Avoid these top 22 mistakes

By Staton Rabin

As a veteran story analyst in the film industry who has evaluated thousands of books and screenplays for film studios and agencies, I'm often asked for some kind of "magic formula" that will enable a writer to sell his script.

Is it mainly a good story or great characters that will catch my eye, aspiring screenwriters want to know. Do I have some sort of "check list" of qualities against which I compare screenplays? Will the writer's age, race or sex work against him? Am I looking for something "commercial," or do smaller, more personal films have a chance? Do my bosses give me "marching orders" and tell me they're looking for one particular genre (horror, romantic comedy, thriller, etc.) over another?

But the most frequent question by far is quite simple: "What makes you give a script a 'Recommend'?"

All of these questions can be answered the same way— and the answer may surprise you. Story analysts who work for film studios or major agencies are not looking for anything in particular—except, of course, a great screenplay. And how do I decide what a great screenplay is? The same way you do. Story analysts are just like anyone else who reads books or goes to the movies. We're looking to get "carried away" by a great story. When your screenplay is great, we almost forget we are "critics" for a while, and get swept up in your thrilling story and fascinating characters.

The only difference between me and the average moviegoer is that I may be able to explain better exactly what it was about a film (structure, characters, dialogue) that made me feel about it the way I do. And if anything about it isn't working, I'll be able to tell you why—and how to fix it. While a screenplay is only a blueprint for a movie rather than the movie itself, reading a great one should be an emotional roller coaster.

That said, any story analyst will tell you that finding a great screenplay is a rare occurrence. In the meantime, we read hundreds of books and scripts a year that leave us cold and functioning in full "critic" mode—which is to say, focusing our full attention on the flaws in your script. And while it's impossible to quantify what makes a great script, or give you some sort of formula for brewing one up, it's very easy to list the kinds of errors that most commonly appear in aspiring screenwriters' work, and that increase the likelihood your material will get a "pass." This list of common mistakes would vary little no matter which experienced industry reader compiled it. Here are the top 22 mistakes I find in the screenplays that cross my desk every day:

1 Ordinariness Many writers don't understand just how terrific their work has to be to stand out from the crowd. Every scene—especially the first page—has to be electrifying, or at least surprising or moving, in one way or another, and some scenes have to move people to tears or laughter. The first page should knock a reader out of his or her seat, and so should the rest. Read top produced screenplays—don't just go to see movies—and if your work isn't that good, or almost that good, it won't ever sell. You cannot get away with laziness or lack of talent. If your script is just OK, or even "good," that's not good enough.

When I teach screenwriting courses, students enter my classroom for the first time and hear the voice of Frank Sinatra. And when they sit down and look at me with puzzled expressions on their faces, wondering if perhaps they've wandered into the school's music-appreciation class by mistake, I point to the CD player with Sinatra's *Fly Me to the Moon* emanating from it, and say: "That's how good you have to be at what *you* do."

2 Lack of story structure The reason professional screenwriters are paid so much money is that very few amateurs know how to structure a story properly. No matter what else you're good at—dialogue, characters, etc.—you will never sell a script if you can't tell a story using the traditional three-act story structure. And how do you learn how to do this? To some writers it is just, to quote songwriter Irving Berlin,

In any film ... the stakes must be high, and the hero must be in jeopardy.

"Doin' what comes natur'lly." Others have to take a screenwriting course or read books on the subject by Syd Field, Lew Hunter or Michael Hauge. But whether you're born knowing how to structure a story, or you have to learn it from others, it's an essential skill for any screenwriter.

3 Superfluous scenes I read a lot of scripts that contain scenes showing moving cars (used only to get characters from here to there, rather than for important action or dialogue) and people entering and leaving rooms, or which reveal slow pacing or other poor choices for a story's building blocks. It's important to know which scenes to include in your screenplay and which to leave out, to pick up the action as late as possible in each scene, and to leave the scene as early as possible after conveying what needs to be conveyed. I'm reminded of the old saw about Michelangelo: To carve his famous statue of David, it is said, he took a block of marble and chiseled away anything that didn't look like David. That describes the art of screenwriting. You cut away anything that doesn't serve your story.

4 Chit-chat Some screenplays have characters who just chat and exchange information or greetings without conveying essential information that propels the plot forward. There's no room for "small talk" in screenplays.

5 Errors of format, grammar and spelling It's just as your third-grade teacher always told you: Spelling counts. Even if you write a great script, if it's filled with typos and grammatical errors or written in improper screenplay format, you'll have two strikes against you from the moment a Hollywood reader begins reading it. To a story analyst, a writer who hasn't bothered to proofread his script or learn the proper format for screenplays probably hasn't bothered to learn how to write, either. Many books are available on the subject of proper screenplay format—and even software programs that do format for you. And if the spell-check on your computer is inadequate—and it always is—or your grammar leaves much to be desired, hire a copy editor to fix your work before you submit it.

6 Characters who talk alike Dialogue should be written so that if you cover up the characters' names, you'll still know who's talking. While it's true that the ability to write good dialogue is the least important skill a screenwriter can have (story structure being far more important), it can certainly enhance a good script if you write exceptional dialogue. One way to improve your dialogue is to study how the masters do this. Watch Paddy Chayefsky's *Marty*, for example, and listen for the rhythms and subtext and the way the dialogue provides exposition and reveals character. Another way is to study the way real people talk. Personally, I learn a lot about writing film dialogue by listening to the teenagers talk on the MetroNorth train in New York City.

7 Nothing much happens The story doesn't move, and it's neither cinematic nor effective in using a visual medium.

8 Unfunny comedy Don't write a broad comedy unless you are so funny the reader is going to fall off his chair laughing. The ability to make your friends laugh is, by itself, probably not an indication of comic writing talent. (Some people are both funny in person and on the page, but this is rare). Successful comedy writers usually are not funny people in real life.

9 Muddled or derivative thrillers Don't try to write a mystery or thriller unless you feel you understand the genre and can do something new. These are very difficult scripts to write, and unless you must write in this genre, it's better not to attempt this for a first or second script.

10 Overlong descriptions Many screenplays I read contain "action lines"—passages that describe what we're seeing and hearing on the screen and include everything but the dialogue—with coy jokes directed at the reader, too many adjectives and characters' thoughts, and too much background or other information that doesn't belong in a script. Though there are exceptions, a good general guideline is: If it won't be seen or heard on the screen, don't describe it in your action lines.

11 Too personal Despite the edict "Write what you know," you are better off writing a story that isn't about your life. A story about your life is likely to cloud your judgment about what is interesting to an audience and derail your story. Don't work out your personal problems in a screenplay. We readers see too many stories about struggling writers who make deals with the devil, or who make it big and end up sitting around a swimming pool with a bevy of babes in bikinis. Don't use your work to fulfill your own fantasies.

12 Main character isn't in enough personal danger In any film—whether it's about a lonely, single 34-year-old butcher who can't get a date and fears he'll never get married (*Marty*), or a team of comman-

dos about to storm a fortified enemy camp—the stakes must be high, and the hero must be in jeopardy. Even if that jeopardy is purely emotional, as it is for Marty, rather than physical, we must care about the hero and be on the edge of our seats rooting for him and worrying about whether he'll achieve his goal. This is just as true of romantic dramas or comedies as it is for war movies, thrillers or detective mysteries.

13 **Story wasn't planned well in the concept stage** The concept—the one-sentence "idea" for a film—is either weak or nonexistent, and contains no inherent conflict. If there are problems in your concept, the script will never be any good. All concepts have to contain some sort of difficult conflict or challenge the main character or characters will face, as well as potential for being developed into a two-hour movie.

14 **Story doesn't set up fast enough** By page 10, we should at least know the story's setting, the protagonist and his or her basic problem.

15 **Poor choice of subject matter** If friends don't say, "Hey! What a great movie idea," don't write it unless your idea is character-driven and you're sure they'll change their mind after they read your script.

16 **Depressing subject** Personally, I tend to "tune out" when I read scripts about people who devolve into self-destruction through drugs, etc. I certainly don't want to deter you from writing the next *Leaving Las Vegas* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. But even serious subjects should be uplifting, not depressing. If you write a character who is depressed, make sure he is "actively depressed" and doing things rather than just sitting at home alone on the couch staring at the TV for two hours.

Where do I send my screenplay?

Your script is finished. What do you do with it?

If you're smart, you send it to a qualified story analyst to get an objective evaluation of your screenplay before showing it to film agents or producers. There are many freelance story analysts who work steadily for film studios, major agencies and independent producers who also do private script analysis for individual screenwriters.

How do you find these people? Type "script analyst" or "screenplay analysis" into any Web search engine, such as Google.com, and see whose names pop up. You can also check out Web sites or classified ads in magazines aimed at screenwriters, or call one of the major university film programs. There are many companies aimed at aspiring screenwriters that have Web sites and a stable of (supposedly) qualified story analysts working for them, and which offer these services for a fee.

Finding and choosing a qualified story analyst is the same as choosing a qualified doctor: You judge them by their training, professional experience and referrals. Fees for a screenplay analysis range from a couple hundred dollars to more than $1,000, and analysts vary widely in their quality, the type and length of report they'll write for you, whether their analysis includes a follow-up meeting/discussion, etc.

Once your script has been analyzed and you've rewritten it as necessary to make it as perfect as you can, then you're ready to send it to producers and agents. Frankly, it is so difficult these days to get a good "Hollywood" agent with clout, you might want to wait till you've already sold a screenplay to a major producer before working with one. At that point, the agents will come to you.

The best way to approach film producers is to send them a great query letter containing a very brief "pitch" for your screenplay. Never send a producer a screenplay without permission. Some top producers won't even open a letter from a stranger, but many will—and writing a great query is the key to attracting their attention.

—Staton Rabin

Resources

Hollywood Creative Directory $59.95, or access online version ($249.95) at www.hcdonline.com. Learn the types of films producers have made in the past. Plus, if your script has a great role for a famous actor, you might approach the actor directly, using the directory to find his or her production company.

www.scriptsales.com and **www.hollywoodlitsales.com** Check listings of spec or script sales to get names of producers who have recently bought film material, and in what genre.

Variety and **The Hollywood Reporter** Will tell you names of producers and their production companies, most of which are in Los Angeles.

www.imdb.com An Internet Movie Database that lists just about every movie ever made, plus producers, directors, stars, etc.

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17 Preachy story As Sam Goldwyn used to tell his writers, "If you have a message, phone Western Union." If your main purpose in writing your story is to sway people to your view on some political or social cause, you'll have to be a very skilled writer indeed to avoid the pitfall of writing a "preachy" or didactic story that sacrifices drama. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the moving classic directed by Robert Mulligan and based on the Harper Lee novel, is a good example of how to make a powerful social statement (in this case, about racism) without being "preachy." Don't try to write a script from theme rather than plot unless you're a genius (e.g., your concept can't be "man's inhumanity to man" or some other generality).

18 Main character is not likable The protagonist can, and even must, be flawed, but he or she must be basically likable, or else fascinatingly evil. There are tried-and-true methods for writing such characters. If you study the first 10 or 20 minutes of most movies, you'll discover the kinds of things screenwriters put in their scripts that make you immediately identify with the hero. These can include evidence of the hero's compassion (what the industry calls "pat the dog" scenes) or his appealing sense of humor, his great expertise, his plucky attitude toward setbacks, his oppression (which has not left him spiritually defeated), etc.

Writers use many other techniques to make a film audience immediately like the story's hero—and a good place to find them is by studying old silent comedies by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. Even if the main character in your script is a villain, you must make sure the audience identifies with him in some way. If he's a rotten or selfish person and not fascinating and human in his rottenness, then the audience won't like your film.

19 Antagonist or villain is not a strong enough adversary for the hero If the hero's victory over the villain in your screenplay is a foregone conclusion, there will be no conflict or suspense for your audience. Make your villain almost as clever, and possibly even more interesting, than your hero.

20 Hero doesn't have to resolve an internal conflict in order to resolve the story's external conflict The hero's personal flaws must intersect with what he needs to defeat his adversary or solve his problem. A good film to study in this regard is *Witness*, in which John Book (Harrison Ford) is a loner with no wife or children who lives by violence. He's a police officer on the trail of a fellow cop who's a vicious killer. Wounded by gunfire, Book must take refuge in an Amish community, where he falls in love with an Amish woman. It is only when he renounces the violence within himself and learns the power of being part of a tight-knit, peaceful community, that he (with the help of the Amish) is able to defeat the film's villains. The fact that he decides in the end to leave this community doesn't diminish the power of his personal transformation.

21 The character's goal or story purpose is unclear, and he doesn't encounter enough obstacles to achieving it You can avoid this by applying the principles of traditional story structure to your script.

22 Trying to 'direct' the movie by telling actors how to read their lines, where to put the camera, and the like It's a myth that movie scripts contain camera angles ("close-up," "long shot," etc.). The "spec" screenplay you'll be writing in hopes of selling it to Hollywood is not a shooting script. It should not contain instructions for what the director should do with his camera.

"Wrylies" are the parenthetical instructions ("wryly," "bitterly," etc.) screenwriters sometimes put just above a line of dialogue to tell the actor how to read his line. If you write good dialogue, any good actor should be able to tell how to read the line based on the context and the dialogue itself—he won't need your instructions. The rare exception is when you intend for the dialogue to be read in a way (e.g., sarcastically) that differs dramatically from its surface meaning.

So, while there's no magic formula for writing a script that will sell to Hollywood, if you avoid all these pitfalls you'll greatly increase your chances.

And here's my best tip: Don't worry that following the formula of traditional story structure will result in a mundane script. You need a well-structured script the same way a composer needs the correct number of beats per measure. Learn to write a one-sentence story concept, because if you can't write a concept that contains the seeds of character, story and conflict, you can't write a screenplay that works. #

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