

Death to Readers by Terry Rossio

Confession: I myself was a reader for two years, for six different production companies in Los Angeles. For those who don't know, a reader is the first line of defense a studio or production company has against unsolicited screenplays. The reader writes 'coverage,' basically a synopsis of the screenplay, and an analysis, with a recommended course of action -- which is nearly always to 'pass.'

Often a college student, the reader is commonly characterized as a creatively bankrupt imbecile whose job it is to keep wonderful screenplays from getting into the hands of those powerful people who would surely buy them if they had the chance.

Perhaps. One thing for sure: the job does give a unique perspective.

Like one time, I swear, I covered three different screenplays -- submitted from different parts of the country -- all of which had key scenes set at a southwestern rattlesnake farm. Why, you could go years without reading a good rattlesnake farm scene, and here I had three in one week. Needless to say, after that I became more sympathetic to claims of 'parallel development.'

And as a reader, you quickly recognize some key patterns. Like all scripts with fancy covers are bad. Scripts submitted by agents are at least well-written. And nonstandard layout -- especially crayon -- is a sure sign of trouble.

And I swear, if I have to read another reporter-looking-to-win a Pulitzer Prize story, I'll gag. And please, don't begin with your lead character waking up in the morning after a pan of the junk in his room. It's by far the most commonly chosen opening.

For my coverages, I referred to a checklist of basic 'rules' provided by a small production company. Over the months, I added to it and revised it quite a bit, combining it with stuff I'd read, and with guidelines provided by other companies. I eventually compiled it all into a make-believe set of guidelines from a mythical studio, SPECTACLE PICTURES. I even gave a copy to my story editor when I left my last job.

We all scoff at the idea of rules, knowing quite correctly that great art -- even great commercial art -- often enjoys its success precisely for the reason of breaking the rules. In this business, conventional wisdom is wrong at least as often as it is right. The fact that readers refer to checklists is disheartening, if not downright maddening. To reduce art to the level of formula is a hopeless task, and takes all the fun out of it besides.

But -- there is something to the old maxim, 'You gotta know the rules to break them.' In that spirit, and for your own amusement, I offer my reader's checklist here:

Checklist A: Concept & Plot

#1. Imagine the trailer. Is the concept marketable?

#2. Is the premise naturally intriguing -- or just average, demanding perfect execution?

#3. Who is the target audience? Would your parents go see it?

Death to Readers by Terry Rossio

#4. Does your story deal with the most important events in the lives of your characters?

#5. If you're writing about a fantasy-come-true, turn it quickly into a nightmare-that-won't-end.

#6. Does the screenplay create questions: will he find out the truth? Did she do it? Will they fall in love? Has a strong 'need to know' hook been built into the story?

#7. Is the concept original?

#8. Is there a goal? Is there pacing? Does it build?

#9. Begin with a punch, end with a flurry.

#10. Is it funny, scary, or thrilling? All three?

#11. What does the story have that the audience can't get from real life?

#12. What's at stake? Life and death situations are the most dramatic. Does the concept create the potential for the character's lives to be changed?

#13. What are the obstacles? Is there a sufficient challenge for our heroes?

#14. What is the screenplay trying to say, and is it worth trying to say it?

#15. Does the story transport the audience?

#16. Is the screenplay predictable? There should be surprises and reversals within the major plot, and also within individual scenes.

#17. Once the parameters of the film's reality are established, they must not be violated. Limitations call for interesting solutions.

#18. Is there a decisive, inevitable, set-up ending that is nonetheless unexpected? (This is not easy to do!)

#19. Is it believable? Realistic?

#20. Is there a strong emotion -- heart -- at the center of the story? Avoid mean-spirited storylines.

Death to Readers by Terry Rossio

Checklist B: Technical Execution

#21. Is it properly formatted?

#22. Proper spelling and punctuation. Sentence fragments okay.

#23. Is there a discernible three-act structure?

#24. Are all scenes needed? No scenes off the spine, they will die on screen.

#25. Screenplay descriptions should direct the reader's mind's eye, not the director's camera.

#26. Begin the screenplay as far into the story as possible.

#27. Begin a scene as late as possible, end it as early as possible. A screenplay is like a piece of string that you can cut up and tie together -- the trick is to tell the entire story using as little string as possible.

#28. In other words: Use cuts.

#29. Visual, Aural, Verbal -- in that order. The expression of someone who has just been shot is best; the sound of the bullet slamming into him is second best; the person saying, "I've been shot" is only third best.

#30. What is the hook, the inciting incident? You've got ten pages (or ten minutes) to grab an audience.

#31. Allude to the essential points two or even three times. Or hit the key point very hard. Don't be obtuse.

#32. Repetition of locale. It helps to establish the atmosphere of film, and allows audience to 'get comfortable.' Saves money during production.

#33. Repetition and echoes can be used to tag secondary characters. Dangerous technique to use with leads.

#34. Not all scenes have to run five pages of dialogue and/or action. In a good screenplay, there are lots of two-inch scenes. Sequences build pace.

#35. Small details add reality. Has the subject matter been thoroughly researched?

#36. Every single line must either advance the plot, get a laugh, reveal a character trait, or do a

Death to Readers by Terry Rossio

combination of two -- or in the best case, all three -- at once.

#37. No false plot points; no backtracking. It's dangerous to mislead an audience; they will feel cheated if important actions are taken based on information that has not been provided, or turns out to be false.

#38. Silent solution; tell your story with pictures.

#39. No more than 125 pages, no less than 110... or the first impression will be of a script that 'needs to be cut' or 'needs to be fleshed out.'

#40. Don't number the scenes of a selling script. MOREs and CONTINUEDs are optional.

Checklist C: Characters

#41. Are the parts castable? Does the film have roles that stars will want to play?

#42. Action and humor should emanate from the characters, and not just thrown in for the sake of a laugh. Comedy which violates the integrity of the characters or oversteps the reality-world of the film may get a laugh, but it will ultimately unravel the picture. Don't break the fourth wall, no matter how tempting.

#43. Audiences want to see characters who care deeply about something -- especially other characters.

#44. Is there one scene where the emotional conflict of the main character comes to a crisis point?

#45. A character's entrance should be indicative of the character's traits. First impression of a character is most important.

#46. Lead characters must be sympathetic -- people we care about and want to root for.

#47. What are the characters wants and needs? What is the lead character's dramatic need? Needs should be strong, definite -- and clearly communicated to the audience.

#48. What does the audience want for the characters? It's all right to be either for or against a particular character -- the only unacceptable emotion is indifference.

#49. Concerning characters and action: a person is what he does, not necessarily what he says.

#50. On character faults: characters should be 'this but also that;' complex. Characters with

Death to Readers by Terry Rossio

doubts and faults are more believable, and more interesting. Heroes who have done wrong and villains with noble motives are better than characters who are straight black and white.

#51. Characters can be understood in terms of, 'what is their greatest fear?' Gittes, in CHINATOWN was afraid of being played for the fool. In SPLASH the Tom Hanks character was afraid he could never fall in love. In BODY HEAT Racine was afraid he'd never make his big score.

#52. Character traits should be independent of the character's role. A banker who fiddles with his gold watch is memorable, but cliché; a banker who breeds dogs is a somehow more acceptable detail.

#53. Character conflicts should be both internal and external. Characters should struggle with themselves, and with others.

#54. Character 'points of view' need to be distinctive within an individual screenplay. Characters should not all think the same. Each character needs to have a definite point of view in order to act, and not just react.

#55. Distinguish characters by their speech patterns: word choice, sentence patterns; revealed background, level of intelligence.

#56. 'Character superior' sequences (where the character acts on information the audience does not have) usually don't work for very long -- the audience gets lost. On the other hand, when the audience is in a 'superior' position -- the audience knows something that the characters do not -- it almost always works. (NOTE: This does not mean the audience should be able to predict the plot!)

#57. Run each character through as many emotions as possible -- love, hate, laugh, cry, revenge.

#58. Characters must change. What is the character's arc?

#59. The reality of the screenplay world is defined by what the reader knows of it, and the reader gains that knowledge from the characters. Unrealistic character actions imply an unrealistic world; fully-designed characters convey the sense of a realistic world.

#60. Is the lead involved with the story throughout? Does he control the outcome of the story?

Death to Readers by Terry Rossio

A postscript

After a few months, I went back to the production company I'd last worked at, needing to make some extra money again as a reader. The story editor was new, a lady I'd never met. But she liked my samples and gave me a book to cover. "And here's a list of our guidelines," she said, handing me several pages, "to use in your assessment of projects."

I looked at the pages with interest. It was the above list, the one I'd submitted to the previous story editor several months before. A copy of my original SPECTACLE PICTURES notes, not even re-typed. Somehow it had become the standard reference for this production company, and the new story editor was giving it back to me, unaware of its origin.

So there's something to consider. A point to ponder, a thought to give pause. Somewhere YOUR script perhaps is being judged by a reader, some dumb college student like me, using this same type of list.

Or maybe even this exact list.

How does your screenplay stand up?