

Getting Past The First Line of Defense

By Margo Prescott

You sigh, smile, lean back and press enter. The screenplay is finished. This is the final draft and it's ready to go to agents and producers. Or is it?

You've checked it a dozen times for spelling and typos. That's great. You even put it away for a few weeks before revising one last time. That's an excellent idea. But wait...

Have you read the screenplay from a "reader's" POV? No? Uh oh and why not?

You are the first person to love your screenplay, and rightly so; it came from your heart. You have spent hours upon hours readying your "child" for the big debut. Unfortunately, loving your story isn't enough; having friends and relatives praise your project is not good enough. Your screenplay has to be "good enough" to grab the attention of a *story editor or reader*.

The *reader*... perhaps the most dreaded person in a screenwriter's life. There are highly experienced readers who do their job well, and there are readers who don't have a "clue" -- will never have a clue. Unfortunately, you don't get to choose who reads your script.

Regardless of experience, the reader is the "first line of defense"; the guardian at the gate. And, to most writers, the naysayer.

Lets hope that your screenplay is scrutinized by an experienced reader; in fact, the more experienced the better. However, regardless of who covers your screenplay, he or she is going to rip it apart like a vulture on a lonely road. That is what readers do.

It is imperative that you give yourself the best shot possible, by knowing exactly what the reader is looking for in your story and meeting those demands. If you don't meet expectations the screenplay won't have a chance.

Now is the time, before you slip your screenplay into priority mail, to pick it apart -- line by line, page by page.

Do not be kind to yourself. You are an artist with a strong imagination, so pretend -- just for an hour -- that you are covering the screenplay for Mr. Bigshot agent or producer.

There are at least four categories that will be scrutinized: characterization, story, dialogue, and setting. It is very important that you analyze each of these categories objectively.

Consider these points overall as you read.

The screenplay must be a fast read; it is not a novel with the luxury of lengthy descriptions and dialogue. Dialogue and narrative must be kept to a minimum.

Narrative must be tight. Use the "active voice" to strengthen narrative. For instance: "Chuck **runs** to the burning car." as opposed to "Chuck **is running** to the burning car". If possible, stay away from words ending in "ing".

Paragraphs should be short with no more than three or four lines. Heavy paragraphs slow the read. You don't want to force the reader to skim; they do enough of that on their own.

Force the reader's eyes down the page.

Do not fill narrative with superfluous information.

No witty "sidebars". Established writers may be able to get away with it, but you can't.

Do not tell us what someone is thinking or feeling. Remember: if you can't SHOW IT, DON'T TELL IT.

Do not tell us what a character is wearing down to his socks, and do not describe every little detail of a locale. Be conservative with your words; make each one count.

Do you clutter the script (and distract the reader) with CUT TO or other transitional phrases? Don't. And do not number scenes. You've heard it before, "Don't direct the director".

Have you used full slug lines where none are necessary? Extraneous slug lines impede the flow of the read.

Extraneous slug lines are *annoying!*

THE STORY

Everyone believes their story is the one that has never been told. Think again. Take a romcom: Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy finds girl (Or vice-versa). It is the

uniqueness within the story that will make your screenplay stand apart from the others in the same genre.

Have you brought fresh characters to the genre, or is the story rife with characters we've met a dozen times?

Will you hook the reader within the first ten minutes, or will she take her first coffee break, let out the dog, and start dinner?

Ten minutes -- that's all you have, perhaps twenty minutes if the reader is feeling generous (don't count on it). After that it is a done deal; you've already lost if the reader isn't hooked.

Do you bring a different slant to the story? Are twists and turns those we've come to expect, or are they unique? Are obstacles easily overcome or are they truly formidable?

Each obstacle must be greater than the one before, leaving the reader wondering if the protagonist will prevail. At the same time the obstacles must be believable or are they will be received with a laugh. If your script is a comedy that's great. You're in trouble if the story is a drama.

Is your story universal? Will everyone, in some way, be able to relate to the characters, their needs, and goals? Are the characters sympathetic? Do we even care if they meet their goals?

What about predictability? There is nothing more discouraging than anticipating correctly the direction of a story, or a character's next move -- even the dialogue.

Does your story allow us to "escape"? Isn't that why we go to the movies? Will the reader forget her stubbed toe or hangnail, even the argument she had twenty minutes earlier with her husband or boyfriend?

What can you *add* to enhance the story? A new element?

What can you *eliminate* to enhance the story? Dialogue? Narrative? Perhaps even a character?

Do all principal characters serve a purpose?

Will the reader "experience" the story or merely observe?

Would *you* plunk down hard-earned cash to see this film? Be honest!

STRUCTURE

Again, you have approximately ten minutes to introduce the protagonist and where the story takes place.

We also experience the "catalyst", that which propels the protagonist into motion; it is what motivates him to meet a particular goal(s). Motivation must be strong and compelling. What is at stake if he doesn't succeed? Are the stakes high enough?

The "second act" is the pursuit of that goal, the conflicts and obstacles that hinder the realization of that goal. Do the obstacles make sense, or do they feel thrown in just for the sake of an obstacle?

The third act is the final push for that goal(s), and all issues are finally resolved to our satisfaction. We are left full – not wondering what happened to certain characters or conflicts.

Does the story progress in a logical manner, with each scene developing the story further?

Do you get in and out of a scene quickly, entering in the middle and exiting on the most dramatic dialogue or action? Taking a scene a beat too far detracts from the impact.

Do you introduce characters, set them up, and drop them halfway through the script? What about the subplot? Have you forgotten that it exists? Or is it so weak that the *reader forgets* about it?

Does the story stay on track? You'd be surprised how many stories take inexplicable detours along the way.

Are there "holes" in the script, leaving the reader feeling empty and gypped at the conclusion?

CHARACTERIZATION AND DIALOGUE

Are characters unique? Do they have depth or are they "cardboard"? What about the characters is endearing or loathsome? Can we relate to their strengths and weaknesses? Do they have any weakness? No one is perfect.

What is the inner motivation that propels the characters forward? Characters that merely react to external forces are boring.

Inner revelation. What do the characters discover about themselves as the story unfolds? What do they learn? How do they grow?

Do the characters stay true to themselves, or do they become different people halfway through the story? Of course there are many good reasons why a weak character may become strong... it's part of his arc. However, there must be a *good reason* for this change; it must be believable.

Dialogue is very much part of characterization. Not only does dialogue move the story forward, but it speaks volumes about the character's personality – it reveals the character's inner workings.

Each character must have his own speech pattern – his own "voice". Do all your characters sound alike? Are speech patterns appropriate for age and background?

Is dialogue realistic? Are you afraid of "offending" someone with dialogue? Protecting the sensibilities of a few is not your job; delivering realistic dialogue *is* your *responsibility*.

Is dialogue filled with exposition? The audience should never recognize they are being fed facts.

Is dialogue "On the nose", and do characters always speak in complete sentences?

Dialogue should be kept to a minimum. The story should be told through action.

SETTING

Is the setting unusual, or have we been there hundreds of times? Does the setting enhance the story? Are we in the same old warehouse with the "bad guys", with dust and smoke filtering through broken windows, or are we someplace new – intriguing?

Do you keep us in the same locale until we get "cabin fever", or do you delight our senses with diverse (not necessarily expensive) settings?

WRITER ABILITY

Oh yes, your writing ability *will be judge*. A reader may pass on the script, for any number of reasons, yet still recommend you as a writer – or not. Coverage will be kept on file; your screenplay is indeed a "calling Card".

Now that you know what readers look for, I can hear you protesting that you have read dozens of books – each one telling you the same thing in preparation for writing a screenplay.

That's true, but reading it is not the same as implementing what you have learned, or recognizing when you have missed the mark.

Have you applied your knowledge? Have you met all the criteria above?

Read your script again and find out.

I have been a screenplay consultant for many years, and still I eagerly anticipate reading every screenplay that hits my desk. I want to love it. I want the writer to succeed.

It is truly exhilarating to be so caught up in a "read" that I forget everything around me. I have to keep reading – flipping the page; there is no stopping me.

I have gasped out loud and my eyes have teared with laughter. My body has jerked to a surprise blow. I have wept.

I have put down a screenplay merely to savor the moment.

There have been screenplays that I did not want to end.

Will the next person who reads your screenplay react the same way?

Margo Prescott is a writer and screenplay consultant. She first entered the biz in 1984 as an agent (screenplays only). Five years ago, upon the back to back option of two of her scripts, she went on "hiatus" to turn her full attention to writing and consulting one on one with other writers. You can find her website at <http://www.techcomm.net/~maggie>

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