



Learning to love development hell

We spend a great deal of time reading scripts, talking about scripts, writing scripts, rewriting scripts and studying script writing. An observer from the United Federation of Planets might wonder why since so few films are actually made here. There is – you might be surprised to hear – no shortage of money for films, so why are so few British films made? The answer may lie in a question often asked but seldom answered: ‘What is a good treatment?’ The answer is usually ‘How long is a piece of string?’

Why is it that I read powerful, moving, convincing – and brief – treatments when I am in the States but they are rare here? Why do American scripts have such great structure even though their subjects and themes may be awful? The answer may be their understanding of the benefits of a treatment as the foundation of what is subsequently written.

Many writers in the UK seem to hate writing treatments. They claim that they are bad at it, that it is not real writing, that they have never seen a good treatment, that nowhere teaches the writing of treatments and anyway, they want to be script writers not treatment writers.

Writing treatments (and pitching) is the road out of ‘development hell’. Doing these activities well is the fastest way out. Development hell exists largely because producers and broadcasters don’t always know what they are doing. Many writers would say that they themselves often don’t know what they are doing. This is not a criticism. It is the nature of the beast.

The ready answer from producers and broadcasters is ‘Have a go yourself!’ I remember my father in an Italian restaurant decades ago, becoming impatient with a waiter who kept bringing the wrong dishes. In a voice that presaged Manuel in *Fawlty Towers*, the waiter raised his palms to the ceiling and said, ‘You try do better!’

I don’t actually agree with William Goldman’s dictum that ‘No one knows anything’. Just knowing that you know nothing is evidence that you do know something. The trouble starts when someone is convinced that they know everything. Of course they cannot know everything so the goalposts are moved and the writer has to make changes to their treatment or (worse) to their script either because it really didn’t work, or because the reader thought that it didn’t work.

What has all this to do with treatments, those usually anodyne, soulless documents much loved by executives, some of whom haven’t the time (or training) to read scripts?

A great script is something magical. It is not easily understood or wholly comprehended; not at the first read anyway. It has depth and breadth, opaque parts and transparent parts, some of which you only become aware of long after you have finished reading the script. Furthermore, really great scripts don’t always make complete sense until you have seen the movie.

So how does a writer – with the imagination of a director – write a treatment that will do justice to an outstanding idea?

How can writers hope to get into and then out of the development hell that is necessary for their movie to be made? Can the writer ensure that the journey is a return one by writing that sad document, the treatment?

Well, I believe that for many writers – not all, I grant you – the ability to think their way through a story so that they can explain how it will be sold, who the characters are, why they are writing it and then provide a synopsis of the film as if they had just seen it, gives them a huge advantage.

Over many years at Blake Friedmann I have noted the treatments, synopses and proposals that elicited very positive remarks from publishers and producers. There was a vague pattern: when all the common qualities were put together,

what appeared to be the optimum treatment was a document with the following four sections:

1. The hard-sell blurb that tells you what kind of movie/television drama/book it is.
2. The character biographies with a few more lines for major characters than for minor ones.
3. Why the writer is writing this script/book – a kind of statement of intent.
4. Finally, the synopsis, written in the present tense to give immediacy.

Yet some writers say that until they are into the script/novel, they don’t really know how every move will play. Good point. But if you want the reader of your proposal to react well, and if you want to make sure that the story hangs together in a coherent way, perhaps you shouldn’t offer the proposal until you have worked it out, or you can suggest one, coherent path for the storyline in your film.

All this ties in with the low fees that writers are paid by producers for treatments. Since treatments usually do not work, producers feel justified in the belief that as little as possible should be paid for them. That in turn justifies the writers in thinking that it is not worth doing much work on treatments because they are usually rejected. (I know I go on about this – Ed.)

However, knowing what is going to be in the script would seem to me to be a *sine qua non*. Knowing how it is going to play tonally and the nature of the subtext is a great help too. That is where the treatment comes in.

A treatment is nothing to be afraid of. It is a way of thinking about something that you want to write. It is not a ‘restrictive practice’, a constraint put on the writer by the producer, broadcaster or even by the writer himself or herself. A treatment should not be a ‘binding’ document. It is the writer’s chance to work out the majority of the problems in telling the chosen story. It is how writers check on their own work and have others provide them with invaluable feedback, all before they start writing the script.

In this sense a good treatment is one of the most liberating documents for a writer to have. Deviations from the treatment because the writer has found better ways of telling the story are usually welcomed by the producer. Remember, the story is not as important as the way it is told.

I know that for the majority of writers writing a good treatment is more difficult than writing the script. But that’s not a good reason for avoiding it, especially since most film and television drama is commissioned and it is usually some sort of treatment that invariably is written first. Spec scripts are rarely bought and even more rarely produced.

Pitching ideas – especially when they do not yet exist in a completed script – is another hurdle writers need to get over at an early stage in a project’s life. Most writers think that pitching is what you do once you have written the script. So often they fail to realise that if they know how to pitch a story, they will also know how to tell that story. And knowing how to pitch the same story differently to different potential buyers is one of the most liberating discoveries any writer can make.

The industry needs treatments. It is a fact of film and television industry life. Knowing how to write them, how a writer can analyse their own treatments, the benefit that is derived from step outlines, the contractual points concerning treatments that should be in every contract signed (especially if the writer has been asked to write one for nothing), and how to use treatment writing skills to improve pitching (important since many commissions are given to writers who pitch better than they write), are all part of getting into and out of ‘development hell’. We hope that *ScriptWriter* magazine will prove a reliable guide.

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