

HOW TO IMPRESS A SCRIPT READER

THIS IS A MUST READ!

by *Michelle Goode*



So you've got an awesome idea for a movie and you've written the script. You think it's great and are eager to send it out. You will have – if you're wise – sent your work to be critiqued by a professional script reader, or at least have gotten several peers to give it their honest opinion before rewriting it to perfection. Sadly, perfection is subjective when it comes to screenplays, but there are things you can do to make sure your script gets noticed.

There are so many places you can send your script to – competitions, agencies, production companies... But they all have one thing in common. No matter where you send your finished script, you'll have to get through the mighty gatekeepers: script readers. With a large amount of submissions to get through every week, they'll not be wanting their time wasted. Often it can take a mere five, ten or fifteen (if you're lucky) pages for a script reader to decide whether your script is worth a full read. So how can you impress them?

Correct format

One of the biggest problems with scripts – one which immediately screams "amateur" – is bad format and style. Whilst a brilliant story and a talent for a style element such as dialogue can render your bad format forgivable, this usually only happens if a producer or a director has a particular interest in you or your story. Unfortunately, the likelihood is that via normal submission processes your script will not get a full read if bad format gets in the way of a reader engaging with your story. Format is a really easy one to get right – there are plenty of examples on the Internet, including my London Screenwriter's Festival colleague Lucy Hay's "One stop format shop", a free PDF guide to script format. Using screenwriting programs such as Final Draft or Celtx (which is free) can also help eliminate mistakes in formatting.

Good style

Style is less easy to perfect, but mostly comes about by making informed choices about the way you write descriptions and dialogue, how your writer's "voice" comes

through and how the tone and pace of the piece reflects the story and its genre. The most common issues are with flat, uninteresting descriptions which give unnecessarily simplistic details (think "he walks over to the door, turns the handle, opens the door and steps outside" as a basic example). Sometimes descriptions are too long or are written in large blocks of text (four lines per section of action description helps break it up and makes it easier to read). Dialogue is frowned upon when it's too expositional, otherwise known as "on the nose". If a character tells back story via dialogue or tells another character something that is obvious to them purely to let the audience know about it, it's on the nose. Sometimes, it is necessary, but should be done in a subtle way; ideally in the context of the scene or through interactive and purposeful dialogue interactions. Often, style helps the tone of the screenplay and the pace. Interesting yet concise descriptions and dialogue which is sparing yet meaningful can really help with smooth and entertaining reading.

Good first ten pages

The first ten pages are essential when it comes to hooking a reader and enticing them to give the script a full read. The first ten pages (essentially the first 10% in any script length) are crucial in setting up who the protagonist is, what the story is and where the story is being told. In a blog article on the first ten pages of a script, I wrote a check list of questions to help determine whether your script opening has what it takes:

- Are we introduced to the world/setting? What do we learn about the setting from the opening which informs the story (era, country, rich/poor, social status, etc)?
- Are we introduced to the protagonist/main characters? What do we learn about them from their description/dialogue/behaviour (age, family status, personality)?
- Are we introduced to the need/want/problem?
- Is there a hook? What happens (of significance) in the first ten pages? Will the reader be left wanting to know more?

Originality

Originality can be a tricky one, as many stories have been told before. It is how the story is told (is it told in a fresh or unique way?), and who goes on the story's journey (how original are the characters?), which determines its appeal. Readers will be thinking about how original the premise and the theme is, and who the target audience (commercial potential) would be. In a competition, readers will need to find the characters and the story compelling or remarkable enough to warrant a high score. A production company reader may also be looking for scripts that will fit their briefs and be achievable budget-

"lets look at the basic process"

wise, so doing your research before submitting a script is essential.

Characters

Creating genuine, believable and non-clichéd characters and by telling their story in a fresh way can help to make your script stand out from those which may be similar. Readers want to find characters who they can empathise with, or about whom they feel curious. Great stories are often character-led; ordinary people in extraordinary situations, people who learn something about themselves or others, people who change for the better (or for worse), and above all people who have something to lose. Raising the stakes in a screenplay, especially by way of giving characters motivation and goals; i.e. in the set up/first ten pages and also by raising the stakes as the screenplay progresses to provide tension and maybe even plot twists, can really help to engage a reader and ultimately an audience if the screenplay ever gets produced.

Plot

Is there a story of some sort with a beginning, middle and an end? It sounds obvious, but sometimes scripts – especially short scripts – can seem more like a snapshot in time; a moment, or an introduction to something bigger as opposed to a self-contained story with a theme and an outcome. Structure can be really useful to ensure the plot plays out as dramatically as possible. Any story needs progression with turning points, a climax and a resolution. They may be subtle or they may be bold, but they will be there. Common issues that affect plot progression are a delayed catalyst or a second act which “runs on the spot” leaving not much time at all for the third act’s rise to the climax and resolution. A well-paced script will keep a reader on the edge of their seats. If you don’t hook them in the first ten pages, the script won’t get read. This is where openings which spend far too long setting the scene or back story can work against a writer. If the script runs on the spot; losing focus of its plot or going off on a tangent, it risks the reader losing their focus, too. A rushed ending and resolution can also leave the reader feeling cheated, which is why it is so important to ensure that the pace works and that the plot reaches a satisfying conclusion in good time.

Exceptions

There will always be exceptions to common rules and advice, especially in indie films which can have the aim of challenging common film narratives,

style and structure. However, you’ll still need to hook whoever reads it. Documents such as loglines, synopses and treatments can help brief a reader before they approach your script, so it’s well worth writing these. They will inevitably help inform the writer throughout the developing of their script, as well as sometimes being a necessity if you’re submitting to production companies, agencies or initiatives. Non-linear films also seem to challenge the rules, but they too will have common elements related to structure and pace. If you want to learn more about how to structure a non-linear script, you can’t get a more comprehensive guide than Linda Aronson’s book: “21st Century Screenplay”.

Multiple Drafts & Feedback

A reader can tell when a script is a first draft. A lot of the time, writers even label their drafts with numbers which is inadvisable as one, two or even three drafts could be considered “lazy”. Of course, you may well write a perfectly respectable script in two or three drafts, but it’s best to leave this information out. Writing several drafts will ensure you have refined your script, even if it’s just to proofread it or tidy up descriptions and dialogue. Typos and bad format/style is very off-putting. You may think that an interested producer or director will want to work on a rough script to develop it to suit themselves but unless they have specifically requested one, a rough script will spell out time and money. You need to prove that you are the one who is capable and worthy of being the writer for the project (after all, you wouldn’t want your script commissioned and then assigned to a different writer for rewrites). Gaining feedback on your script before sending it out is one of the best ways to check its readiness. A fresh pair of eyes; be it a friend, writing peer, colleague or a professional script reader, will help to pinpoint problem areas in your script which you will then be able to fix before attempting to get the script past the gatekeepers. After all, impressing a script reader will get your screenplay read and noticed; something that is well worth having investing time and effort in.

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