived in isolation as a child. She "helped" her father draw pictures and drew her own of imaginary friends. She often played with imaginary friends.

As a youth, she found the churches and schools inviting places because they were a source of friendship, but also loved to spend hours alone reading and learning. She grew to need few close friends. Her father's art, her solitude, her imaginary friends, and her reading were inspirations to her imagination. She developed an active intellectual life.

During adolescence she began to have ecstatic experiences and go into a trance-like state. The family physician examined her for epilepsy or other problems, found none, and labeled her a hysteric - a label she deeply hated. Her Pastor labeled her excitable and harmless, but good for pumping up the others in the youth group because she was always excited and enthusiastic. She never said anything negative and wouldn't let anyone else grumble or complain.

She continued much this way until she was in her last year of high school. At that time, two girls she knew were labeled homosexuals by her congregation and people began to treat them differently. Feeling sorry for them, she became more friendly with them, and found she was labeled a homosexual also, including by her boyfriend. At that point she grew disgusted with the church and dropped her boyfriend.

Entering college, she had her eyes wide open - even a little chip on her shoulder regarding the church. But she soon found the campus community

churches more accepting. She was getting active with them until she heard a visiting anthropologist speak. He listed the exploits of the church over the last 2000 years from a not so sympathetic point of view. This poisoned her. Later she took courses in religious history and found the anthropologist's view confirmed.

Gina's experience with men had not been good. She bonded well with her father, but this trust was shaken by his suicide. She dropped her high school boyfriend because she was ashamed of his attitudes and treatment of her. In college she dated, slept with two guys who were crazy for her until they suddenly found someone else. This all left her distrusting of men, who seem to be there, then disappear without warning.

Now like a woman washed overboard at sea, her place in the world left in doubt by her father's suicide, her faith in the organized church shaken by the historical record and the current attitudes, she latched onto Beau Monde Enterprises like it was her only hope. She worked exceptionally hard and quickly moved to National Sales Manager. She hid from the fact that no one works at Beau Monde much past thirty. But it found its way into her dreams at night.

In Beau Monde Enterprises, she buried herself in her work. But as she matured and her sexual desire increased, having no confidence in men, she found herself taking partners in relationships that were open-ended. No commitment. After a relationship with a fellow manager, which was so steamy it rocked the organization, the relationship ended in outright war and with his being fired. Beau Monde published a policy of no intimate contact allowed between employees or customers. Gina decided to transform her sexual energy into other areas.

Gina is an exceptional motivater. She can not only get people up temporarily with her excitement and enthusiasm, she is a good people person with quick insight into their motives and obstacles.

Although Gina shuns organized religion, she has an active spiritual life. She does prayerful meditation and tries to keep herself morally as pure as possible without becoming inhuman. She is satisfied with herself and makes no claim to being acceptable to others. Her ecstatic trances come and go in long cycles. She has never been able to find any real use for them, but they are fun. She sometimes sees visions while in trance, but doesn't know what they mean.

Margo, the company physician, is a friend to Gina. She believes Gina's endorphin levels are exceptionally high. When they are too high, they can block the brain's ability to regulate the hippocampus region of the brain, the seat of emotion, which runs away with itself, and excites the amygdala, which regulates emotion. Thus she gets overexcited and goes into a trance. But Margo believes her brain is normal - everyone has the capacity to release

large quantities of endorphins during pain, runner's high, excitement, emotion, etc. It is Gina's mind that is different. She has an inner joy and excitement others don't have. Others have restricted themselves for one reason or another. Gina hates the very idea of being restricted.

In the following example, the character is formed from scratch for this book.

I need a banker, one with a lot of immaturity, who misuses his position. I'll name him Ray. Ray was born in the town he now works in, so there is a lot of "unfinished business" in Ray's relationships - a lot of people with whom he now has business relationships and grudges from his past.

Ray was raised in a rather genteel family. His father was a banker, his mother very active in a society church. Image was always very important - propriety a very distinguishing virtue. He was never physically active - no sports. The rougher kids didn't much care for him. They either left him alone or gave him a rough time. There were only two other boys his age who were enough like him to associate with. There soon developed an "us against them" mentality, the three against the world. Their interests became the only correct values.

Ray felt powerless. He was a member of a community of three, and they could get very little done by themselves. If they wanted to do anything, they had to participate with the larger community of boys. When they did that, they got picked on. If they didn't fight back, they were called cowards and mocked. They weren't supposed to fight back, but if they did they were soundly trounced and at home they were chastised. Either way they were made to feel small.

Ray listened closely to his father's disclosures to his mother at home about the banking business. He soon learned that money was power. His father made people, he broke them, he built tall buildings. Whatever happened in town, his father had a part in. Ray liked that. Money was power. With money, he could not only control his own destiny, he could control others. So Ray became a banker. Things were going well until he met Norma. Norma he couldn't buy. Norma he couldn't control. But he wanted to in the most desperate way.

What symbols does Ray surround himself with? He wants power, wants control over others, wants revenge. Money and banking are the first symbols. In his home he has a genuine Chinese abacus and a collection of old calculating machines. A small library on banking, debt collection, assertiveness, and power business techniques. He serves on several committees: church staffing, hospital expansion and financing, the Chamber of Commerce Committee on attracting new businesses, and the Mayor's

committee on recreation projects. All of the committees have an appealing element of power and control over others. Whether he affects any of the citizens or not, just exercising power over them gives him a sense of satisfaction.

Ray wears a power tie, drives a power car, plays golf with the power people. He is married to a woman who fits the image very nicely. Ray wanted her hand the first time he met her. She was glamorous, sophisticated, and shared his background and interests. Marrying her was like marrying himself. But their relationship became lukewarm.

Norma was as different from Ray's wife as she could get. Hated sophistication. Called a pig a pig, even if it went to the right church. Had no use for power, and had little use for money. Thought committees were foolish. She went to Ray's bank and asked for a loan. The loan officer was out, so Ray took the application. When he told her she would have to make payments on time, she just waved good-bye and left. Returned the next day and asked if the bank was still interested in making her a loan - on her terms, she couldn't always pay on time. Wild, unmanageable - there was no way Ray could get power over this woman. He went on in the next months to offer her everything, hoping to find some way to buy her, but she wasn't for sale. By then she had become an obsession - he would risk anything to have her, control her. She symbolized the limit of his power, something he couldn't stand.

So there is Ray, plus his counter character, plus a conflict, and a germ of a story, all growing out of developing one character by paying attention to motivation.

Excursus Three: The Human Condition

What can I tell you about the human condition that you don't already know - or aren't already thoroughly confused about? You can become lost forever trying to unravel all the competing paradigms about human psychology, or more specifically human behavior. We probably need different paradigms at different times, so regardless of what any authority posits as "the" paradigm of life, none can ever be fully true. Having a way of understanding the world around us is one of the fundamental things we all need, and each of us usually has some kind of paradigm. Undoubtedly a lot of the fun in life is coming to a new understanding of things - discovering that some piece of experiential knowledge that life has hammered into your soul now illuminates a new part of life's puzzle.

Rather than try to be an authority and force psychological frameworks on people, I'll just say that the following self composed paradigm, distilled from many hours of observation and experience, is the one I currently use, and it is unbiased (or untainted) by the horde of psychological theories. It also isn't all that different from any of the others. It may save you countless hours in creating a difficult character - that is trying to figure out how a difficult character would act, and why.

Mind, body, spirit

In studies of twins, especially those separated at birth, some remarkable similarities surface. Twins may like the same styles of clothes and same types of stories, despite never having met each other. Twins raised together often sense when the other is facing danger. How much of that is derived from physical similarities? Or is it a psychic - mental or spiritual - connection?

Most people (somewhere over 90%) believe in the spiritual aspect of life. But we are challenged by reality. We know that electrically stimulating certain areas of the brain will cause a near death type of experience where the person enters a long tunnel and sees angels or people from his past. What they see seems to be determined by their religion. But does locating something in the brain mean it's just a biological function? No, demonstrating the experience by stimulation doesn't disprove it any more than inducing a near death experience by drowning and reviving someone would.

But how can you use this in a story? If you hint in a story at a character's personal beliefs, you are on safe ground. But going farther and saying, "God

said do this or that," or making answers to problems fall from the heavens as if sent by God, and you immediately cross the line into the untenable - people instinctively know that the line between physical reality and spirituality is a matter of personal beliefs which vary from person to person. That isn't a line you can safely cross. Yet the spiritual is a major part of the guidance system of every person's behavior. One person would fight in a war and would pull the switch on a convicted murderer. The next person will campaign against both. Why? How do you get a handle on it, and how do you use it in a story?

The mind, which is closely associated with the brain, is not something that we thoroughly understand. We don't know exactly what all the biological influences are and how strongly they interact. We do have clues. We know that drug induced states and drug dependencies can overcome judgment and turn a person with admirable behavior into someone who will commit violent crimes to support the habit.

We know that sex is a biological desire that can be completely subjugated by the desires of the mind, creating someone who rapes or takes advantage of sexuality for his own gain (power, money, etc.).

We don't understand how memory works. But we see clues when electrical stimulus to the brain causes memories to replay. Yet memories seem to stored in many different areas of the brain. Injuring one part of the brain may not destroy the entire memory. Compare this "virtual" memory to a hologram. The images of an object required to create a hologram can be stored on two pieces of film. The object bears no resemblance to the image. But when two lasers transmit the two images at a central point, the image magically reappears hanging in space before you. What happens if you tear up three fourths of both images? The hologram can still appear, but without the detail. Is the memory a virtual reality created from many disparate parts, including a spiritual part?

We often think of the mind as something that captures events and information, and under the right conditions the person can exactly recall all of it. Yet the mind registers the unusual things, not the other stuff. Does the mind have "stock" images and sensations that form the background of memories and recall, and only registers the new and unusual?

We also see clues to memory in the mind's ability to hide from memories that are too unpleasant. We see in every person the ability to avoid dealing with realities that we are not ready to deal with. And when reality forces a person to deal with it in some way, the person's coping behavior can become a

neurosis. How do you get a firm enough handle on your character's mind to use it successfully in stories?

These areas are not simple areas, but here are some constructs, followed by how to use them:

The brain is the device that communicates with the body and with world. The brain processes and stores information, like memories. It is the link with the physical world. The brain's only real motivations are security (protection) and operating the body. For example, many physical skills or operations can be relegated to the brain. Jump in the car after work, put your brain on auto-pilot, and "the car finds its way home" while you think about your new assignment at work and listen to music. The autonomic nervous system and lower portions of the brain have learned the route and do all the right things, including reacting to potential accident situations if the brain has had enough experience or training. But if you wanted to stop off at the corner market and pick up milk on the way home, chances are good that it won't happen if you're on auto-pilot. Yet many people can delegate large lists of things to this part of the brain and do things with very little thought.

The spiritual is, at minimum, a land of ideas. Ideas about what has value to the person, and what values in this world are better. For an example of a personal value, is it better to write horror stories about trips to the dentist, or to write stories that help others understand painless dentistry, or is it better to design buildings? For an example of moral values, is it better to rape, pillage, and plunder an enemies nation, or is it better to help a conquered enemy rebuild his world? These are ideas which compete for the mind's attention.

Without the brain, the mind has no place to reside and work. The mind has no connection with the physical part of life, and is unable to carry out actions that result from ideas and desires. The mind, or psyche, is where the spiritual land of ideas interacts with the physical world to prove or disprove the conflicting world of ideas and desires. Motivation deals primarily with the mind.

The mind is a person's awareness. The mind is where competing ideas and desires collide and decisions are made. "I really hate that person for stealing my money and my wife, and I would really like revenge. Should I poison his soup?" On the edge of awareness, and always slightly illuminated, is the spiritual idea - "don't kill!" Anger creates a physical desire to act, and the loss of love powerfully motivates. The man steals the other's car and wrecks it, to get back at him. The judge decides a ten year prison term will increase

the authority and position in the person's mind of the laws sufficiently to prevent him from doing it again, or possibly killing the next time. The judge may be right. He may be wrong. Spiritual ideas, like don't steal and don't kill, are only external until the person integrates them through experience. The next time he faces the same situation, revenge may still have more value to him than a prison sentence.

Think of awareness as a flashlight illuminating a portion of a room. The floor is covered with basic desires. The walls are covered with memories. The furniture makes up the current situation and the current desire or motivation. The ceiling is covered with ideas which float around. Some ideas carry the weight of authority behind them, and some memories carry the weight of experience and are anchored to memories on the walls. The strength of the competition illuminates the beam weakly or intensely.

Only a portion of the room can be illuminated at one time, but the person can adjust the beam to display any part he wants of the floor, wall, and ceiling. But weighted ideas remain illuminated. It's the person's choice whether to emphasize the floor or the ceiling - but no matter how the beam is adjusted or shifted, both the floor and ceiling remain partially illuminated - it's a matter of focus.

Another form of focus takes place within the illuminated area of the psyche. A concept of self takes shape. Memories and experience and wants and desires link into a system which gains critical mass with an inertia all its own that says, "this is what I am." For most practical purposes this person is a new creation, able to experience the world without the hindrance of previous memories and experiences. Beyond that we can only speculate. Beyond that is a matter of faith and belief.

Do people actually think and make decisions, or does the strongest competing desire flood awareness with its presence and make the person act? Perhaps for some judgment is mechanical, and for some it is more considered - weighed. For some there does not appear to be any defining element in their awareness and whatever desire is greatest wins the competition. The illusion of free will is, "I'm doing what I want - following my own desires," yet they are victims of their own desires.

For others, centered in their awareness, in their concept of self, is a fundamental question: "what kind of a person am I becoming?" It is primarily a question of direction. As they make choices in the desired direction, their resulting memories and experience anchor the idea of what

they are and what they are becoming more and more firmly. The sense of self becomes greater. The person is able to experience feelings not just selfishly, as in what has value only to him and those he has a selfish interest in, but in the happenings in the lives of all others. These people not only understand the consequences of their behavior, they have feelings about those consequences. They can understand the impact of an idea and of their actions in other's lives. No longer motivated simply by the strength of their own desires, they can weigh one idea and a corresponding course of action against another, and accept responsibility for their actions. The sense expands to one of themselves as individuals with greater and greater freedom of choice. Choices even to seek and explore, and to set new directions. Choices to become ever more responsible for their own destiny. These people have true freedom of choice. As for me, I know I have graduated beyond the single-cell, stimulus-response amoebae. Yes, I'm now like the hundred legged worm with a brain the size of a pin point, fascinated with the ability to keep all 100 legs in synch. Now if I could just master chewing at the same time. Step, step, chew, step, step, trip.

Memories are brought back into mental (the brain's) awareness as the mind returns focus (illumination) to the area in which a memory resides. I suspect that memories that support what is important to us - support an idea or desire by an experience they relate - are more easily brought back into focus than the trivia that makes up much of our lives. Details are more likely kept as concepts of what happened, unlike motion pictures that have total detail.

Uncomfortable memories are rarely brought into focus, so never require action from us even though they may have great strength. We often develop strategies that assist us in not recognizing uncomfortable memories - coping behaviors - that divert us from bringing the memory into focus - even though we know it is there. We just don't think about certain things. To some extent we all do this. We don't think about religion, or politics, or not finishing school - it creates too much dissonance. When the trauma being ignored is very great, and the coping behaviors are an obstruction to dealing with everyday reality, we have developed a neurosis.

The center of the individual - basic motivation

Why does that fundamental question - "what kind of person am I becoming?" - ever get raised? This leads into the second construct - behaviors that result from central feelings and choices of what is valued.

Why is each individual so different than others? Why does one person decide to become a stock analyst, while his brother becomes a doctor, and their sister becomes an auto mechanic?   Why does one fail miserably in marriage and another remain successfully married until death? Why does one choose to help the underprivileged and another have nothing but contempt for them? Especially if they are raised in very similar backgrounds, exposed to very similar ethics. The choices we make are influenced by the central needs each of us has. The needs are well known and common to everyone, but find an infinite variety of expression.

We all need to feel we are part of something, that we contribute, that we are competent, that we are loved, that we are respected. These are all feelings of social acceptance - that is, of feeling a part of the whole.

Where do these needs originate? Can we blame them on habits? Learned responses? Instincts? Acquired needs? We can't be sure, but in studies with monkeys who are deprived of "love," baby monkeys who are deprived don't fare as well as other monkeys, and can even die. We label physical contact with others and being cared for, "love." I'm not sure that's the right label (and I'm not saying anything negative about love) - but social acceptance and contact do seem to be fundamental needs that have no more definable cause (or reducible source). Yet these same qualities also seem to be fundamentally lacking in some individuals. The antisocial person seems to have these needs missing or covered up. The sociopath, who has no regard for the feelings of others and can hurt them without feelings of remorse, seems to highly value money. He is motivated by money, but not by feelings or any enterprise most people believe is worthwhile.

I think that central to each of us is a central motivation - the desire to find meaning (or value or a positive experience) in a social context. This ignores the physical needs for food, shelter, and sex - things which have to do with the brain, not the mind. This central desire doesn't mean that everyone is an extrovert or only does social things - many people are uncomfortable with, or don't feel the need, to do things regarded as "social." I think these things are evident in our desire to be accepted, loved, to contribute, and to be competent. For most people what is meaningful in life is defined by those around us, family, peers, religious groups, academic groups, the nation, etc. These groups define the ideas that we live, debate, and prove or disprove - those moral and spiritual ideas that both define our limits, and which we are in process of testing, both to prove experientially to ourselves and to prove in an absolute sense.

For example, the rule of law was tested and proved valuable, but for many has been replaced by a higher scheme, the application of love. Those who love certainly would not violate the principles of the law, but they aspire to a more productive type of conduct. The law is basic - a place to begin - "do not do…" but love brings better results than law, and tempers some of the rough edges of the law - "do this." Mankind has proven this through experience. Individuals continue to prove this to themselves, learning it.

As a person seeks meaning in a social context, the things that are valuable to other people become the things that are valuable to him. He sees what he is competent at, what has meaning, where he can make a contribution, and this becomes what has great value to him. I have read some authors who think this is the key to every individual's destiny - the environment. But I think that much farther reaching than the general environment are the events in a person's life, and how the person perceives those events. We can know the general influences. In biographies and autobiographies, we can read about specific events.

What we can create, for characters, is the specific influences that motivate people. Why does a president's son turn away from his father's profession? It has all the right qualifications. Perhaps he saw the sacrifice his family made and decided it wasn't worth it, or didn't feel he could ever be competent to the task. Or, perhaps God put a different desire in him. Or, perhaps he was born with previous experience that mandated he live a life with different objectives. We can't really know, but for our audience we can create a believable version.

What characters would try to do things that have no value in a society? If they do, then they may be eccentric geniuses, or they may be ostracized from their society, or they may be trying to prove their uniqueness - their individuation. There is motivation here that requires development. What we can gain from this is that most characters would be basically like the background they came from. That much of character development is a given. What you have to develop about a character is the unique motivations. For example, at twelve Johnny is at a crucial stage in his life (wants to prove his uniqueness in a way others can appreciate), and Johnny tells his father that all his friends are doing all kinds of exciting things. They aren't, but what Johnny is really saying is that he doesn't feel "special," not comfortable with his friends - not accepted, not making a contribution, not competent, not having value to others. He watches an air show and he and his friends are so impressed that he begins to do everything with his life to go in the direction

of flight school and becoming a test pilot. Later it is him flying the plane in some dire situation.

Another example, Bill and his friends do not believe in ghosts, but a very close friend of Bill has a unique experience with ghosts, and Bill later has a very brief experience that causes him to doubt. Bill can either become a fool in front of his friends, or deny these experiences.

Another example, "Your attitude is your life." How people perceive things determines what they are gaining from an experience at the moment. The person who feels, "It's a jungle out there," may act suspicious of everyone, treat others calously, and may even carry a weapon. Whether the perception is true or not is irrelevant - the perception still results in an attitude that has major impact on the person's life.

Something else we can understand from knowing how people operate, is that the audience will only understand motivation that has social meaning. They must be able to relate to it. They can relate to an action movie in which mercenaries defend a village or an unknown nation, even if they aren't waving a national flag. They have trouble relating to games with strange objectives played by characters on another planet in a science fiction movie. They have trouble relating to groups that have an entirely different value system than their own. So these things would require elaborate setup and explanation. It's difficult to write movies, or characters, that differ from what we think of as normal. The normal way of life is called *the human condition*. Revealing the human condition is what producers look for. The human condition is what movies are about.

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How To Use Motivation To Form Characters And Plot

Often you have several little ideas in your head, but no story. In this section, I'll walk you through, step by step, the process of creating characters and a workable plot. Let's say for example that you have been toying around with a story about the shady dealings of Ralph Fergmeister because right now a character who is a little shady but good hearted appeals to you. You're not sure yet what your concept is or who your other characters are. Maybe he's the main character, maybe not. But your gut feeling is, he's not going to be the bad guy in the end.

You've also been thinking about rock groups and the local civic auditorium, and all the money these guys make for a performance. Possible setting. Still no clue what your story is about.

You start thinking about all the people and things that go into these performances. There are ticket sales people, janitors, sales people, advertisers, promoters, groupies who follow the groups (groupies: sexual excitement, directionless people obsessed with glamour, very interesting possibility).

So you take a closer look at groupies. What would make a person abandon her life to trek across the nation following some band member who could care less about her? What kind of morals does she have that she will let herself be used in this way? Or use someone else in this way?

What do you think about their behavior? Immoral? Obsessive? A summer of fun that they can remember the rest of their life? Let's say this thing is going to be about obsession. But what about it? Tentative concept (it may change): Obsession brings a woman to ruin. OK, we have some characters who appeal to us, so we need to develop them and see what happens.

Ralph: Ralph is twenty six. He was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and his father was a record promoter. Ralph didn't like the country scene, but he does like rock - partly because he didn't like his father. Ralph's father was never honest with him. He lied to every client to get business and he lied to his mother and he lied to Ralph. Ralph hates lies, and vows never to tell one, but Ralph misleads people in other ways. He holds out the carrot but never delivers. He leads people on, but never fulfills the promise. He does exactly

what his father did because he never learned any better way of doing it. He never had the role model to help him learn.

So Ralph is a showy person and a big talker. He can talk people into anything. He has talked his way into being the booking agent and promoter at the civic auditorium. Ralph has had a lot of experience. He has had a lot of jobs. When the job starts to fall apart, Ralph blames it on things beyond his control and moves on. So he moves faster than his mistakes. This time, Ralph has seen a local group he likes, Trash, and he is going to promote them and help them become famous. He is going to rub his father's face in his success by taking the group to Nashville and recording on the label his father promotes.

Ralph can be religious with the best of them. His background is Southern Baptist. He knows about morals and being disciplined. About every three months he gets an attack of religion and does his best to clean up his act. For a whole week he drives everyone around him nuts, then it fades. He gets back to the business of rock, which he thinks is about sex and rebellion. Ralph justifies it because the sex part is all fantasy and is up to the individual just how they interpret the lyrics and how far they go with it. Rebellion - that's just youth - everyone has to do it. OK, we have a shady character in a setting where he can be as shady as he wants and has the position to cause all kinds of trouble.

A major group, Tor, comes through town on a tour, complete with an entourage of groupies. One of the groupies, a nineteen-year-old nicknamed Stix - "Just Stix, thank-you" - is found by a cleanup man where she was sleeping under the stage, actually collapsed where she had passed out. Ralph is walking through the auditorium and sees she is distraught, argumentative, but very weak. The group and her ride have left town. He takes her to breakfast, then to a local doctor who tells her to take it easy for a month. He tells her to go home - she says, "No way." She has very little money. Ralph lets her crash at his place until he can help her figure out what to do.

Stix: OK, you like this character and her situation. So making a profile is warranted. Stix's mother would do anything for security. After her husband divorced her, leaving her destitute, she threw herself at every man who would have her, making Stix a bystander. After several live-in lovers and relationships that ended in disaster, she married the first man who would have her. That man didn't happen to have room in his life for kids - especially some other man's kids. He squeezed in and squeezed Stix out. Anytime Stix was around, she was made to feel unwelcome. As Stix pushed harder for acceptance and a place in the family, he only pushed back harder. Conflict turned into battles. Battles became a never ending war. The man only had enough love for one person, and her mother could not leave him. In the area where Stix lived, an upper middle class area, step families were typical of eighty percent of the families. Everyone had problems. Stix could see what

her mother had done for security and vowed never to let it happen to her. She went on the road having fun.

What about the normal things that anchor people? Family, religion, love, education, the pursuit of a career? Obviously family and love were at a deficit. Education? No one cared if she studied or not, and Stix was really a people person, not an academic person. At nineteen she would have still been a Junior in High School, but she dropped out at seventeen. She had no educational or career goals. Religion? It was never an issue in her home, although her mother claimed to be Catholic. A cross hung on her mother's living room wall, and a dusty Bible kept its symbolic place on the fireplace mantel next to the picture albums that never grew in size.

What would save this person? Certainly not a lecture on the need for people to have stable secure lives - she had already seen the result of making that the focus of your life and has a strong emotional rejection of it. Love? Would she really trust anyone after seeing a long string of her mother's lovers reject her? She is hungry enough for love to chase after a rock group and prostitute herself for affection from the most admired (to her) people around. But she would undoubtedly test the limits of anyone who tried to really love her, and would probably end up losing them.

Counseling? Might help her add some real direction to her life - although it's doubtful she can select a direction at this point - but this probably isn't going to happen in this situation. How about if she has to save someone? At the moment, Ralph is saving her. But what if she suddenly sees that Ralph is headed for disaster. She hears Ralph say he want to get Tor to let the rock group Trash open for them. By traveling with the rock group, Tor, she knows some dangers that Ralph is going to lead this group into. He will be defeated once again, and the rock group, Trash, will be ruined in the business. Now she will save herself by saving Ralph and the rock group.

What about our tentative concept: obsession brings a woman to ruin? No. After drawing the character, Stix, we see that she is a much deeper person, as we all are, who probably won't come to ruin if she is given half a chance. So for a concept, try: saving someone else she saves herself? Probably a good concept.

Now, suppose you begin writing the story, work with the characters some, introducing them, get Stix to Ralph's apartment. You have a feel for them and how they act. It's time to develop the plot. Ralph wants to make this local group, Trash, the opening act for the group, Tor. But Stix learns that Trash's lead guitarist has a jealous wife who won't put up with him traveling. So as soon as they go on the road, there is going to be trouble, and the strain may pull the group apart.

Even worse, she knows Tor has a destructive bent. She knows this because when other rock groups open for Tor, they badmouth the other bands,

especially if they appear to be better than they are, and this local band, Trash, has more raw talent. As soon as Trash performs better on stage than Tor, the battle will begin and their reputations will get ruined, as well as their chances of ever making it big. But neither Trash nor Ralph can see it. They dismiss Stix as a vengeful over-reactor and think they can handle things. How does Stix react to this rejection? Does she cave in or leave? No, she has become toughened by years of rejection. It hurts, it does nothing positive for her, but it doesn't drive her over the edge.

A benefit is being organized in town. Stix uses her connections to get Tor's lead vocalist to do the benefit, and gets Trash on just prior to them. At the rehearsal, the name band leader makes them rearrange the schedule so they don't follow each other on stage. Ralph sees Stix is right about the Tor group's jealousy. Stix is seen in a new light. But the conflict has actually brought Stix and Ralph closer together. Not marrying close, but has shown them that they can work together. Wait, we haven't shown that - we only know that now Ralph trusts Stix's judgment. We need to show that Stix can trust Ralph, even though he is a shady character.

In Stix's eyes, Ralph's motives for allowing her to stay with him are unclear. So to begin with, this is made more clear by the fact that he likes her - some scenes have to make that obvious - but he never takes advantage of her. After all, he already has relationships that bring him fun, affection, sex. What if he refuses to go out so he can be with Stix? He never lets Stix know that is what he is doing, but Stix hears about it without his knowledge. Does this make Stix trust? She is pleased, but unsure of him. Stix also hears him lead other people on, so there is an obstacle to her trusting him.

What if Stix throws herself at him? Sooner or later that is bound to happen. Not for love, but for quasi-love - affection, acceptance, sex, fun, a partial relationship - something bordering love. What would happen? Ralph, liking Stix, but determined not to take unfair advantage of the situation and act like a Cretan, refuses her. Now she is really confused. Ralph seems to really like her, but he refuses her. Is this another step toward a deepening crisis? How deep are Ralph's motives? How determined is he to not touch Stix?

What if Ralph's opinion, stated in the early scenes, is that "These wild groups are sick people who don't know their limits and have the money to get away with murder with no regard for the people they hurt or the damage they do." Someone's counterpoint to this - to make the situation real - is that, "They wouldn't attract an audience if they didn't. Youth is about growing up, and these groups are unbridled youth." Now, if Ralph is honest with himself, he won't touch her. So, is Ralph a person who is honest with himself? Yes, he thinks of himself as an honest person even if he doesn't know how to be honest with others.

We need one more trust situation (three) to make an effective plot. Stix has been working on Ralph about being really honest with people and not

offering them more than he can deliver. At the climax, in some as yet to be determined scene, she sees her influence on him as he changes and tells some group what he can really do for them. That scene will come later as we work the characters and plot through. It has to be very intense and climax both storylines - his and hers.

As you work the story through, or even do the first writing, many scenes will unravel problems which will remain open. Many things will occur to you that need explored. From these things will come more scenes which lead to the climax.

This is the point to stop and ask yourself some serious questions. Knowing the concept will help keep the story focused as you write. The concept is: "A lost young woman saves a man from himself and in the process saves herself." Everything that is written in the story has to be in sync with the concept. If you veer off into another storyline, for example following the outcome of the local band, you will ruin the story unless you can somehow tie the meaning of its success to your main plot and concept. Side stories, with few exceptions, should be subplots which help develop the main plot.

Second, is the character believable in the part? Stix, by being a groupie, may come off as an airhead. We're asking her to know the music world and to be able to influence rock musicians and help put together a benefit. Maybe a little much to ask. So let's redraw her a little - put just a little more age and experience on her. Her past remains the same, and she started with the group as a groupie, but became the on again, off again lover of one of the group's vocalists. She travels with them and is learning "the lights" - stage lighting.

Her lover, Tor's vocalist, is trying to lose her, takes girls on the side and rubs her nose in it, but she doesn't get the message. She's used to rejection and weathers it because she likes the image she gains from the group. When she gets mono, and collapses beneath the stage, he forces her off the tour. In a final crushing blow, he won't give her the money for an airline ticket, or a hotel - just a bus home - and the bus out isn't until late the next day. Ralph offers her a place to stay. So we have the same basic character with the same basic problem, but with enough background to handle the task. We would need to work on Ralph also.

Third, is the drama big enough? What elements do we have? Romance, a lost woman, and a man who outruns his dishonesty problem. How does romance fit? Our concept says the story is not about romance. We either throw it out, or include it in the concept. Romance is the catalyst that makes the story work, so romance becomes a subplot and we may want to add it to the concept: A lost young woman saves herself by saving a man from himself and gains true love.

These two people should create enough drama working through their problems. Let's see if they did. Stix gets rejected from the tour, she puzzles over Ralph's

feelings for her, she recommends he not get Trash involved with Tor, she throws herself at him but he dodges, she argues with him about leading people on, she brings Tor for a benefit and is proven right, and a climactic scene (which we haven't written yet). Barely enough drama for Stix, but more things will come up as the script develops.

For Ralph, he plays a part in most of what Stix does. That isn't enough. He isn't making anything happen. Is he going to try and change Stix, save her from herself? How will he react when she tells him to quit leading people on with promises that depend more on fate and talent than on what he can do? Who is he leading on? Just the local group, Trash? What if he makes promises, then finds he can't run to a new job because he likes Stix? He will have to chose one or the other: run away, or stay and take the pain, and have a chance with Stix. Now we're beginning to see the final conflict scene that we hadn't yet outlined. But is one broken promise enough to make him run? Probably not, so we need to find more reason - raise the stakes, increase the tension, create more drama.

The tension through the script right now appears fairly flat until we reach the climax. But since both characters have differences that can't be easily resolved, they have to clash. As you write, if you follow the character's natural inclinations, the clashes will naturally get more intense.

Fourth. Through the story the characters have to change. Ralph has to start out denying he has a problem. (He does - he thinks of himself as an honest person and opposite from his father. He will be insulted when Stix tells him he is misleading people about what he can do.) Incidents have to occur to rub his nose in the fact that he does have a problem so that he has to react to it. (Stix does this when she brings in the Tor lead singer and he distances himself from the local band, but more things have to occur. We can see the story needs improved here.) At the climax, there has to be a lot of tension about the problem. Ralph must be denying it at all costs. (He would rather run away than face it.) The same growth has to happen for the character Stix.

Show The Motivation

Some motivation audiences will accept at face value. A guy is in love with a girl. We understand that situation and know that people in love will tolerate a lot from each other. But if you take a businessman who is so pressed for time that he hasn't time to even see what is happening around him, and you have him suddenly decide to help a poor guy on the street, no one is going to buy that because most people won't help others on the street. That has to be shown. You have to start with a scene two years earlier when he or his brother were the person on the street and someone helped them.

Many motives are normal typical human motives that everyone has. They don't really need to be shown. Love is an example. Sentiment for a poor

orphan girl - that grabs everyone. Caring for a baby. Parents looking out for the welfare of their children. Compassion for someone who has an accident or loses his home.

As your character is changing, it is best to show the motivation. At least show the triggers - those situations to which the character responds. But some motivations are so cerebral that there is no way to show them (or if you did the entire film would be dedicated to explaining a small change). People can change because something makes sense to them, or because they react emotionally. Usually the emotional component is stronger, and creates the change. Show what is creating the emotion. But how would you show a man, who tried to commit suicide, finding a reason to live? If it is a person to live for - OK. But just wanting to live? Or losing the reasons for wanting to die - old wounds healing. Sometimes the only way to show it is to talk about it. This is best handled through an emotional exchange of words coming from a conflict situation. The worst way to show it is to have two characters sit down over coffee and chat about it.

Actor Profile: Spencer Scott,
Writers Workshop Repertoire
Independent Writer

Spencer's strong interest in acting is reflected in his high school days: attendance at the St. Louis Magnet High School for Performing Arts. A USC Political Science Graduate, he has had a variety of roles in every facet of the L.A. entertainment industry and is determined to be one of the greats.

In the reading, Spencer performed a variety of small roles, from children to a black southern policeman, bringing a comedic element to each one. Spencer is a writer's delight. Lines? He could wring humor from a fishing line. He created several unique characters and pulled so much humor from the lines, I was asking, "Who is that masked man?" as he stole the show.

SECTION II

CHOICES

As a story begins to take shape, a writer is faced with numerous choices.   What concept shapes the storyline? What genre should the story be written in: should I make this a heavy drama, or would it work better as a light comedy? How real should the sex scenes be? Can I get away without doing research? How true to life should I make the story?   Where should I start writing, with characters, situation, or plot? Should I write the story in scenes, or try writing in sequences? Informed decisions can prevent a lot of rewriting. I know, I know, you really wanted to do that rewriting.

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Choosing A Genre

Genre Is Perspective, Mood, and Style

What mood are you in today? Feeling a little mysterious, devilish, wanting to intrigue those around you? Or perhaps adventurous, just throw caution to the wind and dive into some new adventure. Or maybe rough, tough, brawling, hard driving, hard drinking - daring to ride any wild stallion. Or fun, full of life, ready to laugh. Or maudlin, crying in your beer, in the depths of despair. Or hungry for experience, ready to feel life in its broadest depths, wanting your soul to be stirred. These feelings can be translated directly into a genre.

Genres are simply the classifications of literature. The broader classification includes drama, comedy and action-adventure. These are artificial lines and all genres can overlap. Drama often has comic moments. Action-adventure often has drama and comedy, etc. These three may be pure, or may have one or more of the following genres within them: horror, fantasy, science fiction, mystery, suspense (or thriller), western, romance, spy (mystery/intrigue). For example, horror and westerns are usually drama, but could be action-adventure, or even comedy. Classifying stories by genre helps people select movies and helps them define their expectations for the movie.

The most important thing is not to confuse people. If people go to see a mystery, they will be confused by seeing fantasy. If they go to see a spy story, expecting a huge dose of international intrigue and action-adventure, they don't want to see what is primarily a love story about a woman dying of cancer. The spy can fall in love, and she can die of cancer, but it has to be a subplot and a very limited one at that.

In general, when you choose a genre you should choose the ones you like best because you will probably be more familiar with the types of stories that work well in that genre and with the rhythm of the writing. But when you want to be different, when you're in a "mood," use this as a guide.

The genre you choose - drama, comedy, action-adventure - will most likely reflect an attitude and perspective about the story you write, but not necessarily your own perspective. Any topic and any situation can be delivered in any of these formats. For example, a plane about to crash can have many aspects. It might be written as a very dramatic and insightful event that makes people dig deep within themselves. It may have a humorous side - humor in the face of impending death - that may reflect in a light way what is deep inside, before they get planted deep within the earth. Or it could

involve a lot of action-adventure: perilous circumstances and people who boldly face death together. Each one of these approaches is able to make the same points, it's just a matter of emphasis. And each genre will usually have elements of the other genres in them, it's just a matter of emphasis.

Every story, even science fiction and far-out comedy are about life. They tell us something about the human condition. In comedy we laugh at ourselves or the silly and unexpected. In science fiction we ponder the blanks in our knowledge. In horror we confront our fears. In action, we enjoy life and explore our fantasies. In drama we see various dimensions of ourselves. All stories, even if just for entertainment or escapism, talk about life - it's a matter of the attitude they are presented with. And if it entertains or informs, it affects our attitude.

Every genre has a unique set of characteristics influenced even by the medium it will appear in. For example, comedy may include many types, but for TV is largely situation comedy. The TV sitcom is not like a feature film situation comedy. Episodic TV uses the same characters every week and everything is resolved in a short time frame - a week or so for the story period, and a half-hour for the show. But feature film may develop several situations, one after another, in a comedy that covers several months or years, and you have ninety to one-hundred-twenty minutes to work with. Plus the subjects in feature film are usually bigger, and the scenes include more settings, especially outside. Following are a few tips about various genres.

Comedy: Highest Art

I used to be very serious, never smiled, thought everything had to be serious and relevant. Comedy was for the feeble minded who only ignored reality. Then I met my future wife. She called my sister a "conversation piece." I smiled, and married her. Later she told me I was twenty-eight going on eighty-two. I smiled again and liked it. She had changed me. Life doesn't have to be all serious. When people lose their sense of humor, they pick up their guns. Make them laugh, they put their guns down. Humor makes the toughest medicine a little easier to swallow. I think comedy is the highest art. It allows us to peek in our darkest corners without fear, and without picking up a gun.

Comedy has two categories which often overlap. One style leans toward farce. There is nothing important going on, except poking fun at some target. With one liners and humorous situations and maybe some slapstick, the bungling continuous uproariously to the end. The laughs often come from the special talents of character actors. Farce often contains the elements of neurotic reactions and insane situations.

Situation comedy, on the other hand, takes a serious theme and portrays it in a humorous light. Many stories, like the TV series *Mash*, use both types of

humor; and farce usually has some serious target, like the absurdities of bureaucracy.

Characterization is different for the two types of comedy. In situation comedy, the central character drives the story forward and changes during the story. He will usually be a fairly normal person in situations that are close to reality, but treated with humor. For example, Charles may be a "no account" who is compelled by his attraction to a sophisticated banker to improve himself. He's a lovable guy who is easy to identify with, even if he has no past accomplishments. So we watch him stumble all over himself trying to learn social graces and win the lady. In another comedy, Chuck may be a bungling nitwit whom others use. But he is a nice guy and in the end his goodness defeats the people who are using him, giving him the last laugh.

In a farce, character motivations are likely to be irrational, such as compulsive decisions driven by strange fetishes and eccentric tastes, or even neurotic behavior. We laugh at the unexpected, but in farce the unexpected is totally divorced from reality. For example, a character might be so frightened by water that he will only drink it through a straw from a covered cup. He lives in the desert and takes baths with sand. He takes his dates on boat cruises in the sand, paddling around in a sailboat on wheels. The lady who likes him has a clean fetish and her principal desire is to take a bath with him. The chemistry is explosive. In *The Pink Panther*, Inspector Cluseau (Peter Sellers) subjects himself to unexpected martial arts attacks which happen even when he is making love.

Audiences typically expect one type of comedy or the other, but some films successfully blend them. In the film *Three Fugitives*, Martin Short plays a man who desperately wants his daughter back, something very human and very important to him. But he gets in one zany situation after another trying to reach his goal, and little Martin is whipped around like a puppet in the hands of massive Nick Nolte. However, I think it is easier for a farce to have situation comedy elements, than for situation comedy to use farce.

The pace of comedy is usually fast, unlike drama where the viewer is allowed to dwell on lines and scenes. Comedy works when it moves crisply along, in most scenes, so events happen more frequently than in slower genres and dialogue lines are crisp (short and focused). But comedy can be just as revealing about the human condition as drama, if meanings are more obvious.

Romantic Comedy: Always Good

A comedy division that is a genre of its own is romantic comedy. This is comedy that is primarily about the relationship between men and women. Love is the primary element of the plot, not the subplot. Romantic comedy always sells well.

Action/Adventure: Best Seller

Action-adventure is the genre that sells best. On one hand, it might be James Bond, the archetypical macho good guy who does one daring thing after another, and attracts women like fleas to a furry cat - pure escapism. On the other, it might be a real father in a real situation saving his family by fleeing terrorists deep in a hostile jungle. During the drama, his teenage daughter may succumb to a terrifying attack of killer zits and refuse to be seen by her boyfriend, who happens to be with them, bringing cooperation to an all-time low and death a step closer.

Although action-adventure needs strong characters with convincing motivation, the emphasis is on the situation, not character depth. However, conquering the situation will still usually cause character change (but not Bond, who is an archetype).

The pace in action-adventure is fast, with events coming quickly. Dialogue is usually very direct and obvious. Emotions are explored much more selectively. For example there are few scenes which drag by mourning some tragedy, but plenty celebrating accomplishment, discovery, victory, etc.

Mystery, Suspense Thrillers

Mystery and suspense are often lumped together, but they are very different styles. When I was seven, some friends in the small town where I lived would walk uptown to watch the current movie, which was often a horror movie. For the character, it was usually a mystery. He wanted to get to the bottom of some mysterious occurrence - figure out "who done it." But for the audience it was pure suspense. We knew the monster had done it, and were waiting for the heroine to fall into his waiting hands. As the monster lurked in the shadows, the heroine would open the door. I would stand up in the theater seat and tell the heroine not to go in - the suspense was that gripping.

The walk back, late at night, was filled with mystery and suspense. We knew the monster waited for us somewhere. The mystery was in knowing where he lurked. The suspense was in anticipating his appearance. Downtown, old buildings loomed over us, staring vacant eyes hungry for young blood. What evil lurked therein? The old library peered menacingly down the hill at us, friend in the daytime, Mr. Hyde at night. The sidewalk stretched ominously across devil's canyon, which was so deep no one had ever fully explored it and several people were lost in it - a mystery almost too dark to contemplate. We always ran past the graveyard, shadows hiding mysteries we dared not allow in our minds, tree branches from great old trees groped the darkness for us as we ran. And finally, in a state of mindless terror, we walked the last stretch of dark streets with no sidewalks and few houses, anticipating the

certain appearance of the monster who must be hiding in the weeds or the ditch.

The pace of mystery and suspense is usually average. The emotional focus is on discovery and tension. For thrillers, the pace may be fast at times and slow at times, depending on the focus, but tension remains high.

Setting the stage for horror. First you need to establish a good myth, or superstition, at the beginning. This "loads the motif and symbols," so the audience is primed to be terrorized. Mystery and suspense are elements which can be added to heighten interest. With suspense, the audience is often aware of the danger, but the character is not.

Plot dramatic tension. In a horror thriller, the tension should be present at the first, and like the increasing speed of a steam engine, mount with each puff until the train is hurtling along as if fleeing the gates of Hell.

Subplot tension: The subplot should increase tension by interfering with the character's attempts to avoid the horror. This should help land them all in jeopardy.

Symbols & motifs. Horror is a natural symbol and motif arena. But to make it scary, you need to load the symbols and load the motif. That means, a scary wolf is a scary wolf until you load it with a supernatural aura that means something specific - like it used to belong to a witch who hated little girls. Then when we see the wolf approach a little girl, it's a terrifying wolf. Same with the motif. It's only a scary forest until we give it a horrifying past.

An evil myth, or superstition, is the best way to do the loading. For example, a house where someone died is a relatively normal house. But make it the home of a cannibalistic ax murderer who buried his victims in the basement, and there are secret passages in the house, and the man was never found - just grew uglier and meaner - no one will ever want to go in.

Settings. Horrifying things are probably most frightening in broad daylight in normal daily surroundings; which means there is no escape from the horror. However, much can be done through settings. Removed from his normal environment, and put in an unknown environment, especially one filled with evil symbols and motifs, like an old haunted house with a dark and dank basement, next to a cemetery filled with tilted headstones and crypts, the character and audience are transported into a very suggestible state.

Imagination. Developing suspense in horror is effectively done by showing very little and leaving a lot to the imagination. Hollywood special effects, overdone, can literally take the fear out of horror. Hollywood magic makes a creature come to life before our eyes where we can see and know our enemy, instead of allowing it to lurk in the shadows where we only snatch glimpses of it and fear it. As soon as we begin to know something, we begin to conquer it. The less shown of the unknown, the better. When you have to

show something, let it be the most fearful part of the creature, like a steel claw or the damage it does, while leaving its full destructive potential to the imagination.

The chase. Each battle in horror should include the following elements: 1) Fear: frightened by surroundings, noises, etc. 2) Isolation from help, whether from people or weapons 3) Mystery: what is going to get me? 4) Suspense: anticipating when is it going to get me. 5) Duration: The battle should go on for some time. 6) Limited access to escape or weapons. 7) Mounting tension: Most battles should have several rounds that get worse, with the previous elements repeating.

Tragedy

Tragedy is the genre to be wary of. The ancient Greeks may have written all the tragedy the world needs. In the classical definition of tragedy, the character has a tragic flaw, a character defect that will most certainly lead him to a fatal end. In real life, it definitely happens. Juliets kill themselves because their love is dead. People battle alcohol and depression and lose. People are too daring and lose their lives. Others are too careless and cause others to suffer. People make wrong choices and end up murdering someone.

These stories are in the papers every day. But what people want to see is the victories. How does Juliet get beyond her addiction to Romeo so her life isn't dependent on his? How do people triumph over alcoholism and depression? How do daring people learn to control the odds - calculated risks? How do people who can't comprehend cause and consequence learn to be safe? How do people stirred to the brink of taking another's life learn to resolve problems? The tragedy of tragedy is that it doesn't have to be.

Tragic elements are often used very successfully in movies even though tragic themes don't sell. For example, in thrillers, the maniac doing the killing is a person with a tragic flaw - he will kill until he is killed. To wit:*FatalAttraction*.

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Using Concept To Focus The Story

Twenty-four-hundred years ago the stage play was just in its infancy and already teachers were making rules and developing theories. Not long after Socrates was sentenced to poison himself for poisoning student's minds - with strange philosophical ideas - following in his footsteps came another original thinker, Aristotle, who was writing his own desk set on literature, philosophy, and science - and making up most of the rules himself.

Aristotle profoundly deduced that every part of a play was a microcosm of the whole. Since then writers have discovered that if you cram a story into small enough box, you squeeze out all the fat and render a concept. A "concept" is what the story is about in its simplest terms.

A concept is basically a general idea of what the story is about. Think of it this way: you have one line in which to write what the story is about. Maybe you can, or you give up and take three lines, but that's the limit. A concept is a very concise general statement - very short on specific details. What do you put in a concept?

Following are some very basic concepts I gleaned from movies: Orphaned tall man meets short brother. Detective and slobbery dog. Man marries genie. Man rooms with woman disguised as a man. These concepts put unusual people together and a story comes out. Every part of the story is dictated by the concept.

Myself and the Director of National Writers Workshop agree, concept is the single most useful tool for writing a screenplay, or any other type of story. If you don't know what your story is about, you go in all directions, wasting your time, and the time of everyone who reads it. Many of the problems with characterization and plot that are common to most screenplays, show that not enough work went into development, so no concept ever emerged.

Concept is analogous to the "log line" at the top of studio critiques. That is an after-the-fact concept, and would probably be of great value to the writer for rewriting, if studios could give them out. They can't. Every writer would argue with the reader's perception of his concept, rather than use it as a tool to focus the script. We're our own worst enemies. In critiquing, I always write down what I perceive as the concept. The writer is always free to believe differently or change it.

Concept is usually extended to encompass more of the story. For example, Aladdin: A poor orphaned young man and an overprotected princess fall in love. Aladdin tries tries in vain to win her hand with wealth, then rescues her from marrying the villain, with the aid of a genie. But he wins her only through being himself.

By comparing a story to the concept, you can easily see where a story moves off in some other direction. For example, if Aladdin spent most of the story roaming the countryside with the genie, rescuing people, you would be talking about a series of stories, not a storyline. You can see that isn't really what the story is about and that section would need to come out.

You will often hear the term "high concept." High concept is a very simple concept that others can easily relate to. High concept is when something is involved for which there is a universal pattern with which we all can easily identify. An archetype. Good versus evil. Romance. Family separation. High concept movies sell very well, so if you can apply the term high concept to your story, you can expect a better response.

Developing a concept

I suspect the reason most of us don't do much with concepts is that we never learned how to develop one. Businesses have also gone through this learning experience... the hard way. I'm going to use business as an example because businesses use a similar mechanism called a "mission statement."

A concept is similar to a business mission statement. In the seventies, many businesses saw that their products went through up and down sales cycles or were outmoded during changing times or replaced by other products, threatening their jobs, so they began "diversification." By getting into many different kinds of businesses, losing one product wouldn't put the entire company out of business. Nice theory. So companies that made egg cartons began buying motorcycle companies.

Egg carton companies don't have a clue how to make or sell motorcyles. So by buying and mismanaging a motorcycle company, both companies went out of business. "Hmmm," they said. "We need to do things we know how to do," and they began to narrow their focus.

Companies that made motorcycles began buying products for which they could leverage their expertise. Making engines for small cars, and light engines for other products were much more related to their story. They new all about making and selling engines, and when people weren't buying motorcylces they were buying cars with small engines.

Companies were very worried about results. Money. Profit. Some companies bought other companies that made gears, so they had a cheap source of gears for their engines. The gear company, now an internal "cost," stopped making a profit. Their story had a bad ending - they went under.

The focus on controlling cost became such a consuming story that it overshadowed the main story- making a profit. Once again they had lost focus.

The successful companies, understanding that bringing things into focus made them much more effecient and profitable, began making mission statements that would keep things in focus. A mission statement would include every aspect of the business.

Mission statements are totally boring. They go something like this: "In order to make the expected profit for our stockholders, we will make widgets of a certain quality for a certain vertical market, so that we can maintain or increase our market share, in a way that reimburses our employees so that they want to stay." Most employees gag on this hot air, and don't realize how valuable mission statements really are.

The good news is that concepts aren't boring like business plans. Notice how the business plan mentions all aspects of a business. Such as, "Why are businesses in business?" For most of them, to make a worthwhile profit for stockholders. (See the end note if you are interested in business purpose.)

What products are they going to make? Products that fit in a certain market where sales are comfortably predictable. Are they going to plunder their employees to do this? No, they know from experience that the employees will go to work for their competitors, so they write "good treatment" into the business plan. So when someone suggests a toy manufacturer start making automatic weapons and reduce wages, they give him ten lashes with the mission statement.

What we learn from business's experience with getting focus that brings success is that the concept we create has to include all aspects of our story, or the story becomes unfocused and crashes. Concepts have to encompass what a real story is about.

To form a concept, first ask a question: "What happens if this crosses that?" Cross an elephant with a turtle. When the elephant dies, his shell will make an ivory appointed mobile home. If you bring things together, there is going to be a result. Something is going to happen. So a fully developed concept creates an interesting question and a result. But like the mission statement, it accounts for things important to the story. Those important things are character, motivation, plot, subplot, conflict, climax, and resolution.

Typically a **character wants something**, which brings him into **conflict** with a second character. After a **series of conflicts**, which are handicapped by a **subplot**, and after a **plot twist**, the **final battle** erupts, and character one finally **resolves** the conflict. A fully developed concept should have all of the bold words in place. I'll explain them in the following:

Character. This is where the "detective and slobbery dog" or "orphaned tall man meets short younger brother" comes in. This is the characterization side of concept. Using a "fish-out-of-water" type character is a favorite for audiences and producers. It's unexpected and leads to interesting situations. If you fully develop the concept, then you prevent yourself from letting the interesting characters and situations take over the plot and ruin the story - they are subplots at most.

There should be some statement about the main character or protagonist. Adjectives like dying, wealthy, mentally impaired, loner... tell something about the character's situation and what he will have to overcome.

Look at the Aladdin example. A poor orphaned young man and an overprotected princess... Here are two people who are fish out of water in each other's world. Aladdin is rootless and has no visible means of support. The Princess is strangling on support and roots.

Wants something. This is the character's motivation. Wants a child back. Wants to marry the forbidden man. Wants revenge. All main characters should have very specific objectives. If the story is high concept, then keep the subplots to a minimum.

Look at the Aladdin example. They fall in love... They want each other. This is a high concept plot.

Conflict. The antagonist wants something. The protagonist or situation won't let him have it. Mention what the antagonist wants. This is the beginning of the plot.

Look at the Aladdin example. Aladdin and the Princess are from two conflicting worlds. A member of the King's court schemes to marry the princess.

Series of conflicts. This is the meat of the story. It's usually two or three conflict episodes that precede the climactic battle. But instead of spelling these out, like you would in a synopsis, mention each in two or three words. This forms the path that the plot takes.

Look at the Aladdin example. Aladdin rescues her from marrying the villain, with the aid of a genie. This is the main plot, and takes place in several battles.

Subplots. The subplot intertwines with the main plot and helps develop it. In Alladin, Aladdin's battle is partly with himself. He doesn't feel acceptable to the Princess. He pretends to be a wealthy prince, in order to be accepted. It doesn't work. In the end, it's because of his love that is able to conquer the antagonist. Include the subplot because it is important to the story.

Plot Twist. Put it in if there is one.

Final battle. Tell what it is about, but not the details.

Resolve. The satisfaction the protagonist, and the audience, get at the end of the story.

All of these things go into three lines. When you get those three lines written to your satisfaction, then you will know exactly what your story is "about," and can keep it focused so you avoid a myriad of problems.

Look at the Aladdin concept: A poor orphaned young man and an overprotected princess fall in love. Aladdin tries tries in vain to win her hand with wealth, then rescues her from marrying the villain, with the aid of a genie. But he wins her only through being himself.

Concepts can be formed before the story is written, or during the writing of the story in the early stages. Or they can be created to guide a rewrite. They are a useful tool for making your story stay in line. Unlike plot statements, concepts include statements about character, motives, and plot so are excellent for telling others exactly what your story is about.

Premise

A note about premise: "Premise" is a common term used to describe what a screenplay is about. It is very similar to concept. You can develop a concept with a question, "if you do this, something is going to happen." You may have to develop characters and write some of the story before you know what will happen and can write the concept. The premise, on the other hand, can be stated as an if.... then.... statement. If this happens, then this **will** happen. Your screenplay will always have one or more premises that can be drawn from it, and people may quarrel with your premise.

It is often suggested that writing a screenplay is about proving your premise. When you write the story, it proves that your premise was true. For example, in the example of Ralph and Stix in chapter 24, the concept could have been stated as a premise. "If you save someone, then you save yourself." For Stix, in her situation, it was true. But stating that as a premise and then trying to write a screenplay from it, as some would suggest, is highly problematic. If someone is already "saved," then it has no meaning. And for some, saving someone else would do nothing for them. What was true for Stix was for an exceptionally narrow set of circumstances and character.

Stix's actions might tell us something about human nature and the human condition. But we can't generalize from that that everyone needs to save someone in order to save themselves, or even that every person in trouble needs to do so.

In this book, I de-emphasize premise because it has little value except as a critical tool after something has been written. Premise, as a developmental tool, is far too authoritarian and restrictive to be of any real use. For example, a writer might presume that all rebels are misunderstood children and write a story that "proves" it. Or that all people have "unusual" sexual

urges that undo them if not addressed, and write a story to "prove" it. But the story, while it might be true for some, would be a fallacy.

An example from real life: Reader's Digest reports in their May 1994 issue that the face of the Vietnam Vet commonly chosen by the news media, is that of the loser so mentally crippled by the war that he can barely function, let alone make a success of himself. The image gains pity from the public and government. Not only is this not true for most Vietnam vets, it does most of them a disservice. The losers pictured have often masqueraded as something they are not. So if a story premise is, "being in a horrible war without public support makes mental cripples of its soldiers," the premise is wrong.

Instead of premise, I favor using concept and integration as writing tools because these are things a writer actually uses, and can use successfully for focus and discovery. Honest characters for whom the writer has feeling, put in honest situations (plot), and allowed to develop freely, will develop honest stories. Writers should develop the storyline before writing the story, and if he is wrong the characters will tell him. If they don't, the readers (and ultimately the audience) will.

Note on business

Businesses, like all of us, struggle to understand what they are about. They are driven by their successes, failures, and the pressures of the business world. We are in a highly competitive world market that puts intense pressure on prices, which in turn puts intense pressure on profits. Investors, accustomed to high profits during the double-digit inflation of the the seventies, and the profitablity created by corporate raiders in the eighties, watch every business and market move like a hawk. They put intense pressure on business to watch the bottom line every quarter (profit every three months).

It's no wonder business has turned into a numbers game with the making a profit for investors being the ultimate goal. Investors have forced that focus. Yet to see that in a mission statement is like a flag of passive resistance. It's like saying, "OK, you want it, you got it, but now it's your responsibility. If we go down the tubes, it's because of your greed." I just can't help thinking that putting that in a mission statement is really a slap in the face to investors.

What is a business mission? Businesses make products because the world has a need, engineers and craftsmen like working with the product, and the entire company makes a living from it. Investment is a way of raising the funds necessary to start and expand the company. This isn't a naive approach, this is how successful companies start and become a success.

Many current investors are little better than financial terrorists, plundering, raping, pillaging, and terrorizing the organization that made itself profitable to begin with. This isn't to deny current market conditions or that some

companies need trimming and better direction to make it successfully. But these battles need to take place within the company, not from outside.

Put that in a mission statement, and it comes out: We will make product X to meet customer need Y, so that our customers and employees are benefitted, in a way that our employees can create a reasonable life and our investors make a reasonable return on their investment, while continuing to explore additional product opportunities for our future success.

If companies would make that their mission statement, they would quit screwing up half the world. Now, pardon me for a moment while I put my soap box back in the closet.

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Base The Story On Character Or Situation?

Suppose you are a reporter and are given the following story: An earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter Scale has happened in Paraguay and has changed the course of a river by over twenty miles. Seven point eight is a major earthquake. Rivers changing course are rare. But what are you going to report? If you travel to Paraguay and film the geologic changes and get statements from scientists about the cause, your report is going to end up a science documentary for PBS. The general population won't want to see it.

What if a town had to move because of the river's change? You could film that, but who really would be interested in watching a bunch of people pack and move? More fuel for a documentary. Situations don't even make good news, and especially not good movies, yet many screenplays are formed around a situation. What people care about is the situation's impact on people. What has it done to their lives? How do they respond to it? How do they overcome it?

Topics and themes are other words for situations. Abortion is a topic. Communism is a topic. Freedom is a topic. Religion is a topic. Unconditional love is a topic. You might have strong feelings about any of these, but topics are nothing until you show the impact they have on people. A movie about freedom might have a lot of noble talk and maybe some saber rattling about freedom, but it has no impact.

However, take a World War II Hungarian Freedom Fighter who fled for his life to this country when the Soviets took over. He calls his mother weekly and gets a steady torrent of news about his families' repression because of him. He is working two jobs to send money to his family - which routinely gets stolen in the mail - instead of pursuing his love of music. He never married or even had time to date. Suddenly the cold war ends and freedom comes to his family so he can return to see them. He suddenly can have a life but is fifty years old - he feels lost; what does he do? What has he done with his freedom but become trapped? Now completely free, how does he get on with his life? At fifty, can you start a new career in music? Are we ever really free?

Philosophers and politicians debate topics, but few people go to movies to see topics. Movies are about people and the impact that situations or topics or themes have in their lives.

Trends come and go. The current trend in entertainment is for real situations. Is it because so much entertainment writing has gone so far into left field, too divorced from reality? How long will the trend continue? The rule of thumb is if you respond to a trend, you're too late. Interest will have dropped before you can get from first word to the screen.

If you are writing about true events, remember what stories are really about. If you can't find the impact in people's lives, chances are no one will be interested.

Start With Character Or Situation?

Should you start a story first with the characters or with a situation? Advice varies. Popular wisdom has it that if you develop good characters with a lot of depth, and put them together, a story will come out of it. When you give characters wants and wishes like real people, they take on a life of their own and will write the story. Wants and wishes are the stuff of situations. That's very true, but will you have enough interest in them to write it? And will an audience have enough interest in the story to want to see it?

If you start with a situation first, then there is a great risk that everything in the story will seem contrived. The story will be driving the characters, making them do things whether they really would or not.

It also depends on your interest level. I know from experience that stories about injustice don't get very far on my computer screen. I'm just not interested in evening the score, even if I love the characters.

How do you escape the situation versus character dilemma? Recognize there is some vital truth in both, and realize that writing is a process. Stories must have excellent characters who come to life before the story goes very far. And topics are the agendas which come with life. They are the framework that we are all busy adding details to. For example: coming of age brings sexual challenges for every generation; a flood displaces people, interrupting their lives and changing them forever; police officers continuously struggle with corrupting influences on the job. A strong plot is the main thing that will sell a story, and strong characters confronted by difficult situations are what create strong plots.

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Realism: Where To Draw The Line

Life seems very tame at times. Sometimes major events are happening to us or around us and we hardly seem to notice. A writer looks at events and says, "This is important." He is able to determine what is important in an event and condense something that happened over several days or years into a story that gives others the essence of what happened. A condensed version has much more impact.

Movies aren't reality, and excessive realism detracts from instead of enhancing them. Phone calls to friends sometimes last as long as a movie, but no one wants to see that in film. Some real people can't communicate. They talk so much they lose their point; they use so much foul language they can't express things clearly and limit their own perception of things to four letter words. Reality takes a very circuitous route to get from A to B, but a screenplay stays on course.

Movies aren't reality, but movies are about reality. Movies tell us something about life and if they are too divorced from reality, they are make believe, telling us nothing. I believe writers have the responsibility to inform with accurate information, and to avoid misinforming.

Sex is another area where reality is an uneasy portrayal. What is sexy? Movies are constantly pushing the acceptable limits on things like nudity. This is largely the director's domain, but the writer provides the basic scenes. Being on the edge is titillating to many viewers. In an age where soft porn movies are commonly available, standard movies and TV still find it necessary to push the limits to compete. Today the majority of both men and women spot the tush first. *The Cowboy Way* capitalized on this with Woody Harrelson wearing nothing but a cowboy hat. In The Mask Of Zorro, there is a group of men wearing nothing, handcuffed and encircling a cactus patch. What tomorrow? We overlook what seems sexy today will be blasé tomorrow.

Full frontal nudity seems just around the corner, and today's exposed breast is no better than yesterday's exposed calf, which dates your movie. We also seem to have forgotten the adage that a man's imagination is a girl's best friend. Hinting is often better than showing and what is sexually stimulating often has very little to do with the shape of body parts and has everything to do with the action of the characters.   The power of suggestion is a powerful

tool: Liking the character in a romantic situation, imagining, anticipating what may happen or may be revealed, a little teasing, a little display - these are what build sexual excitement.

A well written sex scene that comes from the action is worth at least ten nude scenes - so rather than focus on exposing the latest body part, let the costume suggest the essence of masculinity or femininity and let sex be an irresistible outcome of the action that is so powerful that intercourse doesn't have to be shown. Two people building a hunger, followed by a burst of passion with them hungrily devouring each other is far more effective than showing the nitty-gritty details.

Realism is always a question in movies: how far to go? The secret is to remember, movies give us the essence of reality without burdening us with the bare facts.

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Sequences: Advanced Writing Technique

Characters often gather information, or become troubled, over a period of time or in different places. Three such incidents is a good number. Tension often builds over two to five scenes, developing a larger piece of the story. Just like the scene, and the entire story, the sequence is a miniature story that centers around conflict, and tension builds to a climax.

Too many short, busy scenes that jump from one part of the story to another tend to make a choppy, hard to follow story. The sequence is the right size to tie things together and make a smooth story with well developed conflicts. The sequence is also the typical building block of TV episodes, which have one sequence of three scenes between each commercial.

An example of a sequence: In the first scene, Hawk talks to a cop about arresting his friend Digs because he thinks Digs broke into his car and took his amp to sell for drugs. In the second scene he talks to Digs' sister who says he was at home all night. He doesn't believe her. In the third scene he talks to one of Digs' enemies who says he saw him cruising that night. Hawk becomes really angry. In the fourth scene he goes to Digs' mother and makes nasty comments about the family. She tells him Digs is on chemotherapy and doesn't want anyone to know, which explains the needle marks. Digs is in another room listening. He comes out and the two confront each other. Hawk decides to help Digs get through this.

Actor Profile: Catherine Eads,
Writers Workshop Repertoire
Independent Writer
Stand-up Comedian

Catherine began working in theater at age twelve, attended the University of Virginia and continues to do follow-up training. She has had feature roles, does theater, and does occasional stand up comedy, which she can deliver in a dozen dialects, at L.A.'s Comedy Store and The Improv,. Catherine's high energy, rapid delivery are a natural for comedy, but she certainly isn't limited to comedy - keep the typecasting pencil on hold. In the *Parades In The Night* staged reading, her character was pretending to be another person - friendly, a little frazzled - the next moment she pulled a gun and transformed into a cool, matter of fact killer with a tempo to match. Totally convincing.

Catherine's interest in writing led her to workshop her own material in college. The process gets quick results. Her creative interest drew her to Writers Workshop as an actress participant where she can get a variety of roles for her own experience.

Her feedback: the invaluable pronouncement that it is a strong script.

SECTION III

VISUAL WRITING

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Visual Writing: Advanced Writing Technique

What is Visual Writing?

First, it's recognizing the preparation necessary of a script for reading. On one hand, scripts aren't books. It isn't possible to include the narrative that is found in books, only the dialogue. So the person reading a script doesn't know what is going through the character's mind. The cues have to be in the dialogue and in the physical action that is described in the scene instruction lines. (Novels are going more in this direction also.) On the other hand, the script is not being acted for the person reading it, so enough information has to be presented to make the picture complete. That means giving some description in the scene instruction lines. Take the following dialogue.

MARY

You have insulted my honor, sir.

JOHN

You have honor?

If the characters have been drawn well and the story is grabbing, when this dialogue is reached the reader will feel the drama. All that is left is for the actors to do their magic. But, unfortunately when a reader who has seen four other scripts that day so his brain is mush, and he is not especially interested in your genre even though it sells well, the drama may not register. So it is a good idea to write in some action.

JOHN

You have honor?

Mary jerks her white glove from her hand, slaps him across the face, then, pinching the glove with her fingertips like a dead mouse, deposits it in the fireplace.

The insult will register and an insult has been added.

Note the lack of adverbs. Adverbs are weak, indecisive words which water things down. Strong verbs are used. Mary didn't remove her glove, or even angrily remove it. She jerked the glove off. Descriptive nouns are also used. "Dead mouse" is used to give a picture which describes her feelings toward the soiled glove. This is visual writing to make sure the script is a good read.

Pumping Up Dialogue

Dialogue should be written with the same strong words. It should also use concrete words instead of abstract ones. Abstract wording: John feigned a hostile attitude and lambasted her with harmless indignities. Concrete: John threw marshmallow words at her. To get to actual dialogue: instead of saying,

> JOHN
> You've maneuvered me into my present
> distress and I find I must oppose you
> in order to save myself. I question
> your psychological health, you seem....
> unaffected. I abhor your action, it
> speaks so beguilingly of you.

Say,

> You cut me to the heart, you
> unfeeling vamp - why can't you love
> me?

Second, look at your drama and determine what can be shown visually instead of talked about. When a character enters, instead of exchanging, "Hi, how are you," until the character reveals she is upset, have the character enter looking glum. The other character asks, "What's the matter." It's much more effective.

After I had written my first screenplay and realized it wasn't visual, I went on a quest to discover what visual is. I'm a visual person. If I had to lose one of my senses, the visual sense would be last choice. I communicate best visually, understand best visually, but I wasn't writing visually. Why? Probably because most books aren't presented visually. They predominantly tell in the narrative what is going on inside a character's head, and how the character reacts internally. But on stage, the only way to know what a character is thinking or feeling is for him to blurt it out - which doesn't work - or to have him react. They react with an exchange of dialogue that reveals their emotion, or they make some physical action, such as body language or interacting with their environment (throwing a dish towel).

Keeping the Director and Actor in Mind

The writer's choices are somewhat limited. Most of the things an actor might do are called "stage business." Those are his choice. If he wants to show he is happy, he might elatedly kiss the other character, jump for joy, dance with a broomstick, or a million other things. That is the actor's domain and the writer doesn't write much stage business. What the writer must write are the important physical actions which affect the story. For example, he smashes a prize vase that sets off a firestorm of activity. Or he punches her, which is serious enough to bring assault charges or a trip to the doctor. But the writer can't put down a physical action for every line of dialogue.

You might think directing the camera shots is a good way to make it visual - show all the character's reactions, etc. Not good. This is the director's job. Directors work directly with actors and the set to capture every possible visual element in the drama. Let him do his job and he'll do a much better job of it than you or I. After filming, the film editor, with the director's input, selects the best shots and pieces them together to tell the story visually. What the director and film editor do is a hundred times more thorough than a writer trying to direct shots. The writer's job is to write good drama.

Interacting With the Environment

Make the character interact with the setting. A person climbing a cliff is not discussing the philosophy of Plato with the guy below him. Similarly, if a mother at a graveside service decides it's time to accuse the ex of not caring enough and causing the death, what happens? People stare. The minister tries to quiet them. Someone nudges the mother. The ex may rise from his chair and move deep within the crowd. What probably won't happen is a protracted and heated conversation, although the effect will be the same - the point will have been made.

Electric Scenes: Getting What You Want in a Scene

What the writer must write, to be visual, are electric scenes. The reader has an imagination and will use it if it is stimulated. If you can draw him into the drama, he will supply all the details necessary and not even know it. Following are the tools for engaging them.

Character Conflict. Conflict is the heart of drama. When people are in a struggle against each other or against something, others are drawn in. The viewer wants to know how it ends. If someone begins a joke but forgets the punch line, what do we do? Hang him from the nearest chandelier? When we hear a mystery, what do we do? We stay alert for the solution. If a good friend tells us Aunt Shirley caught her husband buying an expensive gift for another woman and she is seeing a lawyer, what do we want to know? Will Shirley sue for divorce? We want to know how things end. We are naturally curious, and a conflict is one of the things that grabs our attention.

Anticipation: Anticipation is waiting for the scene to happen because you've been set up for it. Inside the scene, anticipation is waiting for the reaction you know is going to come. If the character has been drawn well, and his motivation is clear, the audience will know just about how he is going to react. But it has to be set up. For example, in scene one, jealous wife Jill questions her husband, Mike, like a police interrogator about his activities, then says she will pick him up after work. In scene two, Mike travels by car with his attractive secretary, and learns they won't be arriving back until near quitting time. What are you anticipating in the next scene? Jealous Jill waiting in her car to pick him up, witnessing him getting out of the car with his secretary. We're waiting to see if she runs over him, embarrasses him, divorces him, or what. But we know Jill is not the type to just start crying.

Within the scene, anticipation can also be a factor. Should Jill just run over him? This very direct solution ends the scene and drama quickly. Try this: Mike walks slowly across the parking lot while Jill worries the steering wheel and burns. When he gets in, she doesn't say a word, but drives furiously away. She runs a red light at a busy intersection. He yells, "Slow down!" She yells back, "You son of a bitch! You son of a bitch!" She continues driving recklessly. A truck approaches from the opposite direction. She pulls into the opposite lane, squaring off with the truck. Mike tries to move the steering wheel, but all he does is make the car swerve. At the last moment she avoids the collision and parks the car. She throws the keys at him and storms down the street on foot. He pulls up beside her and yells, "She's my secretary. We had a meeting in Benton today and she took notes." After several exchanges, she gets back in the car swearing she will check his story.

So if the plot is strong, characters are motivated, and things are set up, there is anticipation and the audience is engaged. To set it up, write in sequences of three to four scenes, then play it out in the last scene.

Show or Tell

Silent films were the epitome of presenting drama visually. But if everything could have been presented visually, there would have been no captions between shots in silent film. And there is a lot of melodrama in silent film, which is not known in modern times as good acting. Not everything can be illustrated visually. Film is also an audio medium, and the dialogue is very important.

Many subjects characters deal with are cerebral. Who gets hurt in no victim crimes? What is wrong with sex.... between consenting adults? A character feels hurt because her lover didn't call. Two people talk through a problem until one finally sees an answer. How can these things be made visual? First, make certain these things are going to have an impact in your characters' lives. If you can't find a response to the question, "What does it mean to me?" then you have a meaningless scene.

Second, to make cerebral issues dramatic, the character must be willing to take some action because of what he knows. If he feels passionately about the issue, then he will debate it passionately. He may storm out of the room in frustration in mid-argument, to return after a few seconds with a drink to finish debating. Dialogue that is passionate sounds completely different from dialogue that is just informative. For example:

Informative: PAUL

I don't think you should take your

brother's car. Technically it is

stealing.

Passionate: PAUL

Don't touch your brother's car! You

can't just borrow it, stealing is

stealing. You'll go to jail!

But every line can't be delivered with that level of passion. The character could simply say, "If you take the car, we could both go to jail. I'm having no part of this; I'm going home." He could just as easily have said something similar about robbing graves or stealing someone's girl friend or "borrowing" money from the office, or failing to help stamp out ignorance and illiteracy in

farthest Orb, or refusing to use a little known strategy in a chess game. People will talk passionately or take action about anything that is important to them, and if character motivation and plot are established, the subject of the dialogue can be electrified.

The next important thing to do with dialogue is to work the action and reaction. Too often dialogue is simply stating positions - flat statements that tell each character's side of a conflict. That doesn't move the story forward. For every dramatic action, there is a dramatic reaction. For every line of dialogue, there is a line of reaction.

For example, if Johnny tells his mother, "I want a pet dog," Mary states her position by saying, "I like dogs, but they're hard to take care of." But she is reacting if she says, "You won't take care of it." A psychologist will tell Mary to quit reacting because it isn't effective communication. An audience will leave the theater telling Mary to stop stating her position because it isn't interesting communication. Reacting is a more dramatic way of speaking. It tells what the emotions are and gives a clue how high the stakes are. A psychologist will tell Mary to tell her son, "This makes me feel angry when you argue with me. Mommy knows best." An audience wants to hear the anger in the dialogue: "You can argue all day, but you're not getting a dog because I know you won't take care of it!"

When Johnny hears his mother's reply, he doesn't just pass on more information on his position. He doesn't say, "I'm mad," and the conversation continues. Instead, he reacts. He looks hurt, crumples the ad about the dog, and stomps from the room. In reaction, his mother grabs him and has a heart to heart talk with him - or maybe she just shakes her head as he stomps off. But every line of dialogue is a reaction to the previous one.

Part of the problem in trying to write visually is getting the writer out of the way and letting the character create the story. I have this problem a lot. I write "about" things and let the dialogue pass the information. There is so much that I think has to be said. So instead of letting the character say the lines and react and show the depth of his emotions, I write the dialogue and let him mouth the words. But when I get out of the way, it works!

I read screenplays frequently where the danger, or stakes, are known from the first. The tension starts high and climbs. The air is rife with anticipation. Each scene contains dialogue dripping with conflict. These scripts are engaging and keep you turning pages to find out what is going to happen.

In contrast, I read many stories that begin with building characters and long elaborate plot set ups. After twenty to thirty pages of information bombardment, I'm not sure I care what happens. Then I see more pages of people going here and there, talking about this and that - and at this point I know I don't care. Character motivation has not caused one thing to happen.

There is no conflict, no action, and no reaction. It didn't spark my imagination so I created no visual images from the script. It isn't visual.

Finishing Touches:

When the drama has been staged well, the finishing touches are symbols and motifs. These are visual, and audio, elements that help establish mood and texture. The director will do a lot with the music, and with the pace of the scenes. But the writer can add several significant things.

Mood Settings

To build excitement, use settings which are unique, colorful, exciting - these are things that are visually stimulating. They are different from everyday things.

While a stage play is waiting to start, music and a stage setting set the mood for the drama to come. Some directors think this is nonsense and only the drama should cast the spell. I wonder if they discern a personal difference in drinking a pleasant cup of coffee at home in the morning, having a hurried cup from a bare wooden stage table while rehearsing, and having a cup in a quiet evening restaurant with an intimate companion. You can certainly enjoy a cup with the intimate companion at rehearsal, but most of us perceive a major difference in ambiance and purpose.

If you open a movie with a rope swinging from a gallows, it sets an entirely different mood than from a couple chasing each other on a sandy beach, or a scientist working intensely at a lab bench. And if one of those images is repeated throughout the story, it continues establishing the mood. For example, a scene of police patrolmen with noisily barking and lurching bloodhounds, repeated through a story, is an ever present reminder that the men are on the run and someone is on their heels. They may take time to rest and discuss how their grandfathers were related to Wild Bill Hickok and the King of England, but that bloodhound scene brings the audience back. Chase, chase, chase, unrelenting, nerve wracking, exhausting - just the sound of dogs barking in the background and an occasional image is all it takes.

Developing Motifs That Set Mood and Texture

Recurring elements (representing a subject, theme or idea) that help establish mood are called a "motif." For a man becoming parched and dehydrated in the desert, the motifs might be cracked creek beds, and the sun shimmering through heat waves. For crime in a violent city it might be constant sirens in

the background and screeching tires, and TV reports with violence statistics. These things are generally independent of the characters. The characters don't create them, but they may respond to them.

Motifs generally are repeating elements used to create the same mood over and over. They can be created by the display of patterns which might be visual, but could also be behavioral, ideas or themes, auditory, or objects.

Motifs can be things that people universally respond to, but can be much more effective if they are constructed. I call this loading the motif. You give meaning to the motif elements by associating events and possibly symbols with it, so that a mood is established when the elements are shown.

Say you want to lighten up a maudlin drama with comic relief. It's set in the Southwest, so you open the story with fast tempo mariachi music. The shot pans down onto a man sleeping on the sidewalk, with a sombrero pulled over his face. Someone tries to wake him, but he doesn't move. A crowd gathers and begins to torment him. He remains unresponsive. People move his arms and legs, and as soon as they let go, they return to their original position. The crowd is amused. Two men drag him into the street. As soon as they let go, he scampers back to his position and with no getting comfortable, he immediately resumes sleeping. The crowd goes wild. Two men tie his shoe laces together and hang him by the laces from a post. He slips nonchalantly from his shoes and resumes sleeping. They pick him up and stick his legs through the lattice work above the porch. Hanging like a bat, he shrugs, pulls his hat over his face, and resumes sleeping. The next time the mariachi music begins and the camera pans down onto the sleeping man, the mood of the audience will lift whether he does another act or not.

Using Symbols

Symbols seem, at first glance, like the least important thing in the world. But a symbol is described as participating in what it represents (Paul Tillich). That is true in some very practical ways. When my father "retired" from his industrial job, which he had come to detest, and began running his own business, he took his old aluminum lunch box and threw it in the trash. I thought he was just discarding it, which I considered strange at the time because it was still good. So I retrieved it. He never said a word. I didn't realize until I had carried it for a while then trashed it myself, what a symbolic gesture that was. Putting that lunch box in the trash symbolized that he had finished with that way of life. That tells us two things about symbols. One, the symbol was an integral part of his life: it participated in it. Two, others don't necessarily understand the symbol unless it is set up for them. I call that process "loading," which I'll describe later.

If a child (and some adults) wants to hurt another child, but has learned that poking them in the eye will gain them worse, what do they do? Break their

doll, kick their dog, tell lies to get them in trouble? Yes. These things represent the person - they are symbols of them. The cherished doll, the loved dog, the reputation, these things participate in the person's life. People who have no regard for others, or no respect, have no conscience about mistreating others' possessions or reputations or anything associated with them.

A symbol gives us information. It represents something. For example, the symbol of a cross will convey a world of meaning to a Christian. The peace symbol and the acronym VC will mean certain things to a Vietnam veteran. The acronym IRS means headache for most of us. The blindfolded woman holding a scales, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Statue of Liberty - all convey information.

Symbols have no inherent meaning. Some symbols, like the foregoing, are universal, part of the collective psyche of our culture, and will convey information just as they are. They may possibly even represent things we can't describe, enabling us to think more productively about the nature of the cosmos. Others have to be loaded. For example, short-term forgetfulness might be symbolized by leaving eye glasses in unusual places. The first time the person hunts for the glasses, the symbol gets loaded. The next time, the eye glasses are shown laying somewhere, we know what happened. Another example, if a gun is always left in a particular spot in a gun case, and then it isn't there, we know something is up with the gun. These symbols alert the viewer that something is going to happen.

Another use of symbols has already been discussed. People surround themselves with symbols of their identity. If someone carries a briefcase, this conveys information that this person is involved in a business or profession. The person who wears a baseball cap, or has them displayed in his rear car window, we know likes baseball. Symbols tell us about people without having to go into their entire history.

For example, a man who wears a Rolex, has a living room full of Chinese furniture and art, has a statue of Buddha in his bed room, a New York Yankees cap hanging on one post of his fourposter bed, and has cowboy boots in his closet, has told us a great many things by symbols. Money is important to him. He has an affinity for China - either married Chinese or lived there - is probably Buddhist, is married, likes the Yankees and possibly does country dancing on weekends. If we saw the NY Yankees cap and cowboy boots at another bed, we would know the character had been there - the symbol conveyed this information.

Natural Symbols And Motifs:

William Kelley, master TV and feature film writer who wrote the Amish portions of the Academy Award winning *Witness*, used waving fields of wheat as a motif to take the viewer to that tranquil country setting. It was a natural part of the environment that worked well as a motif. In *The Milagro Bean Field War*, the bean crop - and later the water - was a symbol of protest and revolt. These natural elements worked well as symbols. Yet they established mood each time they were shown. They also worked as motifs. Symbols and motifs can do both.

I became interested in symbols and motifs when I was researching my book, *Final Prophecies* (unpublished). Understanding symbols is fundamental to understanding prophecy. Water is used as a symbol in two prophetic utterances: "...Out of their hearts will flow rivers of living water," and in describing the river flowing from the new temple, the nourishing river became deeper the farther it got from the temple. To search for the meaning of these, I reviewed the use of water in Biblical literature.

Water is actually a motif. Fresh water was a precious commodity in an ancient land bordering arid lands, where wells and springs were scarce. The community wells were daily gathering places for socializing and fellowship. Water set a mood for ancient people that suggested life, community and caring. God's Spirit was said to be poured out like living waters on the thirsty people. Baptism in the Spirit comes from a water motif, rather than wind. Uniting the various symbols within the motif can lead to the interpretation: God's Spirit, channeled through the people in community (as temples of the spirit), nourishes an ever growing number.

Motifs can be natural or constructed, and can come with a variety of symbols within them, which are usually constructed. Symbols and motifs enhance your story by establishing mood and conveying information so you can better utilize your hundred and twenty pages for plot, character and conflict.

Actor Profile: John Wayne (J.W.) Myers, Writers Workshop Repertoire Independent Writer

John, who landed the lead role in a presentation, hails from Maryland. With a B.A. in theater from Frostburg State University, he has worked on New York stage and has had TV guest star and feature roles. He continued his studies with the Lembeck Comedy Workshop in L.A. His pleasantly distinctive voice and manner differentiate him from the other faces in the crowd, and after just a few moments on stage his character becomes memorable.

He was drawn to Writers Workshop by the opportunity to exercise the acting muscle. He enjoyed stretching for the character's age range, and liked the character's Midwest background, intelligence, and good old boy style. He demands a heavy commitment from himself for character development. He also writes.

Was his feedback valuable? When an audience member (dumb old me) was perplexed at why the character had decided not to kill himself at the end, John knew where in the story, the decision point, the character began to turn away from it. That point, of course, is critical to the presentation and helps the writer know where to focus the rewrite.

PART 3

GETTING FEEDBACK

30

CRITIQUING

Who can critique a script? In a sense, everyone. Everyone is an audience, and the main thing a writer needs to find out is, "Do they like my story?" That may be the *only* thing he needs to find out. But if the story has a weak element, he needs to find out what to fix and maybe how.

Not everyone can critique. Aunt Martha may not like anything she reads; your Brother, Paul, may think everything except motorcycle action films is no good; Mother always likes everything you write regardless of how poor it is. Your neighbor loves screenplays but has the diplomacy of a wrecking ball; Uncle Steve, who teaches English Literature, can hold it to the flame of high art, but has no clue what a modern audience likes.

Another problem with critiquing is the person who wants to write the story for you. I once paid to have a novel critiqued and received five pages of excellent criticism and an offer to rewrite the novel for a substantial sum. But that wouldn't have helped me become a better writer. What I really needed was to know what I had done well, what needed improvement, and suggestions on directions to go. You can't become a better writer by having another person write it for you.

Even other writers aren't necessarily good critics. I sent a movie script to an agent who offered a critiquing service. What I received back was exceedingly poor criticism, nothing positive, and was informed that one particular scene in the comedy "was not funny." I learned that that writer knew nothing about comedy - not every scene in a comedy is supposed to be funny - even though that one actually was.

So, where does that leave struggling writers? In desperate need of feedback and finding it very difficult to get beyond, "Did you like my story?"

How to be a help without being destructive

In every writer's meeting as I open my mouth to give advice, I am struck by a recurring question: How will the writer perceive it? Am I going to come off like a maniac with a wrecking ball thrashing insensitively through the prized prose of some gentle soul? Or will I seem like a pompous ass stroking my own ego? Or someone who says considerably more than he really knows?

Or maybe a jealous writer waiting to slash the unwary victim to his yarn spinning soul.

That fear is born from seeing too many writers cease looking for feedback because they can't handle it. Writers invest hundreds of hours developing a beautiful story that is often a direct reflection of their abilities. They are creative people and creative people necessarily open themselves to the world so they can taste it with all their senses. When you have your tongue sticking out, you risk someone belting your jaw shut. Most writers don't thrive on criticism - they die on it. What they really need is encouraging words.

But on the other hand, writers have a very difficult time improving a script without effective feedback, and the world that buys words is a rough and tumble place. Personally I would rather hear a good sound comment on my writing about something a reader didn't like than a lot of well intentioned praise. I can't fix it if I don't know what's wrong with it, and my main intention is to make it the best it can be. Somewhere in that dichotomy between the fragile creative ego and the highly critical marketplace is where the literary critique falls. When a writer asks for an evaluation and a reader agrees to give it, a contract is formed. The writer agrees to hear constructive advice and the reader agrees to give it. Anything less is unworthy of both.

The best place to start with a critique is to look for the good. Writers desperately need to hear that you enjoyed their tale. At some level I enjoy them all. I have never seen a story that didn't have some good quality to it, something the writer could build on. I try to note those good qualities for the writer: something good he can build around. There are usually several things a writer is doing right. Sometimes it's just script mechanics: spelling, format, shots - or lack of them. Sometimes the plot is great. Maybe he has just one fascinating character. I have never seen a story without at least one good quality and I like to note all the things the writer is doing well so he at least knows he has accomplished that much.

Many scripts could be drowned in a deluge of criticism. That is overwhelming - it makes people feel like putting the story aside and forgetting the *"Problem."* It's much more important to help the writer get to the next level of development. For example, a writer who is struggling with making vibrant and engaging characters doesn't need to hear about developing a motif.

What that writer does need is a lot of feedback about characterization. What did you really enjoy about the characters? What didn't work, why, and what do you suggest to make them better? If the hero came across as aloof and uncaring, then you need to suggest he make the character warmer. Add a couple of ways - show him in a more private scene baring his soul to his girlfriend as opposed to the rough exterior he usually shows to his business associates.

I view scripts being developed in three basic levels. The first is characterization, plot and subplot development, and script mechanics. If these are in shambles, that's what I'm going to focus on. I'll mention the other elements, especially if there was something good, but these three have to be there first.

The second level has to do with making a good story great. Writing so that there is unity of theme, crisp visual scenes, and a very thorough development. This is done by knowing how to develop a scene, subplots, pumping up dialogue, how to join scenes into segments - what a sequence is - and how to let a compelling piece of storyline drive a section of the story.

The third level has to do with aesthetics. Many stories can benefit from a motif and symbols; and exciting settings can add a lot to a story. If the script is beginning to address the second level, I'll mention these because they are part of the story, not add-ons.

Writer Profile: Christina Cottles - Writer, Staged Reading Participant for her screenplay,

Parades In The Night.

TV Intern, Teacher.

Following are excerpts from my interviews with Christina.

My mother is a writer and I have seen the gloomy part growing up. By being involved with Writers Workshop, I have gotten a lot of encouragement, and a lot of good critical feedback about my weaknesses. The hard part in Hollywood is to get someone to sit down with you and develop your talent. They don't want to take the time to find it and develop it themselves, they just want it to come to them. Willard is doing the hard part, the discovering and developing. It's a very valuable program for those who are up and coming and who want to develop their talent as much as possible and get as much positive feedback as possible without getting destroyed in the process.

I anticipated critical feedback from the development and reading process that would help me keep writing. There are two things I expected, either: "You and the story are terrible," or I fantasized, "It's a great script and we'll buy it tomorrow." It would be nice to get it down (the script written) the first time, but it just doesn't happen for most people. I've never seen a reading where people just said, "Oh, I loved your work," and got up and left - it just doesn't happen.

How did I feel after the reading? Exhausted. It's like you get a high off of writing and you feel good about it. You get to the critique part and you relax and it's like you never hear what you want or what you expect to hear. It's an exhausting process. Some of the points are well taken, but the more I think about whether my character changed, yes, he did change, but it's hard for me to answer that. I felt there was enough positive feedback. Even though they had some problems with the story, it wasn't like they were saying you're not a capable writer or the basics weren't working. I think after you get the basics down the hardest part is coming up with a believable story. A story anybody would like.

The feedback was constructive. I wasn't picked on. I've been picked on before and I know the difference. When I am I get this knot in my stomach

and I start getting tense and want to go punch the person. I've had teachers who weren't positive at all - I've been insulted by teachers - which had nothing to do with my writing, it was just personal. So I dropped the class. I'm not going to give someone my money to mess with me. To be petty and ugly and have the audacity to call yourself a professional....

The thing I like about Willard, I think he's a very fair person. His critiques are usually honest; he's usually on the money. I think he's good at this critiquing business. It's hard to find someone who is a good teacher, especially in this town. You get a lot of writers who don't really want to teach people to write. They need a job - they get a big kick out of saying, "I'm a teacher at UCLA or USC" - and they don't teach anything. You can tell they're holding back. They know more and they're not telling. Especially the ones who write themselves for a living, they seem to be very worried about their jobs. "I'm not going to teach you enough you can take my job." Some of them take your money, strip you of your confidence, then leave. I'm a teacher myself, and I know some of these people are counterproductive - especially those who insult other people. Willard is not afraid to give knowledge, which to me is very valuable. If you don't want to impart knowledge or tell anybody too much, then why be a teacher?

My advice to writers is to pick your teachers carefully. Don't feel that because they have a title that they're always right or they're the right teacher for you. Try the teacher and if they don't give, leave.

The Writers Workshop development and reading process relates somewhat to the industry, like in going to story meetings. I've seen professional writers for sitcoms get up there and their script doesn't work, or maybe it would even be funny in the reading but the script wouldn't work for the character. I find that even professionals have to constantly punch up scripts.

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Where To Get Help

Writer's Groups

Writer's groups are one of the best ways to find support. The people who attend the meetings are mostly people who genuinely want to write, improve their writing, and maintain contact with other writers.

Formal writer's groups, like those associated with arts councils, are usually attended by people who are reasonably sensitive to others' needs, and who typically don't assault each other's esteem. Most groups make their own bylaws or operating rules, so there is nothing consistent from group to group - it's strictly up to the members what they want to do.

Writer's groups are never perfect, so be prepared for their peculiarities. The membership of groups is fairly dynamic from year to year. Many writers stay indefinitely, but others move on, burn out, or lose interest. New faces show up regularly - fewer than half come back. Groups typically split every year or so as special interest groups congeal, and form their own group, as in children's writing, women's issues, science fiction writing, screenwriting, playwrighting, romance writing, and poetry.

Personalities also tend to drive groups apart: academic writers have a different mind set about writing forms than say a romance writer. If these differing groups aren't flexible, tension develops and people leave. Sex scenes and foul words, which may be legitimate to the story, may not be well received in a group. Test the waters before jumping in. Sometimes the group leadership forces a more rigid structure on the meeting than people want, or fails to provide enough leadership. Since groups for only screenwriters are rare, the writers in the group are accustomed to novels that tell exactly what a character is thinking and doing, so it is sometimes hard for them to follow and appreciate a screenplay. Thankfully, most members have had some experience with plays. The most important thing is to be supportive of others when they fail. I have seen many people bite off a larger chunk of a project than they can handle and a few weeks later fail to return because they are embarrassed. It's better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.

But most writer's groups are active, very accepting, friendly, more than willing to hear or read your work and give you feedback. In these groups, writers often have the opportunity, and feel comfortable, leading small seminars on writing

topics, or just contributing helpful information. Frequently individuals are willing to read your work independently and give you more feedback - especially if the favor is returned and not requested too often. Events of interest in the region typically are announced by various members. Sometimes contests are run for the area, and often the group will publish an annual representative sample of their work. They often have or sponsor guest speakers - usually someone connected with the writing industry. Sometimes it's just a great place to meet a friend and become mutually supportive.

How do you find writer's groups? Not in the phone book. Library bulletin boards and newspaper ads are the most common. Sometimes they are featured by local columnists. University writing teachers often know of groups. University bulletin boards sometimes list them. Playhouses (live stage theaters) sometimes have a bulletin board for such things; and the theater director or college theater department may know of groups. People connected with commercial writing, such as TV news; radio/TV/newspaper advertising; local publishers; high school theatrical, language, literature, writing teachers; newspaper columnists; or professional writers.

Writer's groups are very frequently sponsored by community arts councils - contact your local library or county government. Some cities have active film groups. Contact the city or state film commission (responsible for enticing film makers to the state) for leads on film groups. For example, the Kentucky Film Artist Coalition regularly sponsored meetings for writers and actors and sponsored seminars with major talents from New York and L.A. Denver and other cities have chapters of *Women In Film.*

If you find nothing in your community, try starting one yourself - meeting at home is common, acceptable, and often preferred. Or ask the local library or government if there is free space available for a weekly or monthly meeting. Advertise for members in the newspaper, library bulletin boards, local supermarket bulletin boards, etc.

Workshopping Scenes

One of the more fun things about screenplays is that they can be worked with by actors. I have done story development, readings, and staged readings with both writers and actors. The people involved get to know your story and characters and provide excellent feedback. They can often suggest new directions to take. They also give you an immediate sense of whether the scene or dialogue works or not, and how to fix them. I have used improvisation to get ideas for developing a story and characters, and for getting past a sticky point in a scene.

How do you find people to take part? Most people lead very busy lives, and many are somewhat shy and in doubt of their talents, so expect many people to decline. But many others are actively looking for opportunities to get

involved in interesting projects - these are the ones you are looking for. Local small theater groups, such as community theater or traveling production companies, are one source. Usually only a small number of their membership is active in a current production or coming production, so the rest (they all are employed at full-time jobs but act for fun) may have some interest in a project like this to sharpen their skills.

Writer's group members are often willing to read or act a part. The local arts council may sponsor a theater group. You may gain interest simply by advertising on bulletin boards. If you are interested in going this route, I recommend the book, *The Playwright's Handbook,* Frank Pike and Thomas Dunn, Plume, 1985. You may end up with a produced play as well as a screenplay (and a lot of fun and learning).

Feedback forms for friends

Many people will decline reading your screenplay because they don't know how to help. It's best to let people know specifically what you are after. For example, sometimes you just want to know if people enjoy the story or if they find it confusing anywhere. Other times you want to know how you are doing with a character. The best way to handle defining needs is to use a feedback form. You can create one for each situation, or you can use a more standardized form. I have had good success with forms, both with scripts and with staged readings. But expect that people will not answer every question - only the ones they feel comfortable with or have something specific to say. And some people prefer to give feedback verbally - they won't write a word. When you really want to know if you've produced a good screenplay, ask if they would pay to see it. It may not fit their personal taste, so ask if they would recommend it to others. Following this page are typical forms.

Education.

Educational opportunities abound. Most universities offer night classes for those wanting to get training in creative writing. Others, like Northwestern University, Chicago, offer full curriculums in writing, and sometimes offer extensions in other cities. As the film community migrates from Los Angeles, other communities are becoming centers of film activity, like New York and Miami, so universities there are offering full film curriculums. UCLA Extension offers courses on single weekends, multiple weekends, as well as regular courses. It also offers short courses in selected cities across the U.S. Many universities also offer creative writing courses by correspondence. These are worthwhile even though they are not specifically for film, because the most important part of writing for film is to get a good basic story developed. Other institutes, like Writers Digest, offer courses through correspondence which get you individualized professional attention.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Screenplays can only be improved through identifying problems. Your input is valued. If you have a definite opinion, please provide candid answers, as long or brief as you wish. Thank-you!

What did you really like?

_____
_____
_____

When were you confused?

_____
_____
_____

Was there anything you really disliked?

_____
_____
_____

Were you bored? If so, when?

_____
_____
_____

Did the story live up to expectations? ___Yes No___

Was the dialogue too long? ___Yes No___

Were the characters unique and have a voice of their own?

_____
_____

Did the characters seem real and have real motives?

_____
_____

Was the dialogue too preachy? ___Yes No___

Would you recommend this screenplay to a friend? ___Yes No___

Do you feel you would have paid to see this? ___Yes No___

What age group do you feel this story would appeal to? _____

The Reel Compleat Screenplay Test:

Use this test to help find areas needing improvement in your screenplay. Not every question applies to every screenplay.

CHARACTER

1. Did the characters seem real?

2. Did the characters have enough depth for the story?

3. Did the characters change emotionally or make decisions in applicable scenes and through the story?

4. Were the protagonist and antagonist well matched, or was the conflict unfair?

5. Were the characters likable and hateable?

6. Were character's intentions evident in their scenes?

7. Did the protagonist capture your interest?

8. Did the main characters seem to have clear objectives?

9. Did the main character take charge, or was he forced into everything?

STRUCTURE

1. Was the concept too big or complicated for a movie?

2. Was the story new and imaginative?

3. Did you know what the story was about within the first ten minutes?

4. Did the first five minutes capture your interest?

5. Did the first twenty minutes capture and hold your interest?

6. Did the storyline seem real?

7. Was the story obvious and predictable?

8. Did the story confuse you?

9. Did the story deliver what the beginning promised?

10. Did tension build until the climax?

11. Did the subplots seem related and interesting?

12. Did you lose interest in the story anywhere? Where?

13. Were the conflicts and obstacles big enough, or was the story lifeless?

14. Was the action too repetitive or boring?

15. Was the ending satisfying?

16. Was the pace too slow or fast?

17. Was three act development in evidence, complete with turning points, obstacles, conflict and plot twists?

18. Were there surprises?

19. Did things happen for no apparent reason?

SCENES & DRAMA

1. Did scenes seem to mesh with each other, or did they jump around and confuse you?

2. Were there enough interesting settings?

3. Was there conflict in most scenes?

4. Did characters glide through scenes, or did they usually react and change emotional states?

DIALOGUE

1. Was the dialogue crisp (short, focused) and real?

2. Were too many things spoken which should have been revealed through conflict and drama?

The Writers Workshop Process

National Writers Workshop, a nonprofit organization, offers three services to writers. Writing aids are available to help the writer improve. Screenplays are read and critiqued. Screenplays that have reached a significant benchmark in writing, and have potential, are put into the development process, which can lead to representation (by independent agents). The following information is from my interview with Willard Rodgers:

The Critique And Development Process

Anyone can submit a screenplay and we will give them a detailed written critique for $65.00 (subject to change). A $500.00 reward (subject to change) is given for each script accepted into the development program, and the critique fee is waved. We're always conscious of our credibility with the motion picture business and are constantly striving to develop it even further. We want the best screenplays and new writers in the nation to be submitted to this program, and those screenplays that are accepted must be special scripts.

When a script is submitted, it is entered into the computer and we make sure we have accurate information. Second, we go through our list of readers - a volunteer staff of readers who are located across the US - and call one to see if they are available to read it. We then send it out, requesting a detailed written critique. We insist the readers be constructive and detailed. It certainly doesn't do any good to come back and pound on a writer. Screenplays are very difficult to write and there is no room for personal attacks. We've had a lot of luck with that - we've established the atmosphere so it rarely happens.

When the critique comes back, I read it very carefully to see how constructive and detailed it is and how helpful it will be to the writer. If it's obvious the script is not ready for development, I won't read the script and will return it to the writer. If the screenplay shows promise, I will read it and if I feel it is very strong, I will ask one or two other people to read it and get their opinion. And based on that input, I'll determine if a script should be entered into the development process.

If not selected, I'll send it back to the writer with a detailed critique. Sometimes we may need two or three critiques to determine if a script should be accepted into development. All those critiques are sent to the writer.

The writer then takes the critique, rewrites the script, then sends it back to us. I read the script and if I feel it is ready to go out to the industry, I will circulate it. We almost always send them out. We send it to twenty to twenty-five agencies with whom we have long relationships, and whom we know want to see these scripts. They will either call or send us back a letter saying they are not interested. If they are interested, one of two things may

happen. They may say they don't want to make the movie but would like to meet the writer and see other samples of the writer's work. At this time we will call the writer and arrange an interview. Or if there is interest in purchasing or optioning a script, I will advise them to get an agent. If they don't know anyone, I will get them an agent to handle the negotiations. At this point, we drop out of it. In several cases the writer was hired as a staff writer. We will push the script as long as it is feasible to do so.

The development process is absolutely not limited to L.A. writers. They enter through our regular program and through contests. No other screenwriting contest in the US will put as many scripts a year into development. Normally one to three out of thousands of scripts. We need a lot of scripts to find those special scripts. We also help all the other writers who are not selected by sending them a very detailed written critique on how to improve it, and maybe next time when they submit it again their script will be accepted.

Things that would keep the script out of development are lack of character development, lack of story focus, lack of uniqueness, lack of surprises. Story focus and character development are the main two. If we see potential in a well developed script, we're happy to improve it further.

But we're not here just to find top scripts - that's a benefit of our program - we're here to help all writers at all stages of their development, and find and nurture new talent. There are people out there who have the potential to write great movies if they can only be given a boost. We have a national screenwriting contest for ethnic minorities in which we award five winners. Our goal is to develop ten quality scripts a year: five from the ethnic minority contest, and five or six from our regular program.

We're starting a brand new innovative program for high school students. I hope to encourage teachers and principals to make this a part of their regular creative writing curriculum. Screenwriting has never been used, and every kid knows about it from TV and movies - it should be used in the schools to encourage writing. There is no guidebook on how to write a screenplay at the level of the high school student, so we developed a booklet on how to write a screenplay (*How To Write A Screenplay*, by Dorian Scott Cole) that is geared toward high school students. I hope it becomes one of the most favorite student choices in writing classes. We'll get students introduced and interested in screen writing at an early age, which no one does at this point.

I think there is talent out there that can contribute to the motion picture industry with fresh ideas. We're not going to hide these young writers from the industry. We'll show these scripts to production organizations and explore getting writers interned at studios. Everyone is always looking for new talent, but always in the same places. No one has tapped this source, so we're going to move aggressively in this program - plus it's stimulating to me; it really excites me.

We offer a unique opportunity for writers. We're open to anyone regardless of the stage of their screenplay development. We instruct them on things they are unfamiliar with, or weak, including format and structure. I take an active public role in promoting the program, getting out meeting people in higher places we can use to field the program, talking to writers, enhancing our reputation. There is no other nonprofit organization so tied into the industry and so tied into new talent, and we can bring both of these elements together.

And we really are a charitable organization. I have been approached about turning it into a private business, but the charitable, reaching out aspect appeals to me. The biggest satisfaction in my job is changing someone's life in a positive way - this is more important to me than the heads of studios calling. Unlike a studio that necessarily has to be controlled by its bottom line and has limited resources to spend on developing writers, we're not just about money, we are genuinely here to support new writers.

SECTION II

STAGING A SCREENPLAY

The Rodgers' Technique

Staging a screenplay is extremely complicated if not impossible. Willard Rodgers, working with the film community in Hollywood for over thirteen years, has developed an efficient process which produces excellent results.

The process is intended to move a step beyond readers, to in front of a live audience, to show whether the basic story is sound prior to adding cinematic elements.

This process is not like story meetings, actor's script development, stage play readings, or scene workshops.

Because the process can be so complex if developed from scratch, the development process is included here so others can have the benefit of experience honed in front of Hollywood's finest, without wasting time reinventing the wheel.

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The Rodgers' Technique
For Staging a Live Presentation of a Screenplay
Presented by Willard Rodgers

Origins

My early background was in theater. I have a Masters in Theater and was very used to writers bringing in their plays and having them read in front of an audience for the purpose of critique. The process made sense to me and influenced my later decision to use readings with screenplays.

After my early stage experience I felt that stage was my thing - Actor, Director. Ted Lange was an American Film Institute (AFI) Fellow with whom I had worked in the theater, and he encouraged me to visit AFI, check it out and enroll. So I visited and observed the activities of the filmmakers - it was fascinating. I was accepted into their program as a Directing Fellow.

At that time, Fellows had to do five practice videos, be they scenes, short stories or the like. I picked plays as my subject matter. Let this be a lesson to others making the transition from theater to film. In hindsight I wish I had picked something more visual in order to have learned to use film more at that early stage of my development. There was a lot of criticism about the static nature of the pieces I did, and my not using visuals to their full capacity.

My thinking underwent a lot of change from theater sense to film, a medium which employs very different techniques. Initially I was attempting to tell the whole story in one interior setting, like most plays - practically everything is interior in plays and it doesn't work in film. In fact, the exteriors in film are usually the emphasis, whereas the opposite is true in most plays. But my theater experience was of bedrock importance. Once I successfully made the transition to film, there were some theater drama elements that stayed with me throughout my AFI tenure.

At AFI, direct, constructive criticism was one element that stood out as a means to mastering the technique of screenplay writing. I thought the process of critique was extremely valuable. It provided an outside objective look at

the writer's work, and there was an opportunity to receive feedback before filming the production.

One problem however, was the frequent degree of harshness of the screenplay critique, which in my mind was delivered at a personal level. Writers were often attacked as if there was something wrong with them simply because they delivered a script not yet fully developed.

That, to me, defeated the entire process. I always thought that the critique was intended to provide objective feedback to the writer on how to improve his script. It certainly shouldn't be based on a personal attack.

After graduating AFI, I had started writing a screenplay, then realized that there was no place it could be read and tested. In 1979 the AFI Alumni Association was started. I went before the executive board and presented the idea to create a format for screenwriters to have their works presented in front of an audience. The Board was a little baffled, but enthusiastically gave their unanimous support, hoping this would become an outreach to the community. They didn't quite understand how the technique was supposed to work, but it was my responsibility to execute the staged readings.

We started the Writers Workshop when the American Film Institute was still operating at the Greystone Mansion in Beverly Hills. I began working out of my home and staging the readings at AFI. The stable relationship established with the Alumni Association was a very important part of the equation necessary to develop the concept. They provided me with the space I needed, as well as moral support. In fact, some of the AFI faculty were the first moderators.

Since writers have enjoyed the reputation of living in isolation, there was just no forum for their work to be showcased. Naively, I didn't realize that what I proposed had never been done before, and that most expert opinion held that screenplays are meant to be seen and evaluated on screen. To my way of thinking, that was too late. You can't correct a screenplay when it's on film as a finished product. After I was engrossed in starting this process, I realized that there was no background - period - on staging a screenplay. This realization placed me in the position of creating the entire process.

Most of the writers were from AFI in the beginning. We were strictly an in-house activity where anyone could come and see the readings, but all the scripts were from graduates of AFI and it was run by AFI. I wanted to do readings once a month so I could develop the process quickly, but there weren't enough AFI Alumni writers. This program ostensibly started as a community outreach where the alumni were going to contribute to the general community by bringing their expertise there. So we began to accept outside scripts in 1981, a key moment in our development. That's basically how we got started.

How The Process Developed

Editing The Script

From the first reading it was obvious to me that the process could work. What surprised me most was how clearly the story flowed. The rhythm became evident, whether it was slow, fast, and whether unnecessary material was there. You could understand the screenplay with all of its faults. We began experimenting to develop the technique.

We couldn't use the same format as reading a stage play. Stage plays typically account for the dramatic action offstage. There are sound effects and the actors talk about it, but you don't see the actual battle. In a screenplay, there might be three hundred characters and a war going on. Dramatic action is supposed to be visual. How do you show that in a reading so the audience can see it? It's through the proper use of narrative.

When the first reading occurred, I immediately noticed excessive narration. The narrative becomes a cloud, obscuring information that is really important. If you tried to read all the narration, about thirty percent of it contributed to the story and the rest of it was nonessential or even pedestrian language: "He goes to the door, opens it, goes outside." That was quickly condensed to, "He leaves." By editing narrative, the reading became more vivid.

At first I asked the writers to edit, but it never worked. Invariably they would take out two or three words on a page and it really didn't help. They felt *everything* was important. I was reluctant to start editing the writer's material. My idea was that the work be presented from the writer's point of view. My sensitivities are with the writers and their material. But I began to edit the scripts and the readings improved.

There wasn't a lot of cutting, but I immediately got insight into how editing made a significant difference in expressing the writer's intent, the story, characterization. The story acquired focus. That was the first key to making readings successful.

The entire process, with its uniqueness, began to come alive, and that was very gratifying. But at this point we couldn't yet read entire screenplays because it would have taken at least three and a half hours, and we would have worn out the actors and lost the audience.

Actors

We needed actors who could read in our unique format. Many couldn't keep their concentration when the narrator was reading. Others read line for line rather than concentrating on their character and where their character was going. So we began screening for these abilities.

When you have one actor playing several roles and you have seventy characters in the script, somehow you have to isolate the actors who are speaking from the remaining cast on-stage. With twelve actors, and several switching roles, it's hard for the audience to concentrate. They are looking over the actors trying to determine what actor and what character are speaking.

We began to have the actor who was speaking stand up so the audience could focus on who was talking. It personalized the performance more and gave it additional dramatic flavor. More importantly, the audience became engaged by what was occurring scene by scene. Suddenly there were two actors standing up and ten sitting down, so the audience could focus only on the two. With actors playing multiple roles, it was necessary to introduce the new character each time an actor rose.

Actors prefer to move as they act. They walk around, get next to other characters, mime action scenes, and use gestures and body language to punctuate their lines. However, if actors tried to put these physical actions with their lines, it broke the rhythm and their concentration.

Narrator

Early on we realized that the narrator is another key component of the staged readings. Screenplays don't focus on dialogue as much as plays do. The story uses things besides dialogue to tell the story. The narrator makes scene transitions visual, condenses dramatic exchanges, describes offstage action, rotates characters in and out of the performance, provides sound effects, and interjects other essential elements into the live readings.

We began with the narration being read by one person, and that was a major weakness. The reader had to bring the audience into the story, into the feeling of what was going on. It couldn't be mechanically read, just to give the audience the information, it had to be dramatized. The narrator had to substitute for the camera, and where the camera would capture an image to bring out emotion, the narrator had to serve the same function. The narrator brought passion and a sense of excitement from moment to moment by describing what was going on, and communicating the drama to the audience. The narrator's attitude meant everything in shaping the audience reaction.

At first, before we began doing significant editing, the narrator tired a third of the way through the script and the performance became boring. That taught us that a key element for the narrator was to establish the rhythm and pace of the performance.

Moderator

Another key innovation was to invite an established writer in the business to moderate a critical discussion about the script, with audience participation. At first, getting qualified moderators on board with the idea was a problem. Every single person would say, "Stage read a screenplay? They're meant to be shown on film, or read at a desk. I never heard of that - you can't evaluate ...." It was difficult to convince experienced screenwriters that this was a legitimate process for understanding screenplays. But those who ultimately participated saw it working.

One of the first moderators was Lois Peyser, who was a writer affiliated with AFI. Lois's role in those early years was to establish the format for critical discussion of the screenplay after the reading. Her focus was to lead a structured analysis of the script: a critical discussion which was constructive without personally attacking the writer.

Having a moderator was essential. The critiques lacked leadership without the moderator; and when you brought in an established person with long credits, it added legitimacy to the entire event. Whereas, if the audience alone provided feedback to the writer, it wasn't as "professional." On rare occasions where there was no moderator, it showed up in the critiques.

Critiques

It took a while to gain control of the critiques and shape them with the writer's needs in mind. In the beginning, there were a lot of actors who came to the readings and actively participated in the critique. Naturally they were more interested in the acting than the strengths of the script. They, and everyone else, talked about the role and how they would prepare for it, and gave extremely long background information on the story, then explained the story and their critique. As welcome as their input was, the critique swayed far off course when the actor's point of view became the focus. We began to get more writers involved.

I also began to lay some ground rules. "We've all heard the story, so tell exactly what you thought without explaining the story." I tried to focus the question and answer session by asking the audience to simply state, "I didn't think the character worked because I didn't understand the motivation for him doing this," or, "I didn't understand the motivation for him chasing this person."

Staging and Props and Costumes

The settings and props for stage plays are relatively compact and not to difficult to assemble. But for a screenplay, how do you bring a car on stage

and blow it up? How do you present a chase scene all over the city of Dallas, then New York, then up the Empire State Building? We tried several schemes, but any props used in a screenplay staged reading break up the rhythm of the text. Props and costumes were ruled out.

We tried many approaches to staging. We tried positioning the actors. We tried isolating sections of the stage to simulate locations. We isolated a certain part of the stage to suggest the interior of a character's house and another area was a lot downtown. You might have thirty to forty locations in a screenplay. It became too complicated and required several more rehearsals, so we abandoned that approach. Staging is out.

Editing, Casting and Characters

Once the script is edited, we do a Character Breakdown Chart. That means that we tabulate every single actor in the screenplay, every character in the screenplay, and which pages they have lines on. The chart allows us to cast actors in multiple roles so there is no conflict or overlap. You can't cast a staged reading without the chart. Before we invented editing and the chart, we spent six hours at the first rehearsal, and did four rehearsals whose time was mostly invested in straightening things out. Now we do two rehearsals, and the time is all spent rehearsing.

The Character Breakdown Chart evolves into a casting breakdown. On that we list the actor's name and the character he will play. Our style of casting and character breakdown is unique to the staged reading technique. The actors can pick up the scripts, character breakdown, and casting prior to rehearsals and know exactly what they are doing. We have to explain very little to them. They can study their roles and know exactly what their lines are.

Summary

In the early years the staged reading concept was based on a theatrical precedent. Lengthy scripts and the writer's proprietary relationship with every word made it difficult for us to prepare scripts properly for staged readings. We had to overcome treating the performance as a stage play, and see that there is an economy of language and a style that was unique to the reading concept.

I vividly remember the first time I strongly edited a script. The reading took on a whole new environment making the focus of the story dynamic in the reading. It was an action script. I edited the script, then started having the actors stand, and I brought a couple of narrators to read. The performance took on a rhythm within itself. The audience came alive and for the first time clearly understood an entire script.

It was that exact combination that created the precise chemistry for the reading: editing, the actors standing when they read, and two narrators. Before, the narrator would burn out, the audience would get restless, the actors couldn't maintain focus, and there was no rhythm to it.

There is no consistency if you bring in a little, but not all, so no costumes, props, effects, settings, or trying to simulate locations - all proved unmanageable, and not helpful. Totally in limbo, there is a synergy with the actors, narrator, rhythm, and audience that integrates and enhances the entire piece.

The process of staged reading and critique is a total event. The reading clearly communicates the story to the audience without them having to read the script. Anyone can come in off the street, hear the script read, and understand it clearly enough to provide constructive feedback to the writer. The reading points out what works, what doesn't, and when things get slow or confusing.

Excursus Four: The Movie Making Process

Making a movie is a collaborative effort. Every person involved adds a unique part of themselves. As a result, egos often ignite like the incendiary devices they often are. But the resulting product is usually enhanced by everyone's contribution.

The writer begins the process. He develops a unique storyline that captures the imagination of others. What the writer presents is like a still shot, the idea, the form that he translates into a sketch of dramatic action. He knows all the characters intimately and senses how they will react in the situations he creates. In creating, he portrays some sense of the visual component.

The reader, who works for a producer, knows what will work and what will be well received. The reader is the first audience, and if she isn't pleased, the producer who reads her coverage won't want to read the script.

The director is often the first person to respond in a creative way to what the writer has written. He doesn't know the characters intimately and he responds only to what the writer has written. The director sees the shadowy images in the script and may see a new fresh image from the information he has read. He sees the possibilities of other directions. In tune to a very different world, his imagination may spark a similar or a very different vision from what the writer has presented.

A story editor and new writers may be next to respond creatively to the writer's basic story. They may have special expertise that lets them develop the director's image.

Actors are the next group to respond creatively to the story. As an actor develops a character he will probably emphasize different aspects than what the original writer did. The character may take unexpected mannerisms and characteristics, may have new desires, may become a different person. Portions of the script may have to be rewritten to accommodate the actor's vision of the character.

Along the way a host of other people involved in the process may have input which influences the final outcome of the film. The final group that responds creatively is the reviewers and test audiences. Their input about what they liked and didn't like may send the film back for more revision and shooting.

Director Profile: Willard Rodgers, Founder and Director of Writers Workshop

You never know what people are going to be like in Hollywood. The stories that make the rounds are about unapproachable people with big egos and no time for others (putting it politely). My experiences have all been good. I know that most of the business is populated by people who are sincere and helpful - but necessarily very busy and out of reach.

I was immediately disarmed by Willard. He maintains contact with all the major studios and has a long list of friends in the industry. But he is unassuming and definitely not pretentious. He talks about his growing cynicism and becoming more cautious because so many people have tried to misuse him. But after thirteen years of running Writers Workshop in '94, he is still a very approachable person willing to help anyone who shows the talent. He is personable and a gracious host, and it's difficult to feel uncomfortable around Willard.

There are two stories he likes to tell, examples of what he has done for others: "A kid from Baltimore had never seen a screenplay, but he had this urge to write, so he sent me about two hundred pages of non-formatted story about an umpire on a team in a small town. I laughed about three times a page. I said, this guy has talent, so I called him. "You have a unique talent and I want to help you develop your story and put it into a format." Twenty-three years old. We worked over a year, then I invited him out for a reading. After the reading, people sat and laughed all night. The next week, he had sold his screenplay. No training, just instinct. He landed an agent at William Morris, sold it to Lorimar Productions and made headlines in the L.A.Times. I know without Writers Workshop, this would not have happened."

But the story doesn't end there. "This one arm guy, who had been in prison all his life for murder, and who lived a clean life after getting out, but was living on the streets collecting cans, read about this guy from Baltimore. The next day he jumped in his truck with his wife, headed out to L.A. with a forty page handwritten story, no format. His truck broke down in L.A., so they hitchhiked to my office at MGM. I began reading and could not take my eyes off of it. Within an hour I had called him and told him to get back over here. I went over screenplay format with him, and showed him how to improve the story.

"He was sitting at the door the next Monday, his typing finger swollen from typing. We developed it some more and scheduled a staged reading. I put

out a press release about this guy's background. The L.A. Times did a feature story on him. This guy had killed several people, had had brain surgery, and it was one of the biggest feature articles the L.A. Times had ever written. The story came out the day before the reading, which we did at AFI. We got five hundred calls from people who wanted to attend, most from within the industry. It was chaos - people calling from around the world, on TV several times. He sold the screenplay. He was supposed to give us 5% - that's our deal. But he skipped and requested his other script back."

Willard came from a humble background, which was probably as motivating and influential as a background can be. He was one of twelve children of a sharecropper family in Arkansas. After he joined the Navy, he and two others were separated from the three hundred other recruits and told they were not smart enough. He ran back to his barracks and hid under his bed, crying and swearing this would never happen to him again. That humiliating experience drove him to excel.

He stayed in the Navy by agreeing to take correspondence courses. After his tour, he finished high school, junior college, then earned a degree in anthropology at California State University, Fullerton. He went on to study social work at UC Berkeley as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, then earned his masters degree in theater arts from USC. After that he graduated from the Director's Program at American Film Institute (AFI). After a stint as a TV writer, he returned to AFI with an innovative proposal. No one in the industry was doing staged readings of screenplays, but he knew they would have enormous value. He established the original Writers Workshop program through the AFI Alumni Association. He could undoubtedly command a good position with a studio at a good salary. But what does he want?

"I would really like to see myself as having made some important contributions to people and changed their lives. I think that's the essence of what I would like to go out with. I've learned to appreciate the saying that 'the most important thing in life is what you leave to others or give to others.' I think that's the most satisfying.

"Before the Somali crisis, I saw volunteers go to Somalia and try to soothe these people in the most incredible situation, around disease and starvation, and earning no money. That's something incredible, that people can give so much to other people simply for the satisfaction that they have helped them, and it has nothing to do with money. It's really amazing. I think those people are heroes. They go there and give their life to it. People like the Somalis would not be helped unless it was for people willing to give. They would just die. That is a drive in my life, too, that I have given something."

Willard has so much going for him in writing and directing - he does write - I wondered why he has never pursued a writing career himself. "I never claim I was 'a writer.' I'm a good writer, but not a writer. I don't have to write. But I wrote enough to really understand the process. I wrote and directed a film

at AFI. I worked as a TV staff writer at Paramount, and several other organizations. I have written two screenplays; one was optioned. I don't have a love of writing, so I have no ambitions to be a writer. I learned enough that I can really empathize with writers, understand them, because I've experienced it over a period of time myself. It is something that helps me understand and appreciate the difficulties of it. I understand the importance of remaining constructive."

Similarly I wondered about his teaching screenwriting. I had firsthand comments that he is an excellent teacher. And the late Ben Benjamin, of ICM - considered one of the most powerful and most likable agents around - said his readings at AFI crackled and sparkled from his leadership. "I teach a class at Writers Workshop we created, called *From Concept To Completed Screenplay In Twelve Weeks.* I enjoy teaching, but my priority now is creating something unique and making it work, that I love doing. I think I've had a pattern of that. As a senior in college, in Orange County - fifteen thousand students, but only seven blacks - a semester before I graduated I went to the administration and said, "Look, I want to bring more minorities into this school." They hadn't thought about that, even though in '67 people were getting into that.

"They said, 'Well, OK. How do you want to do it?' I went out and recruited forty-five minority students, got them into college, got them enrolled, got financial aid for them - they gave me a $200.00 operating account - and from there their affirmative action program was started. It was from such obscure beginnings, they don't even remember it, but it's what I did and it was one of my proudest achievements. I just dove in and said I want to do this.

"That's the way I've always done things. Compton College didn't have a drama department, and they said, 'Come out and start a drama department.' I had no experience, but I went there and I did it. And that program is still going. There are several other programs that I have created, including this Writers Workshop. No program had existed like this, no staged reading of screenplays existed until I created it. And that's my joy - innovator. That's what my life is about. I can't walk in another person's footsteps; why do something that someone else has done? That's what God made them to do.

"This high school screenwriting program we're developing really excites me - it gets my adrenaline going - because it hasn't been done before. It's new territory and it's going to let me get out there and challenge myself - a lot of new problems - it's fun and something that I will leave there and people will use year after year."

For the past several years Willard has promoted minority screenwriting. I asked him how that got started. "The program started in '79 and we started the Ethnic Minority Contest in around 1990. In '88 the WGA West came out with a report that the industry hires only about 1% minority writers, and those that get hired are only for a onetime thing. It's very normal to go to every

show on TV and see that there are no minority writers even though the shows are geared toward minorities.

"In '78, I was one of three in the nation that was network staff. At Paramount, there might be five hundred people on the lot in all phases of the business, and I was the only Black. I decided I was going to participate and see what I could do. I went to Disney, and fortunately they were thinking about the same thing and they immediately funded the program for three or four years. It's proven out that the talent within the minority community was not being utilized, because now there are quite a few good writers hired. There was a definite need there, the same way there is a definite need for tapping high school talent - it isn't a racial issue as much as talent that wasn't being utilized."

I asked Willard what he would like people to know. "I would like to let people know that there are a lot of people out there who are interested in new writers. We have a large volunteer staff who really take the time and effort to do detailed written critiques - because they like it, they don't get paid - and I really want to thank the readers because we couldn't exist without them. That's very important to me that they know that I appreciate them. I'm dying for people to know that I appreciate that help, because that has been the foundation and lifeblood of the program. Without them we couldn't exist.

"There have been moments where people just out of the blue came along at a critical time and literally just saved the program. I really owe a lot to a lot of people who have never asked me a dime for their services, and it has really given me faith in human beings again. I don't feel like anyone actually owes me anything, because I do it because I want to do it. If they want to thank me, I really appreciate it, but I do it for myself, because I love what I'm doing. In some ways I can thank them for allowing me to do what I want to do."

Thanks, Willard, from those of us on the receiving end of your help, which is skillfully and freely given.

Flatus & afflatus (Gas & Inspiration)

My children (who are almost launched on their own now) often give me an astounded look after I make some revelation, and ask, "How did you know that?" To which I always reply, "I know everything." That's part of the illusion of being a parent. (They have suspected since age two that I know very little, but I continue the illusion anyway, just to satisfy myself.) Their mother is just as astonishing. Before anyone had a chance to tell, she would confront them at the front door and ask why they got in trouble. They would give her an astonished look and ask, "How did you know?" Mother's intuition is very keen, and supports the illusion that kids can get away with nothing. (I sure don't.)

So I had to ask myself, "Where did I get this illusion that I can write a book about repairing screenplays? After all, I'm a Hollywood outsider whose major film experience is as an audience. Maybe that is the reason." Well, I have a big ego, and I won it fair and square in a card game. But I won my wife there, too, and her self-appointed mission in life is to keep me humble. She carries a pin for that express purpose. Whenever she sees the ego bubble growing, she sneaks up behind me and pops it. But seriously, she is my best content editor, and whenever she sees muck, she hastens to inform the bung hole of contamination.

Illusion is a marvelous thing. I think I can, so I do. Visualization and positive thinking actually work for some people. Seeing is believing; you see a hologram, it really isn't there, but the object appears to stand in front of you. Would a picture be any less real because it was a hologram, or would it be even more effective? How real is reality? Neurological researcher Wilder Penfield was able to cause patients, during brain surgery, to simulate a Near Death Experience - going into the tunnel, seeing a bright light, etc. - by electrically stimulating an area of the Sylvian Fissure. Is this spiritual world real or illusion?

Stanislav Grof, M.D., in his book, *The Holotropic Mind*, referred to Maya, a mysterious ethereal principle symbolizing the illusion that creates the world of matter. Are we really what we think we are, or do we become what we think? Shirley Maclaine, in *Out On A Limb*, referred to Maya as the visitor from another planet, which is thought possible by some as a projection from another universe. Illusions of things never proven? In Buddhism, Maya means "illusory, the world of error, ignorance, self delusion, which we are to overcome." Most of us are left scratching our heads and wondering if we can ever really know anything for certain.

Illusion can just as easily be delusion. Where is that point where illusion crosses over into delusion? Is it where what we want to believe coincides with what we choose to see? What I do know for certain is that where there

is real love, illusion matters little because divine guidance can't be far removed and delusion can't stand.

Why is any of this important? What difference does it make about a movie, something people use to entertain themselves? Movies are the ultimate illusion. The characters on the screen seem to take real form as real people with real lives involved in real events. We become emotionally involved - empathetic - with the story and characters. Yet for the most part, nothing is real about it - even the images are only momentary flashes of light, still, lifeless snapshots of people acting out an even grander illusion. They are other people's interpretation of life: producer's, writer's, director's, actor's, musician's and film editor's. And the movie, after all, is influenced less than by reality than by what these people think will sell. Sell? Is the buck the ultimate deception? Nay, what they believe will sell is determined by what you will buy. Full circle, is it the ultimate self-delusion.

So why movies? Why art? Why the delusion? Art and the humanities reflect life. The sociologist, the actor, the minister, the writer, each portrays life as he knows it. Whether or not it is ultimately real, it is real for them at that moment of experience. How can you portray life if you haven't lived? (experiential.) How can you give hope that there are answers if you have found none yourself? Is it any wonder that eighty percent of writers write as a side occupation - they are engaged in life through some other pursuit?

At each stage of a person's life, they have a hunger for answers and experiences to share. This is the really great hope I can share with other writers: you are a unique person and you will find unique experiences, solutions, and points of view you can share with others, either in a direct telling, or because it influences what you write. If the script doesn't sell, then you have benefited from writing by becoming more integrated in your own belief.

We all must cross over the threshold into reality occasionally no matter how much we don't believe, because it isn't healthy to exit by the window on the tenth floor, and we all (most of us) still have to eat to stay alive. I grew up with a love of reading, but stopped reading fiction for several years because I feared writers could not resist crossing the line between stories based on fact and stories based on falsehood.

For example, do stories about romance glamorize love to the point that people become deluded about what love is and so enter relationships in search of the trappings of love without entering into the substance of it? I'm a moralist - all my stories have a point to them. I don't hang that responsibility around other writers' necks, but I do think writers have a responsibility to stick to what is real (fantasy and farce exempted), not bogus. There are enough windows to open for people to see new worlds of possibilities, which mirror real life, without fabricating false knowledge.

But writers are creative and imaginative people. I tend to operate intuitively - most creative people do - yet because of my sciences background I tend to turn analytical and subject everything intuitive to a thorough hammering by philosophical logic and analysis. For me it's a healthy approach to writing. The same for this book. The help given in this book tends not to vary far from the beaten path, however it is new and creative in that it is couched in terms and illustrations which seem to me to be more illustrative and easy to understand.

I have to add my bit of advice, of course. It's my book and I'm very opinionated, in case you haven't noticed.

1) Absorb knowledge. Research, investigate, read, learn. experience. We gain knowledge in order to control. But then we explore knowledge in order to participate in it. The latter is better than the former.

2) Live, love, laugh, and be happy. Trite, but true. The less you live, the less you have to write about. Experience. Explore life as fully as possible and enjoy it. Various aspects of life work together synergystically so the total is always greater than the sum of their parts. A housewife and mother's life skills are much more applicable to running a million dollar business than the too frequent manager's who has no people and organizational skills and measures his self-esteem by business success.

3) Integrate your experientially gained knowledge. Forget finding yourself and discovering who you are. Look at your life experiences and be involved in who you are becoming.

4) Write about it now that you have the perspective to illustrate some aspect of the human condition, because the struggle is just important to others as it was to you. I don't mean every story has to be "relevant," God forbid; I'm more pleased watching *Total Recall* than some "totally relevant" drama. But I do mean being able to write scenes like those with the underdog, mutant Martians, by understanding how underdogs feel and interact.

Enough illusion and delusion! What is the elusive principle, Maya perhaps, that makes successful writing a concrete reality? Sometimes it is zeitgeist: the time is pregnant with people's need for the story and the writer's gifts. Some days it is knowing the right people, being in the right place at the right time. Sometimes it is being a master of the art. And I think for every writer it takes an internal drive similar to an Olympian's - a little inspiration and a lot of perspiration. Some days success takes all of the above. OK, so what has this book to do with it?

I can't tell anyone how to write a blockbuster movie. Probably no one can. This book includes all the mistakes I know not to make, all the tricks I could think of to get past obstacles, and is directed toward the people who want to learn how to write a story without drowning in mistakes. I have based this on sound writing principles without getting too "academic." And since getting

out of the stereotype rut is such a big problem, I have tried to emphasize ways to be original and have devoted a large section to challenging stagnant thinking. If I have accomplished these things, then I haven't deluded myself. Even though I can't make master writers of anyone, I do hope to shorten their path. Good luck!

GLOSSARY OF SPECIAL TERMS

This is not a glossary of screenplay terms. This is a glossary with definitions peculiar to the way certain words are used specifically in this book. It may be convenient to understanding some of the terms in this book, to consult the following list and the index. For definitions, consult a textbook or other authoritative work in the field.

Act: Single character behavior that is based on character motivations, obstacles, and conflict. (Also, a major portion of a screenplay, such as: act 1, act 2, act 3.

Action: Single or multiple character behavior, driven by character motivation, which results from character interaction with each other and obstacles. Dramatic action. Action is not physical movement; however, physical movement may be included in the action.

Action Movie: Movie that has a lot of exciting physical movement, high drama (as in danger), and a fast pace.

Antagonist: The main opposing character; often "the bad guy."

Character Life: Wants, needs, and motivations that stem from the character's psychological, sociological, spiritual, and physiological development, and main formative events in the character's past, which interact with the character's relationships and circumstances.

Contrived Plot: Events arranged to manipulate the character. In a normal story, the characters create their own destiny by their own actions.

Formative Events: The main events in a character's life which have shaped their motivations.

Load motif: Give meaning to the motif elements by associating events and possibly symbols, so a mood is established when the elements are shown. See motif.

Load Symbols: Give meaning to the symbol by associating elements with it. See symbol.

Motif: A repeating mood or theme created by the display of objects or patterns (behavioral, ideas or themes, visual, auditory). Unlike symbols, which have no inherent meaning, motifs may be natural (such as colors) or may be constructed by loading them.

Main Character: The character whom the audience most closely follows, and who is the driving force that makes the plot possible.

Main Characters: Group of characters whose motivations drive the plot and subplot.

Mirror Character: An undeveloped character who lacks motivation or personality of his own, so defaults to the writer's motivations and whims.

Plotting: The intelligent foresight of what could happen, given the characters, and situation, with the character exercising control of his own destiny.

Protagonist: The main character who has worthwhile motives. In simple terms the main good guy. The person around whom the story revolves. The main person who drives the story forward.

Symbol: An easily recognizable pattern or object that represents an idea, situation, event, etc. Symbols have no inherent meaning in themselves, but represent what they have been designated to represent.

APPENDIX A: REFERENCE SHELF

Books & Movies

 I have made no attempt to formally and exhaustively review and list all the reference books or movies that might be helpful. The following is a list of books frequently mentioned by others, or consistently used by myself. If it is on this page, I can vouch for its merits. These books are available at local libraries and bookstores (may be ordered), or may be available through the Samuel French Theater & Film Bookshop, 7623 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, CA 90046. Ph. 213-876-0570, FAX 213-876-6822. Out of area: Ph. 800-822-8669, CA: 800-722-8669. These sources and references are given as a courtesy to the reader, and I have no financial or other relationship with the sources.

Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1946. (Note: Covers many aspects of story development with emphasis on human motives.)

Field, Syd. *Screenplay*, New York: Dell, 1982.
        Selling Your Screenplay, New York: Dell, 1989 (Note: Syd, a screen consultant, is the author of several books on screenwriting; his latest is *4 Writers*.)

Pike, Frank and Dunn, Thomas. *The Playwright's Handbook*, New York: NAL Penquin, Inc., 1985.   (Note: This book from the theater is a good resource for story development, workshopping scenes, and live readings.)

Seger, Linda. *Making A Good Script Great*, 1987. (Note: Linda, a script consultant, is the author of several books on screenwriting. Emphasis is on rewriting.)

Stuart, Linda. *Getting Your Script Through the Hollywood Maze*, Venice California: Acrobat Books, 1992. (Note: Linda, a screenwriting instructor and story analyst, gives an insightful look at what readers and producers reject, like, and why.)

Whitcomb, Cynthia. *Selling Your Screenplay*, 1988. (Note: Cynthia, a writer, gives advice on getting in the business with good scripts.)

Writers Workshop carries a series of "*live workshops on audio tape*."

Other Thought Provoking Books

Some books I have found very thought provoking because they are on the cutting edge of philosophy, psychology or science (relating to character change and the meaning of life), or they are landmarks in their field, or because they are exemplary in the way they present characters or information. I don't necessarily endorse what they say.

Andreas, Connirae. *Core Transformation*, Reaching The Wellspring Within, Utah: Real People Press, 1994. (Note: Ten steps facilitating personal change related to relationships, anger, illness and abuse.)

Broughton, Richard. *Parapsychology, The Controversial Science,* New York: Ballantine, 1992. (Note: favorable report on research findings using strict scientific methodology.)

Bruner, Jerome. *Acts Of Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990. (Note: A new transforming view of psychologies that refocuses on cultural (folk) psychology as providing society with its meaning framework, with much emphasis on narrative (story) as the vehicle for meaning. Art mimics life. Life mimics art.

Eco, Umberto. *The Limits Of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990. (Note: Symbols and myth: open architecture. Serials and the meaning of repetition.)

Fingarette, Herbert. *The Self In Transformation*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963. (Note: Psychoanalytic view.)

Grof, Stanislav. *The Holotropic Mind,*: The three levels of human consciousness and how they shape our lives, New York: HarperCollins, 1992. (Note: Resulting from years of original and unique research with thousands of subjects.)

Howatch, Susan. *Glittering Images*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1987. (Note: fiction. Excellent wholistic characterization.)
Kohn, Alfie. *No Contest,* The Case Against Competition, New York: Houghton Mifflin,1992. (Note: The counterproductive results of competition, compared to other forms of motivation.)

Loftus, Elizabeth. *The Myth Of Repressed Memory*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. (Note: False memories and abuse.)

Luscher, Max. *The Luscher Color Test*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1969. (Note: Worth looking at because of its unique use of color as a pathway into the psyche. Psychological revelations are often appallingly on target.)

Muller, Wayne. *Legacy Of The Heart*; The Spiritual Advantages Of A Painful Childhood, New York: Simon & Schuster, Fireside Book, 1992. (Note:

Includes the twelve common reactions to childhood pain, and exercises to help integrate them.)

Naylor/Willimon/Naylor. *The Search For Meaning,* Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994. (Note: Searches for meaning through exploring meaninglessness, separation, having, and being. Obvious biases. Interesting life matrix, and results diagrams.)

Sheehy, Gail. *Passages,* NewYork: Bantam, 1984. (Note: Explores the typical drives of people at various stages of life.)

Movies With Exemplary Plotting

Dead Again, 1991, UIP/Paramount/Mirage
        Writer: Scott Frank
        Director: Kenneth Branagh

Total Recall, 1990, Guild/Carolco
        Writers: Ronald Shushett, Dan O'Bannon, Gary Goldman.
        Story: Philip K. Dick Director: Paul Verhoeven

The Fugitive, 1993, Warner Bros.
        (Information unavailable in published sources, 1994)

Movies With Exemplary Characterization

Fiddler On The Roof, 1971, UA/Mirisch
        Writer: Joseph Stein. Story: Sholom Aleichem
        Director: Norman Jewison

Fried Green Tomatoes, 1991, Rank/Act III, Electric Shadow
        Writer: Fannie Flagg, Carol Sobieski.
        Director: Jon Avnet

Groundhog Day, 1993
        (Information unavailable in published sources 1994)

Grumpy Old men
        Director: Harold Ramis (Information unavailable in published
sources, 1994)

It's A Wonderful Life, 1946, RKO/Liberty Films
        Writers: Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, Frank Capra.
        Director: Frank Capra

Mr. Holland's Opus,
(Information unavailable in published sources 1996)

Scrooged, 1988, Paramount/Mirage
Writer: Mitch Glazer, Michael O'Donoghue.
Director: Richard Donner

Short Circuit, 1986, Rank/PSO
Writers: S.S. Wilson, Brent Maddock
Director: John Badham

On TV, Bedford Falls Productions creates highly character oriented stories: *My So Called Life, Sisters, Relativity*. David E. Kelly combines strong characters and strong plotting in Picket Fences and Chicago Hope.

Movies With Unique Plot Development

It's A Wonderful Life (See previous listing)

Fried Green Tomatoes (See previous listing)

Joy Luck Club, Buena Vista Pictures/Oliver Stone Productions
(Information unavailable in published sources, 1994)

Forrest Gump, 1994 (Information unavailable in published sources, 1994).

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