
WRITING

THE KILLER

TREATMENT

Selling Your Story without a Script

by
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FOREWORD

That a screenplay or teleplay ever gets produced is just short of miraculous. Only those who prepare themselves and dedicate themselves to the art of writing will succeed. Perseverance and assertiveness get one through the door. However, once through that door, only talent pays off.

Many talented writers work in film and television, but genius is rare. By studying the craft and understanding the medium, writers can reach their goals.

Writing a screenplay or teleplay is a daunting task. Filling 120 pages with exciting, dramatic, humorous, romantic moments that entrance or thrill an audience can force any would-be writer to reconsider his or her career and become an accountant or doctor, even in these days of managed care and lower expectations.

Neither short stories nor screenplays, treatments “show” with words the story that ends up on a large theater screen or on television. They inform others how well a writer can relate a visual story with all of its twists, turns, and character development. They place on paper the megatheme of the story as well as the subtext before committing to the screenplay.

Treatments also act as a writer’s entrée into the world of motion pictures and television. One of the first steps through the door of this highly competitive business may be the sale of a well-developed

story. When fundamentals of character, structure, and genre are mastered, they can lead to a successful career as a screenwriter.

ELEMENTS OF THE BOOK

Writing the Killer Treatment takes you through the complete process of developing treatments that sell.

Starting with “A Writer’s Map,” Chapter One, the book explores the uses of treatments and their value as guides through the methods of storytelling. The chapter also examines the need to research your subject matter.

Chapter Two describes “Exploring Options” by developing believable characters that have substance and shading in order to sustain the story.

“Story Development” in Chapter Three takes you through classic, three-act structure as well as the building blocks that go into constructing a solid story. It also discusses the necessity for decision-making as you progress through the story and the need for foreshadowing and the creation of subtext that will give your story a firm foundation.

Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven reveal the story requirements for originals, adaptations, television longform (Movies of the Week, miniseries), one-hour and half-hour episodic television, and daytime serials — the soaps.

Chapter Eight provides the structural underpinning for episodic television specifically.

In “A Final Word,” Chapter Nine, each genre is discussed in order to provide a concise review of all the material presented in this book.

At the end of each chapter you will find exercises designed to lead you through the task of writing treatments in a variety of genres. Done with care and diligence, they will give you a head start on the road to creativity.

Several interviews with well-known writers and producers are included in the Appendix. These successful professionals discuss the way they use treatments to develop screenplays for each of their genres.

No amount of “book learning” will do as much for you as sitting down and scribbling on that legal pad or pecking away at that computer keyboard. But that is only the beginning of the process. Then the difficult task of rewriting repeats itself over and over again until what you have on paper reverberates with echoes of superior writing.

Competition is too fierce to consider your work as “good enough.” It must be the absolute best you can achieve. Hopefully, this book will assist you in the successful fulfillment of your dreams.

Michael Halperin
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CHAPTER ONE

A WRITER'S MAP

If you want to write a gruesome horror story, begin with an empty computer screen or a blank piece of paper. That represents a writer's worst nightmare.

In that void sit the fears of every creative individual involved in motion pictures and television — the terror and anguish of filling space with word pictures we hope will make readers or story editors or producers leap from their chairs shouting “Eureka!”

We may snatch ideas out of the air as the result of a passing remark overheard at an airline terminal while waiting to crowd aboard an economy class flight. Perhaps we start with a premise based on an ancient magazine story read while waiting in a doctor's office. An interesting face sipping from a mug at a ubiquitous coffee shop in a local mini-mall might conjure up a few ideas.

All of those triggers mean nothing until they take on the breadth and depth of a real story with a beginning, middle, and end. Those people spotted surreptitiously or bumped into accidentally have to evolve as three-dimensional characters with lives filled with love, fear, ambition, or any one of the seven deadly sins.

An answer to the dilemma resides in a process called “Writing the Treatment.” While many writers forced into creating this hybrid

between prose and screenplays dislike the form, it does accomplish many worthy goals.

Professional writers use treatments in order to solve problems that erupt during the impulse-driven and artistic fervor driven by the throes of creativity.

Treatments or stories that end up as screenplays or teleplays become no more and no less than valuable instruments in the writer's toolbox. Used appropriately, they can and will assist us in the difficult task of molding breathtaking stories for theatrical and television films, adaptations, television episodes, and even ubiquitous soap operas.

Treatments reflect the intricacies of plot and subtext, conflict and resolution as well as character dynamics. They also present the tone of a story — whether ironic, wry, humorous, melodramatic, romantic, mysterious, or eerie.

Placed in another context, treatments are prose forms of the screenplay without dialogue. They help us to more fully visualize the story rather than rely solely on speech. That isn't to say that dialogue has lesser importance. Certainly no Woody Allen or Albert Brooks film could exist without clever, witty, acid-tinged, neurotic, and sanity-challenged dialogue.

On the other hand, those same motion pictures, from *Sleepers* to *Mother*, have an abundance of semiotics — signs and symbols that communicate everything from a character's motivations to the subtext of the story. Without those visual clues the story would become diminished. After all, we do call the medium *motion pictures*, i.e., pictures that move.

A unique feature of treatments and screenplays becomes immediately apparent: most of them are written in the present tense. Screenplays, no matter in what time period they take place, whether the far past or the distant future, represent the here and now. Therefore screenplays and treatments reflect that creative reality.

SIMPLE STORIES, COMPLEX CHARACTERS

“Simple” does not imply mundane or unintelligent. In this context it means lucid, clear, uncomplicated stories. On the other hand, plots can have major intricacies or twisting lanes down which our characters run.

The greatest motion pictures, plays, novels, and short stories usually have stories that we can describe in one or two brief sentences. Almost all of Shakespeare’s plays have the simplest of stories. *King Lear* describes a father brought down by egotism that refuses to recognize true filial love. Overweening ambition leads to the destruction of *Macbeth*.

Relationships between characters make these and other stories compelling. All we have to do is view contemporary classics such as *On the Waterfront*, *Scent of a Woman*, and *Life is Beautiful* to understand the notion of “simple stories, complex characters.”

THE “WHAT IF” OF STORYTELLING

The path to creating the story or the treatment can take a number of turns. Some writers prefer beginning with a character and

playing with the “what if” moments of the character’s life. Perhaps it’s based on an item from a newspaper or magazine. Perhaps it’s based on an acquaintance. From whatever source the character derives, writers should ask themselves “what if” this person takes the left fork in the road instead of the right. What enigmas will he or she discover? What riddles need solving?

Other times, writers will discover an instigating incident that sets off the imagination. A crime committed, an international event, lost love found, someone or a group battling city hall all have within them seeds of fascinating stories.

I maintain a file of stories culled from newspapers and magazines that may have story ideas embedded within them. If not story ideas, they may hold incidents or scenes that I can use to make a screenplay more authentic in tone and setting.

Several years ago I wrote a screenplay in which a scene takes place in the Cloisters Museum of New York City. I hadn’t been to the Cloisters in a long time when I read a story in the *New York Times* that provided a wonderful description of the building, the gardens, and the artwork. I incorporated them into a scene of intrigue.

Stories also arise when existing characters or notions generate the “what if.” *Shadow of a Vampire* (2000), written by Stephen Katz, carries the theme of “what if” into surrealistic comedy surrounded by gothic grimness. Katz’s notion suggests that the director F. W. Murnau’s obsession for dramatic intensity drove him to find a real vampire to play the part of “Count Orlock” in the 1921 classic German silent film *Nosferatu*. The actor, Max Schreck, looks, acts, and grimaces both horrifically and comically in a satire of horror films. Katz has Murnau tell the crew that Schreck is a student of

Stanislavsky and immerses himself in his role day and night — especially at night. Katz destroys Schreck with true vampire folklore: The rising sun kills the monster.

In reality, Schreck continued acting into the era of sound without biting another neck and made his last film, *Donogoo Tonka*, in 1936. However, the audience does not need this information to make the story work. Katz takes reality and walks down the road of supposition in order to create a fable.

RESEARCH AND ROADS

For writers developing an original screenplay — that is, self-generated stories — treatments act as blueprints guiding them through the creative process. Since producers usually want to see completed original screenplays, no one except the writer may ever read the treatment. On the other hand, if a writer receives an assignment, producers may wish to read a treatment as part of the process that includes development of the story through completion of the actual screenplay.

The same holds true for other forms as well. Adaptations especially require, in my estimation, the development of treatments in order to eliminate some notions, expand others, probe characters, and most of all inform the writer if the essential underpinnings of the original material have come through with clarity.

THE TREATMENT AS PROCESS

Writing for television — and that includes everything from miniseries, Movies of the Week, and hour episodics to half-hour

sitcoms — usually requires writing treatments as part of traditional contractual requirements.

A reading of the Writers Guild of America Schedule of Minimums (how much producers must pay writers at a minimum) shows the “Story” as the first category in almost every genre. For soaps, the treatment takes another form called the “Long-Term Story Projection.” We’ll examine that special presentation briefly in this chapter and in detail in Chapter Seven.

In order to understand the use of treatments for television, it’s necessary to examine the process through which writers sell their stories. Let’s take a hypothetical writer, Ms. George Sand, and the series in which she has an interest, “Indiana,” an episodic drama about a dysfunctional family of drifters who live in a fictitious city.

After learning as much about the series as possible through multiple viewing, reading and breaking down several scripts, reading the bible (the background of the characters and plot), and reviewing the stories that the series has completed, the writer prepares several notions to “pitch” to the show.

If Ms. Sand has an agent, she might have the good fortune to “take a meeting.” In the event she has no agent, persistent phone calls to the story editor, or the producer, may produce the meeting.

Once inside the door, Ms. Sand pitches her notions. Right away, one of them strikes the producer, story editor, or others on the staff: it has script potential. They ask her to write a story based on her notion. Of course, this doesn’t happen without multiple suggestions on how to improve the idea.

Ms. Sand next spends one or two weeks developing the story. In the case of a one-hour primetime network episodic show, the treatment will break into the traditional four acts perhaps with a teaser (a brief scene prior to Act One that sets up the audience) and a tag (a brief scene after the end of Act Four that may summarize the story). For sitcoms, the story breaks into two acts with a possible teaser and tag thrown in.

Upon delivery of the treatment one of three things will occur. Either the producer and/or story editor will like it and Ms. Sand will proceed to a rewrite of the story based on notes or the go-ahead to write the first draft — or they may turn thumbs down and that ends the process.

The treatment plays an important part because producers and story editors can use it to judge the quality of writing, the ability of Ms. Sand to understand their show, deliver on time, and whether or not she fits into “Indiana’s” creative jigsaw puzzle.

The same procedure takes place with longform television as well. Although the producers probably hired Ms. Sand to develop the story because of her reputation and ability, they may wish to view a treatment in order to avoid future problems and pitfalls in the story or with production and casting. As with feature films, the treatment becomes the tool that identifies potential difficulties, including some of the more obvious holes in story and plot that can destroy good storytelling.

One of the questions often asked is, “How long should a treatment be?” To use an ancient comeback for such a query, “How long is a piece of string?” It all depends. It depends on the writer, the story, and how much detail the writer and the producers wish to include.

Treatments that writers use for themselves for original theatrical features and original films for cable may range from one or two pages to those that almost approximate the length of a finished screenplay. One screenwriter wrote a story for a successful film that ran over 90 pages. After that, writing the screenplay became a process of including the dialogue with the action.

Writing a treatment doesn't mean changes will not take place. Of course they do. Writing is a dynamic process. Anyone who links him or herself so firmly to the treatment that the script can not take off in other directions does a disservice to the innate vitality required to create characters and stories that intrigue audiences.

Miniseries, Movies of the Week, and episodic television that play on commercial stations have a fairly standard length. A Movie of the Week (two hours) consists of seven acts. Each act has approximately 5-8 scenes per act. The treatment reflects the act with approximately 3-5 pages per act. Multiply that number by the broadcast length of the project. Therefore a treatment for a two-hour MOW might have approximately 21-35 pages single-spaced or 35-50 pages double-spaced typed in 12 point Courier.

A one-hour primetime network episodic television script such as *ER*, *The West Wing*, *Law & Order*, or *Ally McBeal* has four acts. Again each act has approximately 5-8 scenes. Therefore the treatment or story runs approximately 12-20 pages single-spaced.

Never consider any of these numbers and lengths as hard and fast rules. Every project is unique.

For example, I wrote a story and teleplay for the one-hour

episodic television series *Falcon Crest*. Classified as a primetime soap, it took place in a fictional version of the Napa Valley of California.

The first script I did for the series in its first season was called "House of Cards." My treatment typed double-space ran 37 pages. The first act consisted of 10 scenes in 7 pages. Act One of the first draft teleplay had 9 scenes in 19 pages. That sounds a bit long, but the series tended to be dialogue heavy.

For another episode of the same series I wrote the treatment single-spaced and it ran 18 pages. The first act alone consisted of 12 scenes in 5 pages. In this case, the treatment translated into the final teleplay with very few changes.

On the other hand, my first draft treatment for an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* ran a total of 12 double-spaced pages including a Teaser and a Tag. Due to additional commercial breaks as a syndicated series, *ST:TNG* had five acts. The initial scene breakdowns in my treatment were Teaser, Act 1: 6 scenes, Act 2: 5 scenes, Act 3: 6 scenes, Act 4: 4 scenes, Act 5: 4 scenes, Tag.

I raise these examples to demonstrate that no hard and fast rules exist in treatment or story development. Often, producers or story editors determine what kind of treatments they want. Some dislike lengthy descriptions. Others want a carefully detailed explication of the story, characters, and their interactions. It's important to know the show and its idiosyncrasies.

The daytime soap is another beast altogether. Due to their five-day-a-week regimen, their multitude of story lines, and their large cast of characters, soaps work off of long-term projections.

A projection will take story lines out over a six- to twelve-month span. The objective has to do with maintaining logic (at least the logic that the series sets up) over a long period of time and numerous daily episodes.

A number of years ago, I wrote a six-month projection for the CBS daytime soap *Capitol*. The series dealt with a political family and its life and intrigues in Washington, D.C.

The six-month projection ran 96 pages and covered 14 main characters plus subsidiary characters. The stories intertwined in order to maintain the ongoing relationships. My task was to take the characters and their stories and raise them up a few notches in order to create additional excitement as well as provide springboards for continuing action beyond the projection.

SUMMING UP

Developing the treatment becomes an exercise in creative discipline. Without a guide, writers often find themselves faced with the infamous “writer’s block.” That syndrome usually indicates that no plan exists for continuing the story beyond the initial flush of excitement over an idea that may have had excellent possibilities.

Treatments also have utility in discovering weaknesses in story, plot, and character development before creating the actual screenplay. While it may seem an unnecessary step in the rush toward developing your brilliant idea, you may find that writing a treatment spurs your imagination more than it slows it down.

With experience you may discover that you can take shortcuts. You may not have to write a full treatment after your fifth or sixth screenplay. You may only need to develop a step outline or beats to keep you going.

Don't take short cuts to the shortcut. Begin with the treatment or story until you become comfortable with the process. No one ever succeeded without paying attention to detail, structure, proper story development, and character development. The treatment helps you enter that comfort zone.

EXERCISES

Choose a character from a motion picture.

- A. Describe the choices the character makes at the moment of the instigating incident.
- B. Outline the story as if the character chose a different path.