

Do NOT send me first draft material. Write it, read it, rewrite it at least once and THEN send it to me. I don't want to wade through your miles of "thinking out loud." Turn in the wheat, not the chaff.

No such thing as "very unique." It's either unique or it's not.

If your idea is crappy, think of the following:

What in your life really pushes your buttons? What injustice, or bad thing, or good thing, really makes you EMOTIONAL? What do you REALLY REALLY BELIEVE IN?

What REALLY scares you? (this is where SIXTH SENSE came from)

What REALLY makes you sad?

What REALLY makes you happy?

Think about what makes you go through fits, and then figure out a way to do that to a character...

Site and sight are two different things. Look 'em up. Use them safely and wisely.

Never say, "I think..." It weakens the point you are making. Just say it. Quit thinking and writing out loud. Proofread your stuff and send me the third draft, not the first draft. I have no interest in reading your angst.

I think the lead (good guy) in this movie will be the girl, even though a lot of development and change will take place in the character of the father as well. Since I am horrible with names, let's just call them Natalie and Paul.

Paul, like Natalie, spends his life wrestling with the past and shaking of (proofread!) his present demons.

I will try and put a somewhat tragic aspect into Dominick's character in that he must forever wonder the Earth in search of his prey. (proofread!)

After whooping a little vampire ass, he confronts Dominick, who is holding his son in the House of Mirrors. (proofread!)

MAKE IT MORE INTERESTING:

The low point will be for Mike, when he goes to investigate the carnival for any trace of his son and, of course finds it empty in the daytime, except for the bloody and torn T-shirt of his son laying on the ground in the carnival. It is at this moment that all appears lost for his hopes of finding Tommy, unless he accepts the truth about the carnival and decides to return at night to confront those responsible for his son's abduction.

What if Tommy is KILLED? How's that for a low point? And then sheriff has to bring him back to life somehow, or defeat the vampire and save his son, or allow Vampire to leave unharmed if he gets his son back... and Vampire leaves, but double crosses him and takes his son anyway... so he has to get him back and try to kill vampire in the big finale... as many twists and turns as possible, eh?

USE THE RIGHT WORD: Her parents remind her that she has already made the financial commitment, and her friends ensure her that her week will be great. Assure.

Slowly during the week, Sara falls in love with Lee. Not necessarily in the romantic way, but she just grows to love him and care for him immensely.

Again, what's the jeopardy for Sara? Why not the romantic way? She is dying to kiss him, wants to go to bed with him. that's a character in the crusher. If there's no heat for sex, then what's the

big deal, they're friends.... All safe and boring. Throw in some pain and anguish. Make us SWEAT!

Always write a screenplay in the present tense. This is a little premature, but I just made this mistake and thought I'd show it to you.

In an instant, Idell has opened her snake box and grabbed a twisting rattler.

It should be:

In an instant, Idell opens her snake box and grabs a twisting rattler.

Present tense! It's also shorter.

MOVIE TITLES are in capital letters. All the time. Always. Forever.

Lisa's last boyfriend died when she crashed her car in college. She lived. She now has a major fear of intimacy.

Not really. Why does she have a fear of intimacy if the problem has nothing to do with intimacy? They were perfect and were in love, and he died. Has nothing to do with intimacy. Give her a problem that will lead to a fear of intimacy.

Do not write long involved outlines with tons of description when I only ask for specific character points. ONLY TELL ME THE CRUCIAL STUFF.

"The first draft of everything is shit."

Ernest Hemingway

With that firmly in mind, do not send me first draft material. Rewrite it and make it succinct and good. I absolutely don't want to read your exploratory musings. YOU read them. Then YOU find the crud and then you slash it out, so I can concentrate on what I really need to see instead of trying to wade through chest deep verbiage in search of your plot and characters. If there is too much jungle around your story, I might not see it.

Remember, you must ALWAYS assume the person reading what you've written DOES NOT want to read it. Trim to the bone so they won't put it down because it's overwritten.

From my critique of someone's homework:

This guy is a gutless wimp. We are not going to care about a guy who is allowing life to swallow him whole like quicksand with no struggle. No wonder Diane isn't interested in him... he's a loser. MAKE THIS GUY AN INTERESTING HUMAN BEING, one that Sam Shepherd or some other star will want to play.

Make sure you're writing a role for a strong actor. Strong characters who make mistakes...

"He wants to rescue his mother. He wants to do it himself and avenge his father's death. Only then can he put to rest all of the sadness and loneliness that he has lived with his whole life. What he needs to do is rely on the help of others when he needs it. Not be such a huge jerk to all who are willing to help him out. He needs to learn how to talk to girls, how to make friends with people, and how to control his temper and anger. He needs to become a better person, not through defeating the enemy, but by relying on others, which will lead him to have the ability to defeat the enemy."

He should have one want.

He should have one need.

Read everything you write out loud over and over again until it is good and you have found and removed all the fat and chaff.

"There is no final battle per se, but they do encounter each other at graduation. Because their last names are so close together Cameron winds up sitting right in front of Brian. There is obvious tension and awkwardness. Nothing major happens, though."

Then why are we here? There needs to be some sort of blowout. If there is no blowout, there was no pressure, and if there was no pressure, then the theater emptied long, long ago.

This would be a lovely time to read the Seger book about Character. I can't tell you how lovely it would be!

"Wants/Needs: Peter needs Sarah, who is experiencing the same puberty-related changes. This makes things better and worse. He needs Sarah, but is further confused by his emotions toward her."

He needs something on the inside, not a girl. What is his character flaw, the hole in his soul that needs plugging, and he gets that plug/change through the conflict with the Opponent?

"Chris is the bad guy while hiding his relationship with Sonya from Chris."
Nice proofreading.

My Notes on Second Act End:

It starts really well, but gets very bland. What can make it interesting all the way through? Think of movies you've seen and how they start and where they end up... When it starts, you have no way to predict where it goes, but when it's over, you can look back and see how it got there, inevitably.

Spend some SERIOUS time thinking about your ending. How will it end? Who will be there? How can the end be a major emotional catharsis for the character AND the reader? How can you take the audience's emotions and twist them and squeeze them and make them go up and down? Can you make them cry? Can you give them a huge laugh? The last five minutes of a film are what win Oscars for Best Picture. Really sit down and think how you want it to end, what emotion you want to wring out of the audience. Then, aim your whole story at the ending.

Ghost-

We learn in time that Mark's father was in prison for drunkenly robbing a convenience store and killing the cashier in the process. Mark doesn't admit this until Allison asks him. It is close to the climax, when his viewpoint of his father is changing.

What if he doesn't know and Allison tells him? His mother and father lied to him about what his father did... and he finds out at JUST THE WORST POSSIBLE TIME...

What is the fascination you folks have with suicide? Characters in movies don't kill themselves so they won't end up like their awful parents. If you kill yourself, there's a huge reason for it... and it's not going to make for great box office. WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY was all about a man's struggle to kill himself because he was a sculptor who became a quadriplegic... and it died at the box office.

"What does Catherine want? Catherine wants to be in school. She wants to be able to turn back the clock and fix her mistakes. Most of all she wants to make her mother proud."

One want, please. Just, please, please, give them ONE desire, like train track, and the whole engine of your movie runs on those tracks.

A scene should have 1.) character information or 2.) plot information or 3.) humor or it should not exist. Study your scenes closely to make sure they have one of these three, and if they don't, cut them.

"1) They are at dinner together chitchatting about random stuff. Both are having a good time."

This is not enough to push the plot forward. We learn nothing in this scene, so it should be cut. Whatever "they have a good time" stuff there is can be put into another scene, one that happens later, so you combine the two and get rid of the boring one.

You are college students. Use correct grammar. If this (gasp!) means you have to proofread or (triple horror!) actually make a change in your first draft, then by all means, go right ahead. I take a dim view of grammatical mistakes. So should you. Your employer will.

THIS HAS TO BE THE LIFE ALTERING MOMENT FOR ALL OF THEM OR WHY ARE WE HERE? For the next 50 years of their lives, this has to be THE moment, this movie, or you're telling the wrong story.

Don't have any characters whose names begin with same initial or same sounds. Sonya and Carla. No. Sonya and Shannon. No. Sonya and Carol, fine. Too confusing to reader, which is the main reason and, you can't abbreviate their names with an initial when you're making notes...

Characters must be FACED WITH DIFFICULT DECISIONS. You can't have your hero, Kyle, being forced to marry an unpleasant girl, Shannon, and then meet a lovely girl, Sonya...

My notes to one writer on that subject:

Why, and it has to be a GOOD reason, one we understand and sympathize with, why does his father want Kyle to marry Shannon? 1.) they've been dating since high school, 2.) Kyle really loves Shannon and Shannon really loves him 3.) everyone expects it 4.) They are perfect (really and truly... but not 100%!) for each other... you can't have us think, "Well, duhh, he has to marry Sonya, cause Shannon's a bitch." The character must have a terrible horrible difficult choice. He's in LOVE with girl #1 and then, to his horror, falls for Girl #2, who is better for him... but it's A TOUGH DECISION. If there's no decision, there's no movie. We're bored from the get go.

"The main character of the film he is a young novelist looking for inspiration."

"Jo comes over to tell Mike he's loosing his wife."

Try to get the grammar right. It's so embarrassing when you don't. Hint: comma. Hint: wrong word.

Proofread. While it's funny a few times to get stuff like this, in the end, it tells you you don't really care enough to proofread:

"One is the internal struggle he is dealing with to both overcome his alcohol addiction and the loss of his wife and the external struggle he must face with his son as a result."

Not enough commas is one thing. Too many is another:

"It should really surprise the audience, when it is finally revealed that Mike caused Julia's death.:

Phrases that have no meaning should go in someone else's work, not yours:

"Diane's murder at the fault of Dominick and to a greater extent Tommy is another big moment in the movie."

Loose is one word.
Lose is another word.
Figure out what they mean.

"He teams up with a girl who is a poor magician, and a good soldier buddy."
poor, not very good or impoverished?

Never have a phone conversation when you could have the people meet face to face. The director will ask for it, so do it without being asked. It's much more dramatic when they are looking at each other.

"Open quotes. Period. Close Quotes."
not
"Open quotes. Close Quotes. Period".

peak & peek
Look them up. Use them in good health. Correctly.

"Cole goes to the company late at night and sees the doctor writing code for the game. He doesn't understand the other three layers of code that overlap the game because they aren't needed to run the game. When the doctor leaves, Cole reads into the codes and only understands one of them but it appears to be a form of hypnosis."

Way too easy! What if he starts digging inside the game itself, in the code, opens up the back of his program so to speak... he sees a flash of something or thinks something's odd with the game and starts snooping around. This is coincidence and makes your hero weak. He needs to suspect for himself and dig for himself.

"but the police are getting to suspicious."
too, college students...

Never call your character by two names in the story. If his name is MARK CASE when you introduce him, then call him Mark all the time or Case all the time. Remember, the reader is confused and you want him / her to understand where they are and who's doing what at all times.

Never number your scenes. When the script is bought, someone will be paid to number them.

No, or very little, dialogue on page one. Use page one to establish character and set mood. It's the only chance you've got.

It's ."
not ".
Haven't I mentioned this before?

When you want to emphasize something in dialogue, underline it. Do NOT put it in italics.

It's ITS if it's possessive. "Its bowl is missing."
It's IT'S if it's a verb. "It's hot today."

How long must I keep telling you this? How long must I suffer? Do you do this to me on purpose, because you don't like me? Are you just being mean and cruel and spiteful? Did my ex- wife call and tell you to do this to me? Or is it because your parents mistreated you? Were you dropped on your head as an infant? Whatever the reason, please, I beg you, for the rest of your life,

please, oh please, STOP IT BEFORE YOU GIVE ME A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN. Thank you. There. I feel better. Much better. I'm sure you do, too.

Get the format right. Look at the sample pages I handed out. Look at the scripts you have. If your script looks just like 'em, you're in good shape. Do not fail to use 100% perfect format. It's not rocket science.

Header font must be Courier Regular. Page number font must match font in body of script. No page number on page 1.

Use contractions in dialogue. Just like real people. Make your dialogue flow smoothly. Make it sound real, without being redundant.

Two spaces after a period. Just like that.
Not one space. It's not right.

Underline a word in dialogue for emphasis. Put it in UPPER CASE letters when the person is shouting.

If you move the actors from one room to another, you need another slug line:

INT. DINING ROOM

Mike drinks. He walks out.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Mike plays with the electric train.

INT. BEDROOM

He comes in, plays Parcheesi.

or --- use a steadicam

INT. HOUSE

CAMERA FOLLOWS Mike as he wanders around. In the dining room, he drinks, goes to living room and plays with train. Finally, he staggers upstairs to the bedroom for a quick round of Parcheesi.

Parentheticals go between dialogue and the character.

like this

DAVE

(menacing)

Come here, cutie pie.

not like this:

DAVE

(menacing)

Come here, cutie pie.

When people talk, use contractions. Very few Americans or human beings, for that matter, say "I am coming next week." They say, "I'm coming next week."

GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. It ain't rocket science, dude. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT. GET THE FORMAT RIGHT.

Don't ever do a phone call when the characters can be put in a room together. Any conversation is more powerful when it's face to face.

Every scene is an argument. Every scene has conflict on some level.

Each character in a scene WANTS something. What is their agenda? What is the hidden agenda?

What can you do in a scene, once it's written to make it WORSE for the characters and more intense for us? Jack up the pressure in the second draft! What makes it more emotional for character and reader than the present draft?

Write numbers out in words. Not 3 but three.

For pity's sake, QUIT using the passive voice!!! Every teacher you've had since fifth grade (and now me) has told you this. Are you EVER going to learn it? How hard is it, fercryinoutloud? "He is walking" becomes "He walks." It's unbelievably simple. Just DO it. For the rest of your life.

Steadicam is not spelled with a Y.

"Okay" is not spelled any other way.

Read and memorize the sheets I gave you about format. Do it right. It is VERY tough for me to critique the quality of your writing when I have to slug my way through a forest of poor formatting.

All right is always two words. Despite what you might think. Despite what your spellcheck might think.

The following will be on the assignment sheet for the 40 pages. Get ready. Start proofreading in your sleep. Practice running your spellcheck.

There must be no format mistakes. No spelling errors. If there is a format mistake, your grade will be lowered from an A to an A minus and I'll start grading down from there. If I find something that is not proofread (word spelled correctly, wrong word) I'll start grading down from a B. If there is a spelling mistake, your grade will be lowered to a C and I'll start grading down from there.

Minor characters have personalities! Even if it's a security guard, you can give him or her a personality, some pizzazz, a cute line... Even the most bland exchange can be lively if you decide to take the time to do it. Go through your whole script and make sure EVERYONE has great dialogue to say.

As you go over your outlines and the scenes you've written / are writing, ask yourself -- "Where's the conflict in this scene? What new thing do we learn about the character? What new thing do we learn about the plot? Where's the conflict? Should I move the scene? Should I combine it with another scene? Can I cut the scene?" Then ask yourself the questions again.

Did no one take me seriously when I said "get rid of 'to be' in all its forms?" I don't want to see -- He is walking... He is talking... She is wearing... she is tall... she is a race car driver... on the same page.

Did no one take me seriously when I had you do the Walter Hill HARD TIMES exercise? Your prose is way way overblown and often has nothing to do with screenplay style. Think poetry, not how many words can you cram on a page.

Your sentence:

21 words --

There is a picture of Ann next to it. She is sitting on a park bench and looking straight ahead, thoughtful.

Rewritten, 9 words --

Beside it, Ann on a park bench, looking thoughtful.

Much smoother, faster, with more punch. No forms of "to be."

or, 12 words --

Beside it, a shot of Ann on a park bench, looking thoughtful.

"Dave is asleep in the bed."

Only tell us where he is if it matters. "Dave sleeps on the ceiling."

otherwise,

Dave is asleep.

or, shorter --

Dave sleeps.

We know it's a bed.

You HAVE to cut this stuff down.

Dave, head of the program...

becomes

Dave, program head

Always, always, always, always, always, keep in mind

1.) You're not getting paid by the word.

2.) No one wants to read your stuff except your mother.

3.) Smoother and easier to read is more pleasing than clunky.

Laughter ceases to continue.

which is nearly incomprehensible, becomes

Laughter stops.

Don't say, in scene description:

"He skips several answering machine messages from his mother..."

We have to hear those partial messages in dialogue. Don't describe dialogue in scene description unless it's background from a crowd.

When we meet a CHARACTER for the first time, you need to give a little description of them.

DAVE RUMSFELD, 60s, a cute social climber. If it's a major character, you give two sentences.

Spend a lot of time with the page 1 of the screenplays you read. You need to set mood and

location and describe the characters. You don't have to launch into tons of dialogue right way.

You shouldn't, in fact. Tell us where we are and what it feels like, briefly. But do it.

Read the screenplays in the library. How will you have a clue what to do if you don't read them?

This is not a short story you're writing. It's a foreign language.

Read your stuff out loud. Catch embarrassing mistakes.

"Black BMW pulls up to curb in front of a large church steeple."

Is the steeple on the sidewalk?

Write out all words in dialogue. It's to be spoken, not read.

It's eight o'clock.

Reading from First Timothy.
See you at six, Lieutenant Howdy. (not Lt. Howdy)

All right is two words.
Alright is not a word at all. Even your MS Word spellcheck knows that.

"Albert turns and leaves toward his BMW, which is sitting in the driveway, and he pulls out."
You don't leave toward something.
When did he get in the car?
Unless it's in the flowerbed, don't tell us a car is parked in a driveway.
How about --
"Albert gets in the BMW, leaves."
6 words vs. 17

Read your stuff out loud.
"One of the adult teachers looks back at him."
Are there children teachers?
"A teacher looks back at him."

Print your work.
Proofread it.
Fix your mistakes.
Print it again.
Hand THAT copy in. Do not attempt to proofread on the computer.

MOVIE TITLES are written in capital letters.

Do not be redundant. Don't repeat yourself. Don't say the same thing twice.... see?
SHERRY
I DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER! DON'T
YOU GET IT? I DON'T WANT TO EVEN
REALIZE IT EVER HAPPENED!!
Instead say this --
SHERRY
DON'T YOU GET IT? I DON'T WANT TO
REMEMBER!

Okay is not spelled ok.

Don't use same forms of words all the time:
Students smoking and laughing. Students are walking and talking. Ann is searching her locker.

Font in header for page number must be Courier just like font in screenplay.

Johnny knocks on the door.
becomes
Johnny knocks.
unless it's
Johnny knocks on the elephant's ear.
Then we need to know where he's knocking.

A science lab class room with students dissecting frogs.
becomes
Science lab. Students dissect frogs.
Four words shorter! Yippee!

Give your smaller characters some zing. Think of a tiny backstory for them, or some personality... so that the secretary or the pizza guy don't just say, "Yes, ma'am." all the way through your script. Make them as un-boring and as interesting as possible. It's the little touches that really make your script stand out. Everyone has to have good, interesting dialogue.

Get the format right. Read the script on reserve in the library. Check your format against it. Check your format against the format handouts. Correct your format where it's wrong. As the semester progresses, I'm going to be less and less forgiving of format mistakes. It's not hard if you make an effort. If you make no effort, it's pretty tough to get it right.

Use parentheticals correctly. They color dialogue. They don't get used in place of scene description.

Once again I ask you not to use "is" or forms of "to be." They weaken your writing to a grade school level. IS ANYBODY OUT THERE LISTENING???

Write out numbers in dialogue. "You paid her ten thousand dollars? You idiot."

Try never to use words "walk" and "run." They are boring. Grade school words. Find exciting, interesting words that will captivate our imagination. Work at this!

If you describe in scene description dialogue we should be hearing, then you have to write the dialogue. Don't say:

Repeat scene where Dave asks Sam if he will be going to the picnic, and Sam denying. You have to write out the scene.

PROOFREAD. You're asking me to care about your work when you don't.

Avoid adverbs like you avoid the Grim Reaper. A sure sign of weak writing is reliance on adverbs. Choose better words AFTER the adverb, lose the adverb. Adverbs = Palookaville.

Don't forget: no naked slug lines.

Don't do this:

EXT. SMALL TOWN DRUGSTORE DAY

DAVE

Hot today, ain't it boys?

You have to have some scene description:

EXT. SMALL TOWN DRUGSTORE DAY

One horse town. Dead horse, too.

DAVE

Hot today, ain't it boys?

Is the person you have chosen to be the main character, really the RIGHT person to be the main character? Does the story revolve around them, or should a different character really be your central hero?

Be sure you know who the main character is really really supposed to be. Sometimes, you can pick the wrong person and then you go down a long rocky road until you figure out your mistake.

Elise fights Bad Guy to save Patrick's life.
Elise realizes she loves Patrick.
Elise and Patrick are together.

Patrick fights Bad Guy to save Elise.
Elise realizes she loves Patrick.
Elise and Patrick are together.

Depending on who your main character is... much can change. I'm working on the Bad Guy being the hero's agent of change... the hero becomes the person he/she needs to be because he/she fights the Bad guy

*

Heroin is a drug. Heroine is a girl.

I may have misspoken when I continually said "Bad guy." It's too simplistic and is confusing. Go with "Opponent." It's more accurate. Hero vs. Opponent is better, because in a love story, for instance, the Opponent is the one you're in love with, but it's not working out... there doesn't necessarily need to be a Dr. Evil Bad Guy, just someone to do battle with the Hero.

Never have characters whose names look/sound the same (rhyme) or start with same letter. Tougher to tell them apart and you can't abbreviate them when making notes.
Jake Jerry John Jonas Honus
Jake Alphonso Reed Bo

What is the jeopardy for the hero? Why are we worried about her survival in an emotional or physical way? And why, partway through, do we get REALLY worried?

Why are you all so nihilistic? Producers don't want to pay \$50 million for a movie where the hero ends up dead and ruined and crushed and defeated at the end. People don't want to pay money to see someone with worse problems than theirs get slaughtered at the end. Just a thought. I'm not gonna tell you what to write, but yikes, look on the bright side, why don't you? SEVEN was a rare, rare exception.

*

Your first plot turning point (as you have turned them in on homework), generally, should be your inciting incident. Most of you are starting your stories way too late, with too much set up and prep at the beginning. Take a look at your story and see if you can lop off the first part and use what you are calling your first plot point as an event that gets the story moving, somewhere before page ten.

You can also think of the trial by fire as an "apparent defeat" for the hero. We think all is lost and so do they... then they decide to fight back.

*

You HAVE to know precisely what the Opponent wants. If you don't know that, you can't create your story. Until you know what the Opponent is after, nothing can fall into place.

Spend some time figuring that out.

What does the Hero want? Often it is the same thing the Opponent wants. (Football genre: both are after the championship. The coach wants to cheat to get it. The Quarterback wants to win honestly...)

Also, you have to know who the Hero is at the beginning and who he/she is at the end. How has she changed through the course of the movie? What is her arc?

You have to be able to answer these simple questions with a clear, simple answer, or you can't proceed.

*

By now I hope you've read the book on character development. *Creating Unforgettable Characters* by Linda Seger. If not already, today would be a good time. Why not now? You've got nothing else to do...

"The modem has reported that there is no dial tone."
becomes, when you cut for speed..

"The modem has reported no dial tone."

or

"The modem reports no dial tone."

Same thing, only easier to read. Pretty anal retentive, huh? You have to be that way, I'm afraid. This is the way you have to write every sentence of scene description in a screenplay. More to come on that subject...

What do your characters FEAR? What scares them, and then how does it happen to them? This is a crucial question.

The most important thing to keep in mind is your hero's EMOTIONAL journey. What effect do events have on him or her? How are they feeling about this scene and that scene. What is going on in their heart and head... how do they feel, all the time. Never forget it.

Be careful to make sure your Opponent is a well rounded person. They can't be 100% evil. They become cartoons if they're just horrible people doing horrible things all the time. Even the Amon Goeth character in *SCHINDLER'S LIST* was not totally ghastly all the time.

If you are borrowing a friend's printer to do your homework, or if it's your printer and it stinks, please make the effort to get to a printer (VU computer center perhaps) that will do a professional job on your homework. Do not make my job more difficult by making it tough to read your homework.

How can you continually make us worry about your hero?

Turn your homework in printed in 12 point type. Thank you. Thank you very much.

*

Some of you are throwing yourselves into your stories like jumping off a building. Good!. This is what I am after. The deeper you can immerse yourself, and your own emotions, in your work, the more true your work will be.

Remember, if it's really embarrassing for you to think I might read the work aloud in class, then you're actually writing from a place that is real inside you.

Never say, "I believe..." or "I think..." in any writing. If you say it like that, it weakens your statement. Makes us feel you are open for argument. Just state it like it's a fact.

Be sure to proofread. I see the wrong words, but spelled very nicely. Shows you don't care enough to read it over before printing.

*

In class, I did not explain "call to adventure / refusal of the call" which is on the homework. It's simple. Not always there, but it often is.

At the very beginning of STAR WARS, Luke is asked to help the rebellion (or something) and says no, he has other things to do. Then, after his uncle is killed, he then accepts the call to adventure and says he will help. This plays out in many ways under many guises, but that is one example.

The hero is often reluctant to get involved. Something happens that changes her mind and then it's off to the races.

*

Think seriously about what you can do to make your Opponent less of a cartoon and more a real person. Give them a speech where we see why they do what they do, and we understand it. They are the hero of their movie, and see that what they are doing is right. Many of you just have cartoons for villains, and it's less interesting than if they were real, complex people.

You must eliminate coincidence from your story. It's okay in the first ten minutes for someone to bump into someone at an airport, and then the story ensues. However, after the first part of the story, there can't be coincidences. You can't move your story forward based on acts of God, happenstance, etc. Go through and weed out any coincidences. They destroy all credibility. Read Tom Clancy. His novels stink because they are riddled with coincidence. Then see his movies, which are not written by him. They're generally pretty good. Coincidence is not good. Root it out and kill it.

*

Chart the appearances of each character as you work through your outline. You'll often find that Character A and Character B haven't been in a scene together for twenty or thirty pages... Whoops! Looking at the outline is often the only way to correct that.

You MUST know what the main character wants.
You MUST know what the opponent wants.
It must be reflected in nearly every scene.
If you can't answer those two basic questions, you will flounder.

He clamps his hand over hers, squeezes.
becomes
He squeezes her hand.

*

The gallery has one of those sudden conversational lulls. Banks freaks, wondering if anyone heard him. He looks out frantically. The room rocks on. He feels better.

becomes

The gallery has a sudden conversational lull. Banks looks out frantically, wondering if anyone heard. The room rocks on.

Graham looks to Hatch and Emma. They believe Ulysses.

GRAHAM

He hired me to pretend to be an artist! He hired me because his career had gone down the tubes! He was sleeping with Camilla and her husband found out! WE WERE IN THIS TOGETHER! Call my acting teacher! Ask Lola, anybody in my class! I'M AN ACTOR!

EMMA

And a murderer.

becomes, with a better piece of dialogue:

Graham looks to Hatch and Emma. They believe Ulysses.

GRAHAM

He hired me to pretend to be an artist! He hired me because his career had gone down the tubes! He was sleeping with Camilla and her husband found out! WE WERE IN THIS TOGETHER! Call my acting teacher! Ask Lola, anybody in my class! I'M AN ACTOR!

EMMA

So was John Wilkes Booth.

*

The door slowly opens. Magda kicks past shopping bags, CD cases, creamy soft clothes, and other elegant debris into Graham's expansive loft.

becomes

The door slowly opens. Magda kicks past elegant debris into Graham's expansive loft.

Do NOT have character names that start with the same letter.

Clarence. Carol. It's too confusing for the reader. You have over twenty letters of the alphabet to choose from and probably only about five or six characters.

Proofread your work. It doesn't thrill me to find mistakes that tell me you don't care enough to proofread.

Put page numbers on your work.

affect, effect ... look them up. Use them correctly.

Do not force me to make choices. If you don't know the direction something is going, or you can't decide which of two decisions to make... don't leave the two choices in your work for me to decide. You decide. Let me read it.

*

No dialogue on page one. Set mood! It's your one chance to dazzle me with the brilliance of your prose.

You have bought the screenplays so you'll read them and steal from them, especially in terms of writing style and screenplay format. It seems fairly simple to me to be able to copy the format from each of the dozen screenplays you have. Just look at the stuff I handed you in class, and the screenplays, and do it JUST LIKE THEM.

Don't write as though you're writing a novel. Be visual. Tell us what they do. Tell us what we can see. Remember, you're writing a screenplay for a movie. The audience will see what you tell the actors to DO and will hear what you tell them to SAY. That's it. The audience will not be reading your scene description.

Page numbers go in the top right corner. Just like in the screenplays.

Do not micromanage the scene description. Just tell us barely enough so we understand what they are doing, but don't give us ALL the details.

Do not justify your right margin.

Page number font must be courier, just like the body of the script.

Do not have a slug line and then dialogue. Write some scene description under the slug line, then the dialogue.

Read the sheets I handed out on format. They will solve 90% of your formatting problems.

Always tell the age of a character when he/she is introduced. Always give a little character description when they are introduced.

Remember, SOUND EFFECTS or IMPORTANT SOUNDS and CAMERA MOVES and VISUAL EFFECTS are all in upper case letters.

In your very first slug line, set the scene like this:

FADE IN:

EXT. NANTUCKET FARM DAY (PRESENT DAY)

A beautiful day. Blah, blah, blah.

You do this so we'll know exactly where we are. Alternately, you can say (1967) or (1892) etc.

*

You MUST know what the hero wants. THE crucial thing.

A one line outline is the ONLY way to see your story and find flaws. If you can't see it on three pages, you can't grasp the whole thing at once.

If you are using Final Draft, go to File, Preferences, General, then select Paginate Like a Macintosh and you can squeeze a few more pages in...

Inside the gallery, everyone watches, amused. Ulysses bows deeply and gives them the stiff arm. He totters with no dignity down the sidewalk.

BECOMES

Inside, everyone is amused. Ulysses bows and gives them the stiff arm. He totters down the sidewalk with no dignity.

This takes up one less line on the page! Yippee! Just like:

ULYSSES

Only person who'd gain removing me from the picture, is you. Was it you?

Graham shakes his head. Ulysses works on the beer. Graham begins to change for dinner.

BECOMES

ULYSSES

Only person who'd gain removing me from the picture, is you. Was it you?

No. Ulysses guzzles the beer. Graham dresses for dinner.

He turns on his slide projector.

BECOMES, FOR CLARITY

He switches on his slide projector.

If I write "Proofread" on your homework, you should be ashamed. It shouts to me that you didn't take the three minutes necessary to re-read your assignment before you printed it... or, after you printed it... and reprinted it. How tough is that? What else have you got to do for three minutes?

Don't have a slugline and then go straight to dialogue. Have a slugline, then a bit of scene description, then dialogue.

career, careen... look them up. Use them correctly. Almost no one does. I'll give you hint, careen is something you do to a boat.

In dialogue, underline words for emphasis, then CAPITALIZE THEM for more emphasis but don't bold face 'em.

Page numbers go in the top right corner. In Courier font. Optional, a period after the number. Why is this so hard?

Two spaces after a period. Like this.

Not one. Like this.

*

CAMILLA

You knew Roland, right?

(lethal)

You hadn't scratched the surface...

Graham can't take his eyes off the gun.

CAMILLA

He made me sign a prenup, that scamp. And after all I did for him. So I made a little plan.

Roland goes to jail for killing Ulysses. I live happily ever after... That night, I boned you three times. No way you were going to wake up. How was I to know Ulysses would take one of his patented midnight strolls? It was so dark in there.

(petulant)

I stubbed my toe.

After some rewriting and breaking up the speech so she's not telling it to the hero, he's figuring at least some of it out... This is a big difference, as it makes the hero active in solving the crime puzzle, he's not just told it by the bad guy, which makes him weak... THE ABOVE DIALOGUE BECOMES:

CAMILLA

You knew Roland, right?

(lethal)

You hadn't scratched the surface...

Graham watches the gun.

CAMILLA

He made me sign a prenup.

GRAHAM

So you made a little plan. Roland goes to jail for killing Ulysses, you live wealthily ever after...

CAMILLA

That night, I boned you three times. No way you were going to wake up.

GRAHAM

Quite the perfect alibi.

CAMILLA

How was I to know Ulysses would take one of his patented midnight strolls? It was so dark in there.

(petulant)

When I left the cashmere, I stubbed my toe.

faze, phase fazed, phased look 'em up, use 'em right!

numbers need commas. 1,000 10,539 342,000

always have scene description, even just a little, between a slug line and dialogue

make sure your page number font matches your screenplay font, i.e., both are Courier. Times New Roman changes the length of the page...

beware of "to be" in all its forms.

do not over explain in your scene description. write lean!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Tell us what is happening and then quit. Forget adverbs, forget most adjectives.

parentheticals are about dialogue and how it's spoken, not about movement. 99% of the time, you don't say (getting up for beer) in the parenthetical.

do not make format mistakes! Check your script against the handouts and the scripts you read. Make your format perfect. It's so easy!

Local Sheriff, holding hat in hands, tapping brim with fingers.

BECOMES

Local Sheriff, holding hat, tapping brim.

(unless he's holding it in his teeth, don't tell us... or if he's tapping the brim with his toes, mention that)

write out numbers in dialogue if they're less than 100.

Some of you are having trouble with what is supposed to be happening in an Act Break scene... the Act I break is a moment that turns the main character's world upside down... nothing will be the same, and his ordinary world is no more. It sends him or her forward into the body of the story, gives her purpose, etc. It's the end of the static, normal life. It should be a big, big deal.

Act II is the same, only bigger. Everything the hero has thought for the second act is now proven wrong, or there's a huge development / revelation... and the story doubles in speed and tension and the stakes go up and we're really worried about the hero's entire universe collapsing around him. Again, it propels us into Act III and the final battle. You need revelations between the Act I and the Act II breaks, or you'll have a giant sag in Act II, but these are the biggies.

Some of you are writing scenes that seem like just another scene.

Two spaces above SLUG LINE, one space below. At least in your first draft. You can squeeze the space out later, if you have to. Otherwise, it's easier to read.

Bold face your slug lines. Easier to tell when a new scene starts.