Write Like a Pro Screenwriter *Before* You Turn Pro

2020 Willamette Writers Conference

Saturday, August 1, 2020, 3:45 – 4:45PM

Go Into The Story Interview with Lisa Joy

“Before I became a pro screenwriter,
I started to act like a pro screenwriter.”

WESTWORLD

Jonathan Nolan & Lisa Joy Ink Giant TV Overall Deal With Amazon Studios

By Nellie Andreeva
April 5, 2019 12:30pm

Worth a reported $140M

Three Keys

- Daily Practices
- Time Management
- Set Goals

Daily Practices

Watch Movies. Read Scripts. Write Pages.

Franklin Leonard
@franklinleonard

Replying to @crfcaio

Genuinely couldn't care less, and not something I've ever thought about.

The best screenwriting education I've ever heard comes from @GoIntoTheStory: Read scripts. Watch movies. Write pages.

5:45 PM · Jun 13, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Daily Practices

Watch Movies. Read Scripts. Write Pages.

Time Management

1 2 7 14

Set Goals

Three Scripts. One Genre. < $20M Budgets.

DAILY PRACTICES
Watch Movies

Watch Movies

- AFI 100 Years… 100 Movies
- WGA 101 Greatest Screenplays
- Rotten Tomatoes Top 100 Movies of All Time
- IMDb Top 250 Movies

More Reasons to Watch Movies

-- Study genres

-- Story research

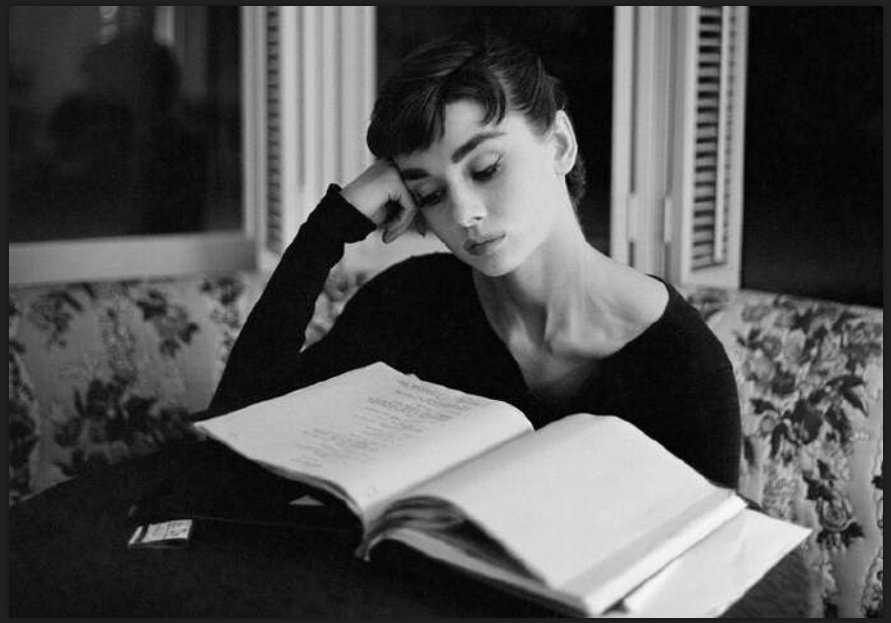
-- Movie history

-- Film and TV tropes

Letterboxd

Letterboxd
Your life in film.

DAILY PRACTICES
Read Scripts



How To Read A Screenplay

- The First Pass
- Scene-By-Scene Breakdown
- Plotline Points and Sequences
- Subplots, Relationships, and Character Functions
- Metamorphosis
- Themes
- Style and Language

Movie Script Scene-By-Scene Breakdowns

Parasite
Scene by Scene Breakdown
By Olivia Ramirez

1-3 We meet Ki-Woo (son), Ki-Jung (daughter), Chung-Sook (mother), and Ki-Tek (father) as Ki-Jung moves around their semi-basement apartment looking for a wi-fi signal. Chung-Sook is miserable and berades her husband, demanding he take action to fix the many issues affecting their lives. Ki-Woo and Ki-Jung successfully find Wi-Fi while huddling on top of the toilet. The toilet is set on a platform unnaturally close to the ceiling to accommodate the septic tank in their semi-basement apartment.

3-4 The family is folding pizza boxes together – one of their odd jobs. A fumigation truck inches closer to their home. They start to close the window but then decide to leave it open since the fumes might kill the crickets they have.They cough as the toxic fumes fill their apartment. Then Ki-Woo shows everyone a video of a white girl folding pizza boxes, and the family uses this as inspiration to fold boxes faster.

4-6 The pizza shop owner tells the family they've only folded 1 out of 4 correctly. He wants to pay them less since many of the boxes are unusable. Ki-Jung begins manipulating the pizza shop owner, trying to get him to fire an employee and hire one of them full-time, while her brother Ki-Woo backs her up. When they're finally paid, the family stares at the bills -- it's been a while since they've seen money.

Go Into The Story Script Reading & Analysis Series

- *12 Years a Slave*
- *1917*
- *(500) Days of Summer*
- *Argo*
- *Arrival*
- *Birdman: (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*
- *BlacKkKlansman*
- *Black Swan*
- *…and dozens more*

More Reasons to Read Scripts

-- Scene construction

-- Transitions

-- Narrative drive

-- You just start to 'get it'

Online Script Resources

- Go Into The Story
- SimplyScripts.com
- Script Slug
- Raindance
- r/Screenwriting

DAILY PRACTICES
Write Pages

DAILY PRACTICES
Write Pages

“Lots of people can write good stories with good characters and great sentences. What’s rare is the stubborn, pragmatic thing that tells you 'I’ve got to do this every single fucking day, even when I don’t want to do it.’” -- Kevin Barry

DAILY PRACTICES
Write Pages

"Every day, it's about building a practice that enables you to try and forget that you're afraid." – Brian Koppelman

DAILY PRACTICES
Write Pages

"Just write a little bit every day. Even if it's for only half an hour—write, write, write." -- Madeleine L'Engle

DAILY PRACTICES
Write Pages

"Write every day without fail, even if you are savagely hung over and your grandmother has fallen out of a third-story window." -- Tom Robbins

DAILY PRACTICES
Write Pages

"You just need to do it every day and love it and write things you care about that you want to see made into movies." -- Aaron Guzikowski

One Page Per Day

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

-Romans 12:1-2

EXT. SUBURBAN - NIGHT

ANDRE, 29, an African-American man walks down the sidewalk talking on his phone.

ANDRE
Hey. I'm trying to figure out what kind of sick individual would name a street Evergreen Way a half a mile from and "Evergreen Lane."

CRYSTAL (O.S.)
Oh shit. You're at Evergreen Lane?

ANDRE
Took me long enough to figure that shit out too. Now I'm walking through creepy confusing-ass suburbs.

They laugh

ANDRE (CONT'D)
I'm serious though. I'm out here like a sore thumb and shit.

CRYSTAL (O.S.)
Stay put; we'll come get you.

ANDRE
No, I'm like 10 minutes away now. I'm good. I need a drink, but I'm good.

CRYSTAL
Okay. Sorry baby. I'll make it up to you.

ANDRE
I'm gonna hold you to that, too. See you in a minute.

Andre hangs up.

One Page Per Day

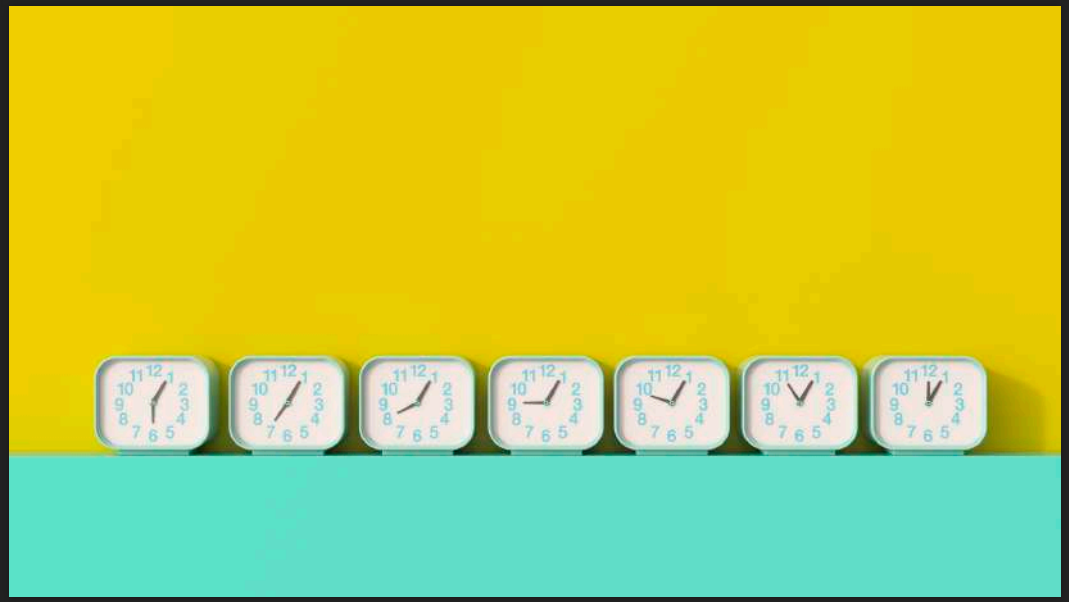
- 1 month: Research, brainstorming, character development, plotting
- 4 months: Writing (1 page per day = 120 pages)
- 1 month: Rewrite and final edit
- Which means you can crank out 2 full-length screenplays per year — by writing just one page per day.

Daily Practices

Watch Movies.
Read Scripts.
Write Pages.

TIME!!!

…As in I don’t have enough of it!

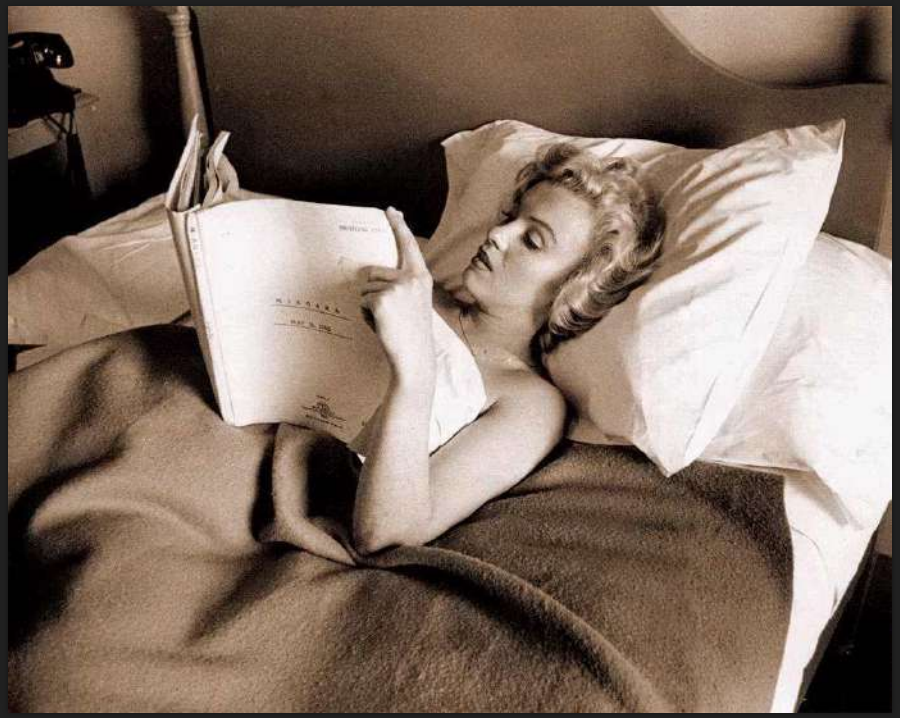


Time Management

1 2 7 14

- 1: Read 1 screenplay per week
- 2: Watch 2 movies per week
- 7: Write 7 pages per week
- 14: Put in 14 hours per week on Research, Craft, and Story Development

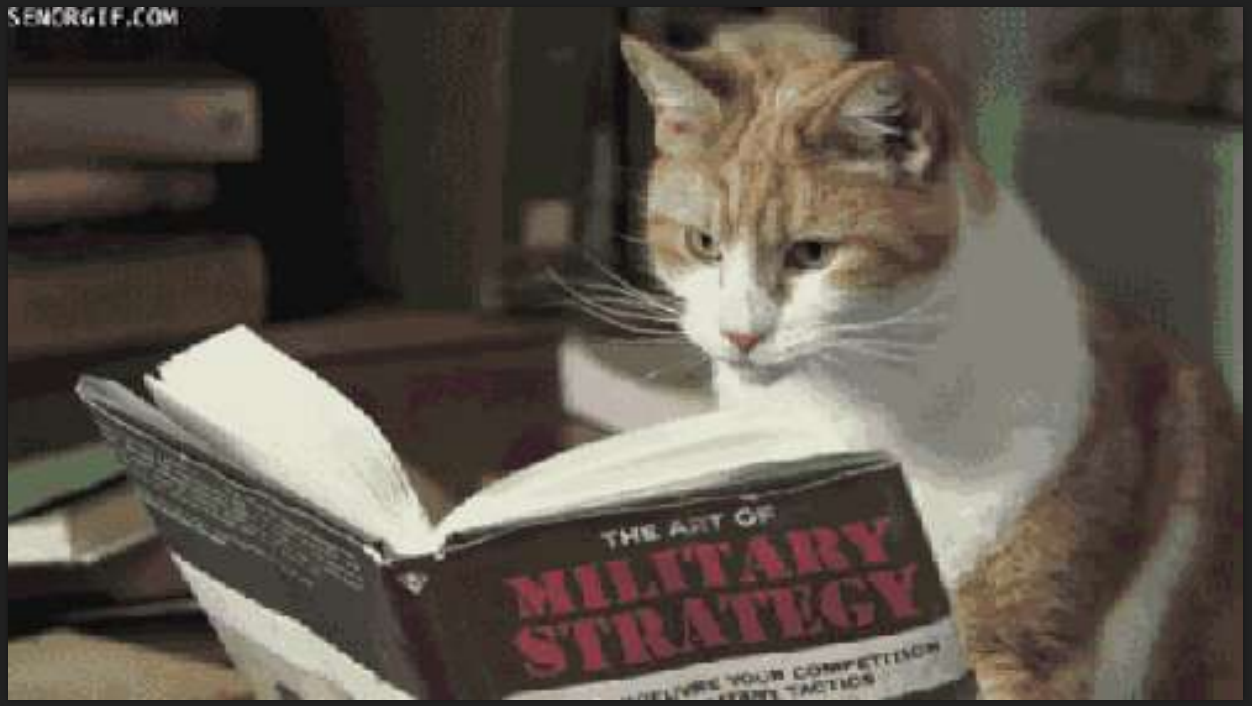
TIME MANAGEMENT
Read 1 screenplay per week



TIME MANAGEMENT
Watch 2 movies per week

TIME MANAGEMENT
Write 7 pages per week

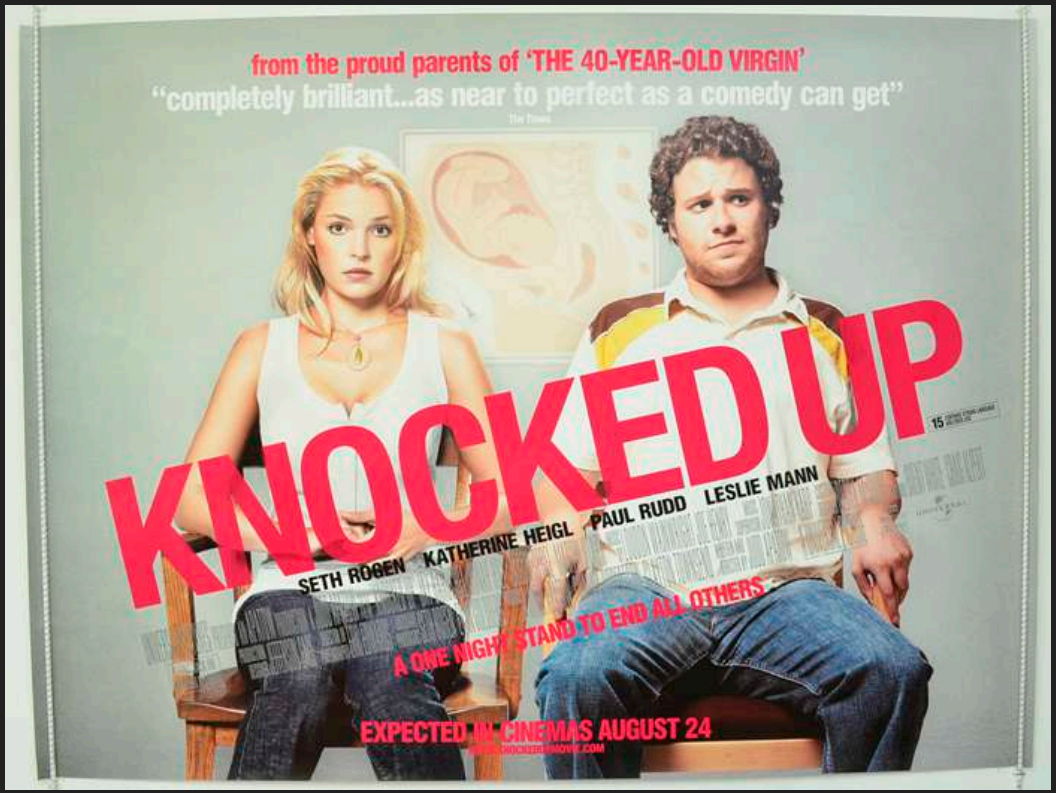
TIME MANAGEMENT
Research, Craft, and Story Development



TIME MANAGEMENT
Research, Craft, and Story Development

- Explore story universe
- Study similar stories
- Learn about the business
- Track what's selling, box office, TV ratings
- Character exercises
- Brainstorm plot

How Judd Apatow wrote a screenplay using his email



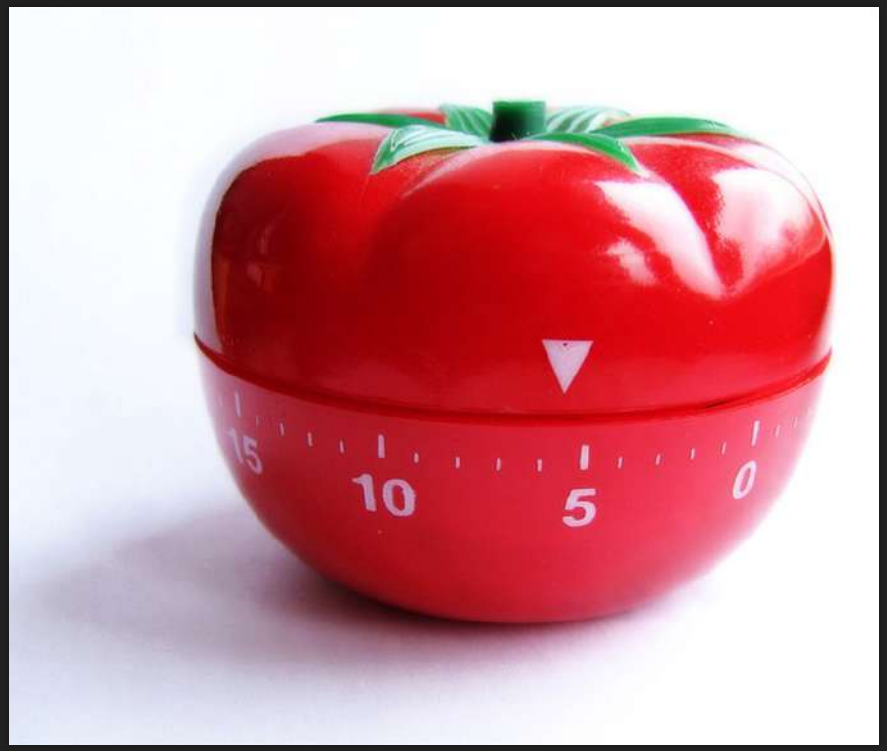
Knocked Up
Story Elements

- Going through this helps her adjust her life in a positive way.
- The idea of being forced into a relationship for life is the main conflict. A relationship in reverse. A baby, then get to know one another.
- For the girl there can be a sense that this is the end of her dreams, vocationally. Her ability to finish school etc. is impossible unless they become a team.
- The idea of the film is that their idea for their lives is altered completely. Freedom is gone.
- The movie should be about the fact that he falls in love with her first, but she takes longer and isn't sure.
- He commits to the idea of committing forever and she eventually sees this, feels safe and falls hard for him.
- The baby forces everyone to face the reality of their situations.

1 2 7 14 = 24 Hours Per Week

- 14 Hours: Research, Craft, and Story Development
- 4 Hours: Writing 7 pages (one page per day)
- 4 Hours: Watching 2 movies
- 2 Hours: Reading 1 script
- Basically 3 ½ hours per day

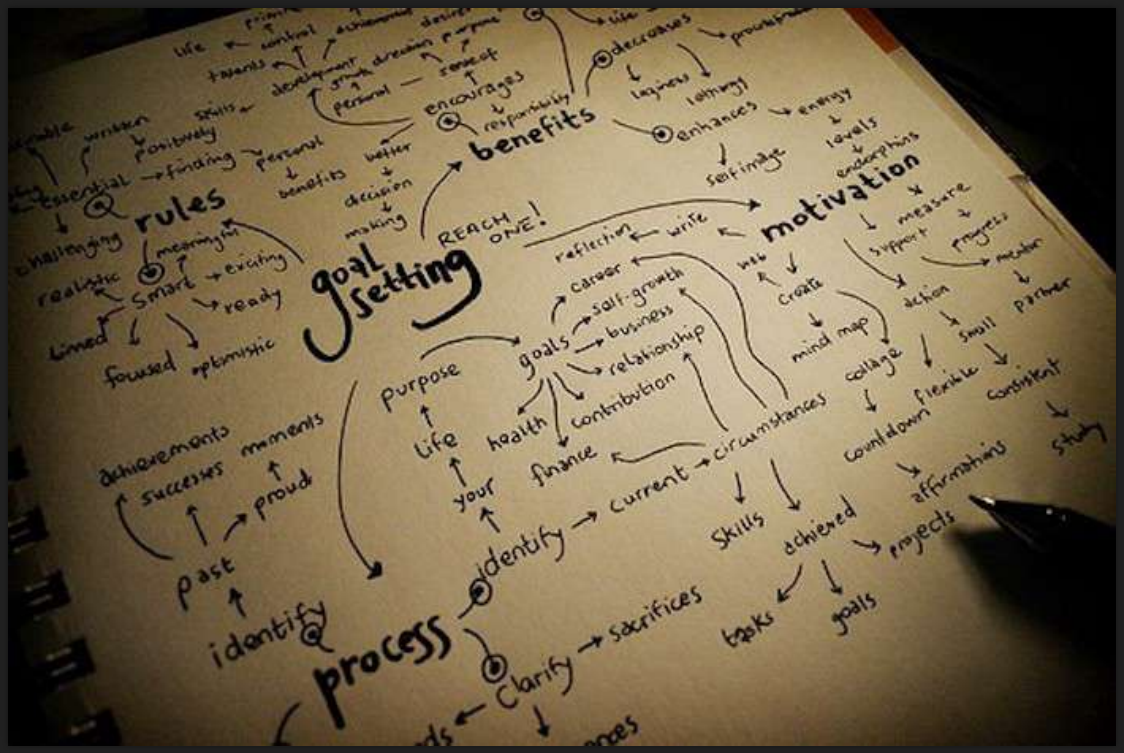
The Pomodoro Technique: Write More Efficiently



Pomodoro Resources

- Focus Booster
- Marinara Timer
- Moosti
- My Tomatoes
- PomoDone
- Tomato Timer
- Tomighty

Set Goals


goal setting
rules
benefits
motivation
process
REACH ONE!
Smart
identify
Clarify
purpose
goals
identify
current
circumstances
sacrifices
achieved
skills
tasks
goals
projects
affirmations
countdown
collage
mind map
action
support
measure
progress
mentor
partner
small
consistent
flexible
study
reflection
write
career
self-growth
business
relationship
contribution
health
finance
life
your
achievements
successes
moments
proud
past
focused
optimistic
ready
exciting
realistic
challenging
essential
finding
personal
benefits
better
decision
making
encourages
responsibility
decreases
enhances
energy
levels
endorphins
self-image
lazy
lethargy
lazy
lethargy

Set Goals
What type of writer do you want to be?

- Do you want just to write movies?
- Do you want just to write TV?
- Do you want to write both?
- Do you want to write and direct?
- Do you want to write and produce?
- Do you want to bounce between writing big commercial movies and character-driven indie films?
- Do you want to write screenplays and novels?
- Do you want to carve out a niche writing specific types of movies or write across multiple genres?

Set Goals
Be S.M.A.R.T.

Set Goals
The #1 Most Asked Screenwriting Question

How do I get an agent?

SET GOALS
The Path of Least Resistance

- 3 Scripts
- 1 Genre
- < $20M Budgets

Set Goals
The Path Forward

- Script #1: Due June 30, 2021
- Script #2: Due December 31, 2021
- Script #3: Due June 30, 2022
- Revised final drafts: Due December 31, 2022

The Importance of Story Concept

"Most aspiring screenwriters simply don't spend enough time choosing their concept. It's by far the most common mistake I see in spec scripts. The writer has lost the race right from the gate. Months -- sometimes years -- are lost trying to elevate a film idea that by its nature probably had no hope of ever becoming a movie."

-- Terry Rossio (*Aladdin, The Mask of Zorro, Shrek, Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*)

The Importance of Story Concept

"Ideas cost NOTHING and require ZERO risk. And yet, oddly, the LEAST amount of time's usually spent in the idea stage before a small fortune is dumped on a whimsy that's still half-baked… Ideas cost nothing yet have the potential to yield inexplicably long careers and happy lives."

-- Kevin Smith (*Clerks, Mallrats, Chasing Amy, Dogma, Zak and Miri Make a Porno*)

Strong Story Concepts

- How to Generate and Critique Story Ideas
- Is My Screenplay Big Enough to Be a Movie: 10 Questions to Ask
- The Six Word Test
- 300+ Story Ideas

The Art of Stacking Projects

- Project #1: Research and Character Development
- Project #2: First Draft
- Project #3: Rewrite and Editing

What do I do now?

Opportunities

- The Black List
- Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting
- Austin Film Festival Screenplay & Teleplay Competition
- Sundance Feature Lab
- Universal Writers Program
- Disney/ABC Writing Program
- CBS Writers Mentoring Program
- Fox Writers Lab
- Sundance Episodic Lab
- WB Writers' Workshop
- Imagine Impact
- The Six Degrees of Separation approach…

Query Approach

- Aggregate 10-20 comparable movies
- IMDb Pro: Find producers who are managers
- DoneDealPro: Locate email addresses for management companies
- Email: “3 spec scripts, 1 genre [name], < $20M Budgets
- Logline
- “Interested?”

Diablo Cody

Three Keys

- Daily Practices
- Time Management
- Set Goals

Bonus Tracks

- Breaking Story
- Writing a Screenplay
- Rewriting a Screenplay
- A Screenwriter's Guide to Aristotle's "Poetics"
- 10 Screenwriting Skills and Traits You Need
- 10 Screenwriting Do's and Don'ts
- The Story Behind Script Coverage
- Go Into The Story Interviews

Scott Myers

- Commissioned to write "The Protagonist's Journey: Character Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling" for Palgrave Macmillan (publish date: 2021)
- DePaul University School of Cinematic Arts: Offering B.F.A. and M.F.A. in screenwriting
- ScreenWritingMasterclass.com: Unique online educational resource for writers
- GoIntoTheStory.blcklst.com: Official screenwriting blog of the Black List
- @GoIntoTheStory: 60K+ followers
- Zero Draft Thirty Facebook Group: 3.9K+ members
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