

Art Holcomb and Steven Barnes

present

**The Machine for Screenwriters**

**A 21st Century approach**

*Important: Print this out, for use as reference and notes as you watch the video.*

# Part 1

## The Statistics

- 95% of all screenwriters will never finish the work they begin.
- Of the 5% left, 95% will never polish their script or properly submit to get it considered by a script reader.
- Of the 5% left, 95% won't get past the script reader – the quality won't be high enough.
- And of the last 5 %, over 95% will not get to the “right producer”.

## Why The Failure?

- The Script Reader decides if it is a Pass /Fail Grade – this is true of Hollywood, Bollywood or BBC.
- The dichotomy between creative process and the editing process is insufficiently understood.
- The primary cause of writer's block – the creative process and the editing process are at odds.

## Function of a Screenplay

- A novel is a direct conversation with the reader.
- But the screenplay is a different creature because it's really a blueprint – something to inspire and be shared between all the creative people who will make the screenplay happen.
- The different gate keepers – from agent to script reader - locate scripts suitable for a producer to make.
- Depending on the level of the writer, a script might go from agent to Script Reader or in reverse, from Script Reader to producer.
- A good script reader will outline the strengths and weakness of a screenplay.
- Producer – Director – Actor. All links in a chain, and all are looking for that emotional connection with the script.
- The average script might be read by 50-100 people in the process of bringing it to life.
- Your job as a screenwriter is to inspire the script reader or agent.
- Producers and agents, once engaged, will guide the re-write process. For all practical purposes, no scripts are "shot as written" by a Hollywood outsider.
- Start with something you are deeply passionate about. Without passion, you will never survive the re-write process.
- You want every reader to be emotionally involved. This requires a strong "emotional through-line"
- Art's "String of Pearls" concept can help you build your script around the strongest emotional moments. Use it!
- You must be able to answer these questions:

- What type of producer are you writing for?
  - Who is your ideal audience?
  - Who would be willing to buy this?
  - Who are the actors you envision?
- Sarah Silverman said: "I want you to write the very best story you can. And I want you to write it for me."

## **Limitations**

- A useful belief: "Limitations make me more creative".
- Scaling back the logistics can open the possibilities.
- Limitations force you to look, think, dream more deeply.
- Start small, before you progress to "writing large."
- Think about the human condition.

## **State of Education Today**

- Film schools and self-help books are technique based – designed to solve small problems.
- Most teaching is "Model based" – "Save the Cat", Hero's Journey, etc. All speak to structure and not process.

## **So - What Is Lacking Today?**

- What does it really take to attract a producer, director, or actor?
  - A compelling story,
  - A page-turning read, and
  - In short, an effective story -- not just a good story.
- In actuality, there are really very few good screenplays to produce! There is virtually little competition.

## **What does it take to write a great screenplay**

- First Rule - Don't bore me.
- Second Rule - Write me something that can only come from you. Let it come from your personal experience.
- Find your voice.

## **Personal Story Arc**

- Your emotional history is your primary storytelling tools (the same is true for actors).
- It's all about using:
  - Your personal limitations,
  - Your personal experiences,
  - Your unique losses and triumphs, and
  - Your challenges.
- Don't try to be "clever"--tell the truth!
- Two most important questions:
  - "Who am I?"
  - "What is true?"
- If I don't feel your emotions, it is all just stunts and special effects.

## **The Core**

- You have to stop thinking of yourself as a writer, start thinking of yourself as a storyteller, a creator, a communicator.

## Fundamentals

- There are only about 100 different things you need to know to write a screenplay. That is your beginning, and the faster you learn them, the sooner you can begin to deepen your craft.
- Example: dialogue.
  - Good dialogue "sounds real" but conveys more information and "punch" than everyday talk.
  - Develop subtext, people are often more about what is "not said."
  - Contrast text and subtext: "Invariably what people argue about is NOT what they are upset about."
  - Actors play the subtext, not the text. "Jazz is what happens between the notes."

## The Screenwriting Experience

- You must take action.
- Reading and Studying are useful, but experience is everything.
- You have to learn how to survive the "Act 2 Flu", when you are deep in the process, the excitement of your original idea has fled, and you are dealing with the reality of hard work.
- Your writing starts in the "sunlight" but you will move into the shadows eventually, and there it is hard to remember why you started the journey. This is the writer's "dark night of the soul."

## **Four Stages of a Screenplay**

- Dream the Story: make sure it's worth telling.
- Get it on Paper: you will need to access "flow state" for this.
- Strengthen the Story: Switch to "editing" mode.
- Polish: Make it attractive to a reader.
- Process: 2 drafts and a polish are a typical pattern - from initial idea to completed screenplay shouldn't take more than 6 months.



## Part 2

### What Hollywood Really Wants From You

#### Hollywood does not want:

- Your sequel to a blockbuster or famous movie. There are established screenwriters who get those assignments.
- Your first script or your second. It wants to have very become good at this first
- Hollywood does not want what is "hot now"— it takes three years to make, and by the time it's released, the world will have moved on.

#### But Hollywood does want:

- Your absolute best effort
- You to know your craft - the fundamentals down cold.
- It wants you to know how Hollywood works – and who all the players are
- You to be a professional at all times and to know what that means
- Hollywood wants you to be serious about your career, not treat it like a "lottery."
- Hollywood wants your script – not a treatment, not idea, not outline or a pitch

## **How to know if you have a good film premise**

- First, find a concept that can only come from you.
- Expand on all the possible paths for the story– what kind of main character, what is the antagonism, what is the setting?
- Then, identify the specific challenges you will face with telling this story.
- What is the genre– each genre has its own unique rules – know them!
- Who is the best main character to follow through your story? This is not always initially clear. If you get down the path and it is not who you started – go back and rewrite.
- Once you know the storyline, give thought to the central conflict. What is the main obstacle? What is the nature of the conflict – how to pace that conflict?
- What is the most direct path through the obstacles? Remember: the simpler the plot the better
- Focus then on the hero, looking for emotional growth – the Hero's arc – from beginning to middle to the end – how s/he will change from point a to b to c
- Finally, what is the audience appeal to your story – if you don't know this, it will not pass the script reader.

- Mastery is the ability to perform your skills, to create spontaneously under pressure, in a flow state.
- How do you learn to do this?
  - Move from unconscious incompetence (don't know what a bicycle is), to
  - Conscious incompetence (know what it is but cannot ride it), to
  - Conscious competence (can ride as long as I concentrate), to
  - Unconscious competence (look Ma, no hands!).
- All basic skills MUST be at the level of unconscious competence before you can access flow state and work at a professional level. This is what fuels the artistic process.
- Input → Work → Output is the pattern for growth. Constantly upgrade the quality of your “input”—watch and read the very best films you can find.

## The Power of Short

- Short projects maximize your chance for success by having you complete the cycle of creative completion. They allow you to access the power of "The Machine".
- Understanding the creative cycle – from idea to realization – teaches you your craft.
- Shorts allow you to learn quickly, making your mistakes as fast as you can.
- The Machine can take years off of your education.
  - Old Method: in one year's time, you might have one screenplay perfected and ready for submission.
  - New Method: in that same year, you could have 3-4 short films written made and submitted. You will have moved from aspiring screenwriter to accomplished and experienced screenwriter, director, actor, cinematographer and film editor – that is to say – a creator!

## **What is the Machine?**

### **For Fiction Writers**

- Write a story a week, or a story every other week.
- Read 10X what you write.
- Finish what you write.
- Polish it.
- Put it in the Mail, keep it in the mail, don't re-write except to editorial request.
- Repeat.

### **For Screenwriters**

- Watch a movie a week, while reading its script (input).
- Read 2 scripts/week.
- Write a short film a month (output).
- Make three-four short films a year (output/education).
- Post them on Youtube for comment (promotion/distribution)
- Repeat.

### **In a year's time**

- You will have read more than 100 scripts.
- You will have studied more than 50 films.
- You will have created/directed/acted in 4 movies.
- You learned (in micro-form) all the roles:
  - Actor
  - Director
  - Screenwriter
  - Film editor
- And much more!

## The Plan

- Using current technology you can make a short movie for under \$100! It's possible to make a short for \$3 or less.
  - The goal here is to let you see first-hand the entire process of filmmaking – the very purpose of screenwriting.
  - You cannot be a professional by writing scripts in isolation.
  - This gives you the necessary professional experience very quickly and very cheaply.
  - You can gain a lifetime of essential experience
- **Step 1:** Write a one-act, one-set, two-actor script running about 10 pages. We will give you guidance, resources and help along the way.
- **Step 2:** Film it with friends or local film students using only your smart phone video camera.
  - This is easier than it sounds. We can show you how to do one of these every weekend
- **Step 3:** Edit it with low-cost or free “app” software that probably already on your computer.
- Voila! A short film! You are now a writer-producer!
- **Step 4:** Submit your film to YouTube and give it to the world. Receive feedback. Get seen!

## **Remember**

- Your first effort won't be very good – That's perfect!
- The process is what's important. By shooting just one short, you will quickly understand what a writer, director, editor does. A set of skills that you could never have by working alone of a single screenplay.
- it's worth thousands of dollars to you in experience alone.
- Do a couple of these and you'll understand what it is to be a professional.
- Don't be surprise at the quality of your work you're capable of. There are many shorts that do very well at film festivals that were shot on an iPhone.
- And the best reason – it will be yours and yours alone.



## **The Hero's Journey**

*(As presented in "Star Wars: A New Hope")*

### **#1 Hero is confronted with challenge**

"Come with me, Luke. Learn the ways of the Force."

### **#2 Hero rejects the challenge**

"I promised to work on the moisture evaporators."

### **#3 Hero Accepts the challenge.**

"Teach me to be a Jedi like my father."

### **#4 Road of Trials**

The actions taken, places visited. Going to Mos Eisley, Alderaan, Death Star, etc.

### **#5 Allies and Powers**

Gaining mentors, companions and skills. Obi-Wan Kenobi, Han Solo, Chewbacca, Princess Leia, etc.

### **#6 Confront evil *and fail***

Obi-Wan Killed.

### **#7 Dark Night of the Soul**

Total despair (attack on Death Star failing).

### **#8 Leap of Faith**

"Trust your feelings, Luke."

### **#9 Confront evil and succeed**

Death Star destroyed.

### **#10 Student becomes the teacher**

Luke and Han get medals, audience applauds! (Poor Chewy gets nothing...)

This pattern mirrors *most human experiences*.

## **The Machine and the Hero's Journey as applied to You.**

#1 You accept the challenge to be a writer

#2 You fear the difficulty of being a film-maker

#3 Accept the responsibility

#4 Learn about making short films, using zero-budget techniques. Take constant action.

#5 Find allies and mentors--like Art Holcomb and Steven Barnes

#6 Hit the "wall"-- run out of money, time, energy, patience. Your crew rebels.

#7 Total depression, fear.

#8 Remember your long-term plans, trust your partners, your dreams and mostly yourself.

#9 Complete your film

#10 Put it on YouTube, show it at festivals, tell others how you did it...and move on to your next film!

## **The Path to a 10 Million Dollar Movie**

**How do you make a 10 million dollar movie?**

- Make a million dollar movie
- Before that, make a 100k movie
- Before that, make a 10k movie
- Before that, make a 1000\$ movie
- Before that, make a 100\$ movie

### **Conclusion**

Mastery is a verb, not a noun. A process, not a position.

If you do the work, you will be amazed at the results.

Art Holcomb and Steven Barnes