

Cultural Daily

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10 Things Screenwriters Do That Tick Me Off

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, June 30th, 2011

At least ten times a day, 365 days a year, somebody asks me to read a script. And that's now, when I've taken a year off from producing to write a book and start this blog! When I was running a company, I was asked 50 times a day, and I'd read two of them, so suffice it to say I've read a lot of scripts.

With this many pages turned and scrolled, I have developed a highly opinionated list of things screenwriters do that tick me off. I'm sure they have a list of things I do to tick them off, and hey, I'll publish that too.

10 Things Screenwriters Do That Tick Me Off

1. Starting with "Shit." I've read so many scripts that start this way: the first line of dialogue, one-third of the way down the first page, is "Shit." It's supposed to make us like the main character because something goes against him and he's relatable, and he says "Shit." As soon as I see that, I stop reading. It is a lame and tired opening. It worked once, in *Four Weddings and Funeral*, when the Hugh Grant character says "fuck," and only "fuck," a couple of dozen times when he wakes up late. It is hilarious. But, (1) it was "fuck" not "shit," (2) it was a couple of dozen times, (3) that was 17 years ago, so (4) it's been done. Next.
2. Women with guy's names. Sam. Alex. Jesse. Syd. C'mon. First, women with guy's names occur only in scripts written by, well, guys. Second, I know what you're going for – a female lead that men can relate to as well as women. A female who's tall, hot, looks good in jeans, watches football, drinks beer from a bottle and digs hotel porn. Well, I will grant that she does have a guy's name, but there is only one Cameron Diaz, and she's not doing your movie.
3. While we're on it, can we stop giving men one-syllable names? Jack, Ben, Rex. *Really?* How about some characters that are really interesting, with names to match. And since we're at it, how come you use a male character's *last* name for the character slug, while you use a female character's *first* name? Because you think the last name emphasizes men's grounded maleness, while a first name shows a woman's femininity? Yes, it screams sexist...and shows you have forgotten that more than half of your audience is female.
4. Speaking of the audience, not knowing who the audience is. Typical conversation... Me: "Who's the audience for this movie?" Screenwriter: Dumbstruck silence. If you don't know who's going to buy a ticket, why did you write the script?

5. Giving me something I have seen before. I don't mean a previous draft – if I thought your first draft was decent and I told you I'd read it again, I will (or at least I would, when I was reading). I mean giving me a script that's so familiar I could have seen it last week or last month or last year, or worse, on Lifetime last night. The audience doesn't want recycled movies, and neither do I. (Unless it's a franchise, in which case the audience does want a recycled movie. And if I had a franchise to produce, you bet I would be in hanging in there for the fifth sequel.) I want genius, wit, genuine characters that transport me to splendor.

6. "Query from optioned screenwriter." I get dozens of emails like this a week. First, I don't read query emails. Second, from "optioned" screenwriter? It's not like you won the Academy Award. Just because someone I have never heard of (and you don't name) has "optioned" your script you're supposed to have credibility?

7. Trying to sell me with mash-up comparisons. Those went out of style even before Michael Eisner exited Disney. If I wanted to see *Transformers* meets *The Kids Are All Right*, I would just Netflix 'em back to back.

8. Telling me I should read your script because the movie isn't expensive to make. This shows you know nothing about the business. Every weekend this summer, there's at least one picture that has cost \$400 million to make and market. Do you think making a picture cheaply is a selling point?

9. Giving me a script that's a slow read. I love great writing, and great writing moves with pace and precision. Even though I read on a screen now, if the pages don't turn, it is bad. Yes, a writer must do a lot of slow, painstaking work to make a script read fast.

10. Giving me excuses for why you can't write. "I don't have time." "I don't have money." "My job gets in the way." "I just get too tired at the end of the day." Get over it. Writers write. Believe it or not, I bless them for doing so.

By the way, *don't* send me anything. I already told you, I'm taking a year off and I'm not reading. But I'm sure I'll get an email tomorrow that begins, "Query from optioned screenwriter: No shit, my script doesn't do any of those 10 things..."

Image: One-sheet from the Coen Brothers' Barton Fink, a screenplay that does not tick me off at all.

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