

THE NAME GAME: Choosing Names for Your Characters

by Drew Yanno

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What's In a Name?

What's in a name? In a word - everything. OK, that's a bit of an exaggeration. But when it comes to screenwriting, how you choose and present your character names can have a significant impact on how well your screenplay is ultimately received by a professional reader.

Allow me to elaborate.

Oftentimes I'll read a script and the characters populating it will have the most ordinary names imaginable. Joe, John, Mary, Susan...

Look, there's nothing inherently wrong with those names. Millions of people in real life have those names. Heck, you probably know lots of people with those names. Except that you're writing a script you hope will convince a reader that you have talent. You want to make them keep reading. Above all, you want to impress them.

One of the ways you can do that is to give some thought to the names you invent for your characters. You want your script to be memorable, right? So why not help do that by giving your characters names that are memorable?

When it comes to choosing names, lots of writers get hung up on the sound of those names. What it's like to *hear* the name. And that's not a bad thought. Except it's a long way until your script gets to the screen, if ever. When it comes to selecting a name for a character, I advise writers to make the name not only sound good, but *look* good on the page, as well. After all, that name is going to be read first. It has to pass that test long before it might ever be heard.

In addition to sound and look, writers often employ other means when it comes to giving their characters memorable names. Fine. I'm all for it, so long as it achieves that goal. However, I'm not suggesting you go overboard here. I've known writers to choose names that have some sort of weird origin or cultural derivation. You know, it's Gaelic for "one who carries a goat on his shoulders." Forget that. Just take some time and effort to choose interesting names.

OK, so how do you do that? Well, there are a couple of ways. Nicknames, for one. We all like nicknames for the very fact that they aren't ordinary. And they're memorable. Isn't that the whole point of a nickname? If you describe one of your characters as fat and you call him Sticks, the reader is likely to recall that. The contrast between the name and the character makes it memorable.

Another trick is last names. You can give your character an ordinary first name coupled with a memorable last name. Then use the last name for the character in description and dialogue.

One of my favorite examples of this Harrison Ford's cop's name in *Witness* - John Book. John couldn't be more ordinary. Probably the most ordinary of first names for men. But the surname Book isn't ordinary, at least as a last name. Plus it seems to have a few associations with the character in that film. Recall that Book is pitted against some corrupt cops. Compared to them, he goes "by the book."

Then again, he roughs up a suspect and beats up a guy when he is disguised as an Amishman. In that instance, he *doesn't* go by the book. And, of course, cops "book" suspects. On top of all that, Book is a strong sounding one-syllable name that the writers wisely chose to use in description and dialogue instead of "John." And, oh yeah, it both sounds and looks good.

Notice I picked a main character in my example. This is where naming is most important. Again, you don't want to go overboard with giving every character in the script an unusual or uncommon name. There may be story reasons why you would select a rather ordinary name for a secondary character. For similar reasons, you may want to give your main character an ordinary name. However, in that circumstance I would advise you to give more uncommon names to the other important characters.

OK, so where do you find these memorable names? Well, the short answer is - just about everywhere. I've heard of writers using all kinds of devices. Their childhood friends. A book of baby names. The Baseball Encyclopedia. The phone book (if you can still find one). Those are all fine. But I think we hear all kinds of names throughout the course of our lives. I recommend that you keep a notebook handy and write down names you hear that grab your interest. Hey, if they grab your interest, they'll probably do the same for a reader. Then when you start your script and you're searching for names, you can open that book and look for ones that might fit your characters.

What Characters Need Names?

I once read a bit of advice from a screenwriting guru who said that every character in the screenplay should have a name. I think his line of reasoning was something like: "Hey, they're people too."

That's a nice humanitarian thought, albeit in a make-believe world. However, trust me on this, if you give names to every single character in your script, you're going to piss off the reader and "dilute" your story.

Why is that? It's simple. Every time you give a character a name in your screenplay, you are – implicitly – asking the reader to remember that character. Now you may not intend to do so, but trust me, it will happen. It's just the way our minds work when we watch a movie and, by extension, read a script. We will inevitably store that name in the back of our mind and watch for them to re-appear later on in the script. If the character doesn't re-appear, we're likely to confuse them with another character or characters. After all, you gave them a name. They had to be important. What happened to them? Where did they go? You don't want questions like that. They create confusion during the read, and confusion can kill a script faster than a dose of strychnine.

Another reason for not naming every single character in your script is that every time you create a character – and name them – you are creating a potential subplot. Why is that? Well, subplots arise out of secondary characters and their relationships with the main character and/or other secondary characters. Giving a character a name is the starting point of a possible relationship. If you don't want to create a subplot, then don't name the character.

What's the risk in creating a potential subplot you might ask? Well, there are several. If the reader thinks a subplot is developing, that's just another thing they have to keep in mind, which will not serve your story if you have no intent to explore it. And since you don't intend to pursue that subplot, you won't resolve it, leaving the reader feeling that there is a "loose end." I'll write more about subplots in

another column, but for now remember their connection to naming characters.

OK then, if you don't give a character a name, then what do you do? Once more, it's fairly simple. If the character is – let's say – a waiter, then simply call them "WAITER." If they're a cop, then call them "COP." By doing so, the reader will understand immediately that they need not remember those characters, nor worry about any possible subplot.

So apart from the generic cop or waiter, how do you determine who should get a name? I use a simple rule for this: If the character is going to appear in more than one scene, I'll give them a name. (An exception would be a recurring generic character, such as that waiter, assuming you aren't establishing a subplot with them, in which case they should be named.)

As a corollary to this, if the character speaks more than a line or two, they probably should be named – again, unless they only appear in one scene and have solely a generic purpose (i.e. "waiter"). Notice how having a character re-appear and/or speak more than one line gets you thinking about a possible subplot. It doesn't always happen, but be aware of what you might be creating if you name that character.

That brings us to the question of just how many named characters there should be in a script. Is there a limit? Look, there's no formula that I'm aware of, and I don't have any empirical data to base this on, but I think generally that once you get over twenty named characters who speak and appear in more than one scene, you're getting dangerously close to the point where you're testing the reader's capacity for remembering who everyone is. That doesn't mean you can't ever exceed twenty under any circumstances. It's just that you better write a heck of a script and make sure your names are distinctive enough for the reader to remember and differentiate them.

What's the Best Name to Choose?

I want to talk to you about the actual names you give to your characters and how they appear on the page and how they might eventually sound should you be fortunate enough to sell your script and get it made.

Before I do that, let me point out that choosing the right names is one of those seemingly small things that writers don't give much thought to but that can actually make a big difference in how a reader responds to their script.

Surprisingly, I see bad naming choices in scripts from beginners to pros alike. The latter might be able to survive this not-so-minor annoyance, especially if they're writing on assignment. But for those of you working on spec, I caution you not to take the chance that your reader will be so forgiving.

I'll begin by giving you an example from a script I recently consulted on.

It featured a solid story, some pretty fine writing and some nicely drawn characters, but there was one big problem. Seven of those characters had a name that began with the letter "B."

Because of that, I found myself constantly confused as to which character was which. Think about this: Bobby; Brian; Billy; Bradley; Buster; Ben and Bart. Imagine if you had to remember all those characters and who was who. Oh yeah, and they're all men. Mind you, this wasn't done intentionally. It wasn't part of the story that they had those names. It was never referenced. And it certainly wasn't a comedy. On top of that, there were other characters who had names that started with the same letter.

As a result of this, about every five pages, I found myself going back in the script to figure out who was who. That's not a good thing to have happen when someone's reading your script, whether for a consult or as a prospective project. Like a shark, a reader has to keep moving forward and turning the pages – toward the end, not the beginning.

Here's my simple bit of advice to avoid this: Don't have two or more characters with names that begin with the same letter.

I told you before that you want your character names to be distinctive and memorable. Well, if they begin with the same letter, you run the risk of making them that much more difficult to distinguish. Remember, you don't want to confuse the reader or make their job harder than it already is, given the sheer volume of material they have to read.

Look at it this way: There are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. To avoid "over-crowding" your script, there probably shouldn't be twenty-six named characters with a speaking part, so it shouldn't be much of an issue to avoid.

Again, there are always exceptions. Your story may require more than twenty-six named characters. If so, you'll have to give a few of them names that start with the same letter and, admittedly, there aren't many Quentins, Xaviers or Zachs you can use.

If you find yourself in that situation, I suggest you make one name short and the other long, one syllable versus multiple syllable. Having the names sound different and look different on the page will help the reader keep the characters straight.

A corollary of this is to avoid names that sound alike or look alike on the page, even if they start with a different letter. For instance, it would be wise not to have a Stan and a Fran. Or a Tim and a Jim.

Again, the potential for confusing the reader is too great and there are plenty of names out there to choose from and plenty of ways to find them.

This is a simple rule and, thankfully, there's a simple exercise you should employ before sending out your script. Go through it and list all the character names. If you find that you have more than one beginning with the same first letter, or two that look alike on the page, change one of them.

Doing so will make life easier for the next person who reads your script. While it may not help to sell it, it will surely help to eliminate annoying someone who could keep it from moving up the ladder to a decision-maker.

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