



Willamette Writers Conference  
August 6, 2022

# How to Write a Marketable Screenplay

# How to Write a Marketable Screenplay



In Hollywood, one of the highest accolades a script can receive is, "That was a good read." The ability to create a "good read" is key to a screenplay's viability in the spec script marketplace.



In this session, we will focus on three aspects of the craft essential to writing a marketable screenplay:



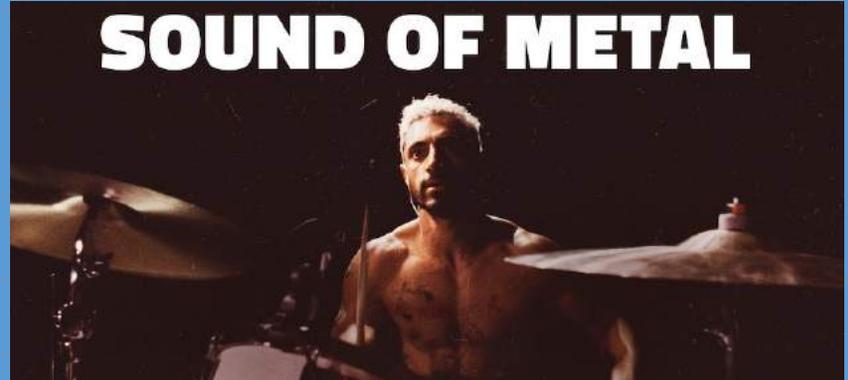
Concept, Character, and Voice.



A close-up photograph of several red and yellow popcorn buckets overflowing with popcorn. The buckets are decorated with white popcorn icons and the word 'POPCORN' in red. The text 'Indie Films' is overlaid in white in the center of the image.

# Indie Films

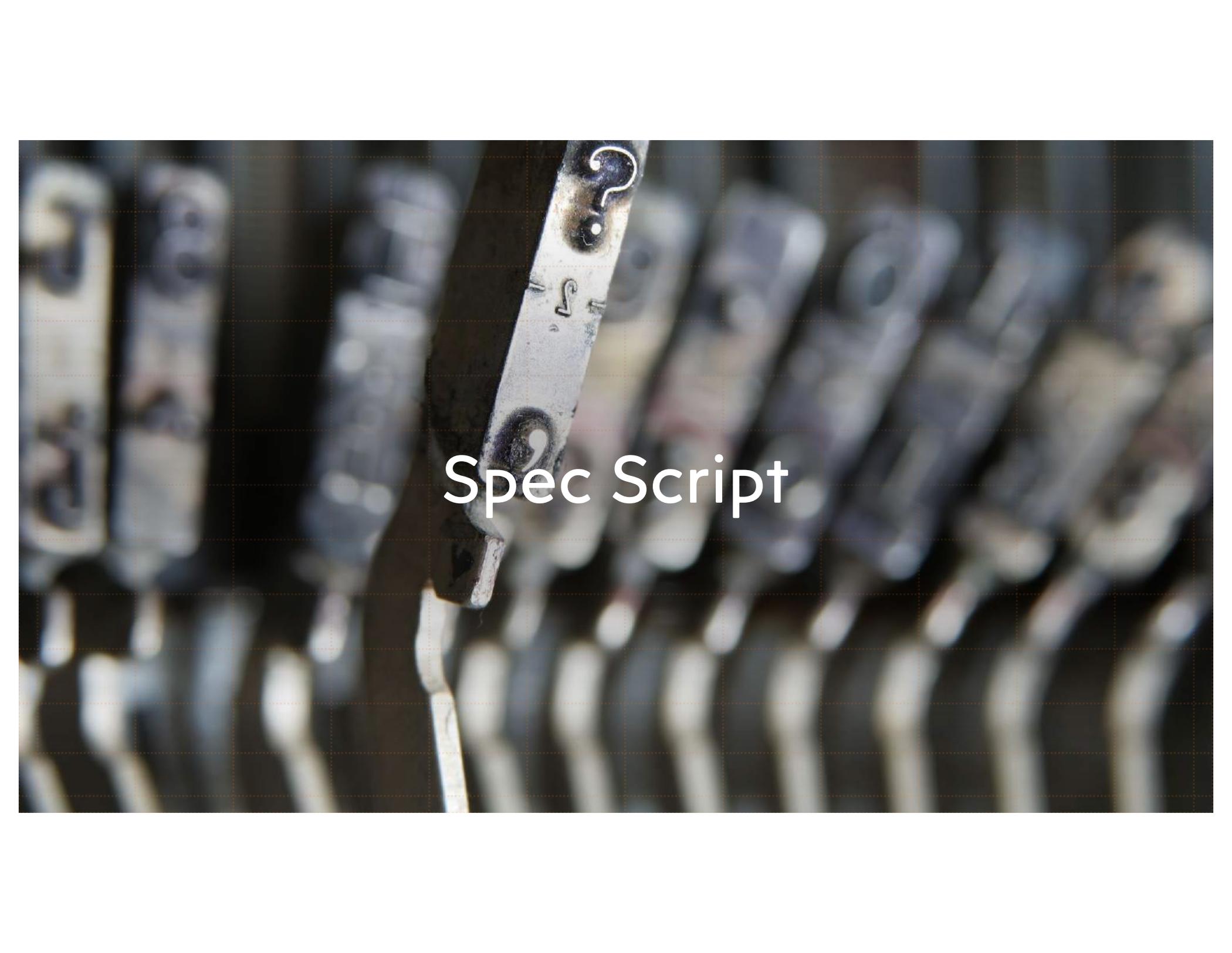
# Contemporary Indie Cinema



“To make a great film you need three things -  
the script, the script, the script.”

- Alfred Hitchcock

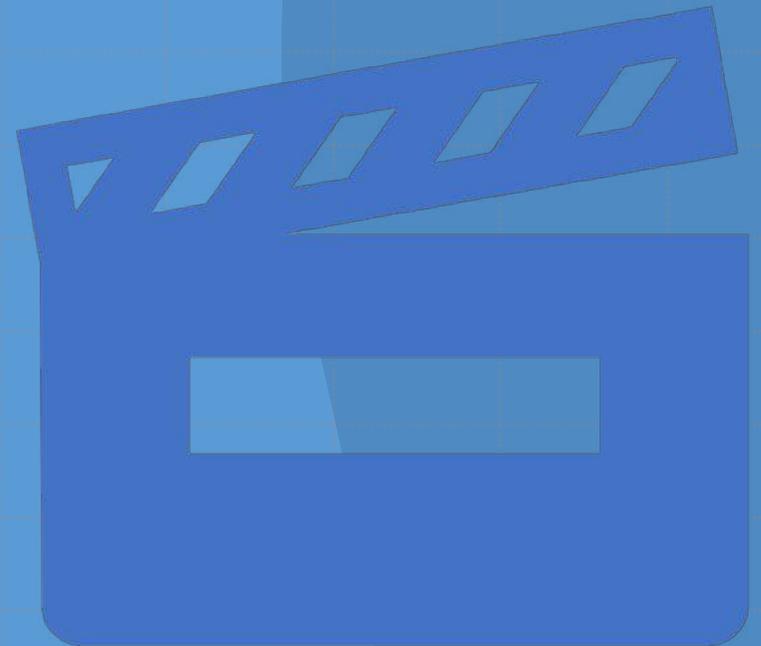


A close-up photograph of a typewriter's carriage, showing the metal frame and the typebars. The text "Spec Script" is overlaid in white, sans-serif font in the center of the image. The background is dark and out of focus, showing the repeating pattern of the typebars.

# Spec Script

# What can happen with a spec script?

- A manager or agent will represent you
- Win a screenplay competition like the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting
- A producer will option it
- A studio will buy it
- Talent will attach themselves to it
- A director will make it



**JAMES BELUSHI**

# **K-9**

**Meet the two toughest cops in town.**



**One's just  
a little  
smarter than  
the other.**

**AND INTRODUCING JERRY LEE AS HIMSELF**  
A GORDON COMPANY • PROD. BY ROD DANIEL • "K-9" BY MEL HARRIS • MUSIC BY STEVEN SIEGEL • COSTUME DESIGNER SCOTT MYERS  
EDITED BY MILES GOODMAN • EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DEAN SEMLER AND STEVEN SIEGEL • EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DONNA SMITH  
DIRECTED BY LAWRENCE GORDON • PRODUCED BY CHARLES GORDON • EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ROD DANIEL • A UNIVERSAL RELEASE  
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# The Definitive Spec Script Deals List [1991–2020]

Pretty much ever since I broke into the movie business in 1987, I have been keeping track of spec script deals. This list is, as far as I know, the most comprehensive of its type. Not only an historical record, but also a great resource for brainstorming new story ideas.



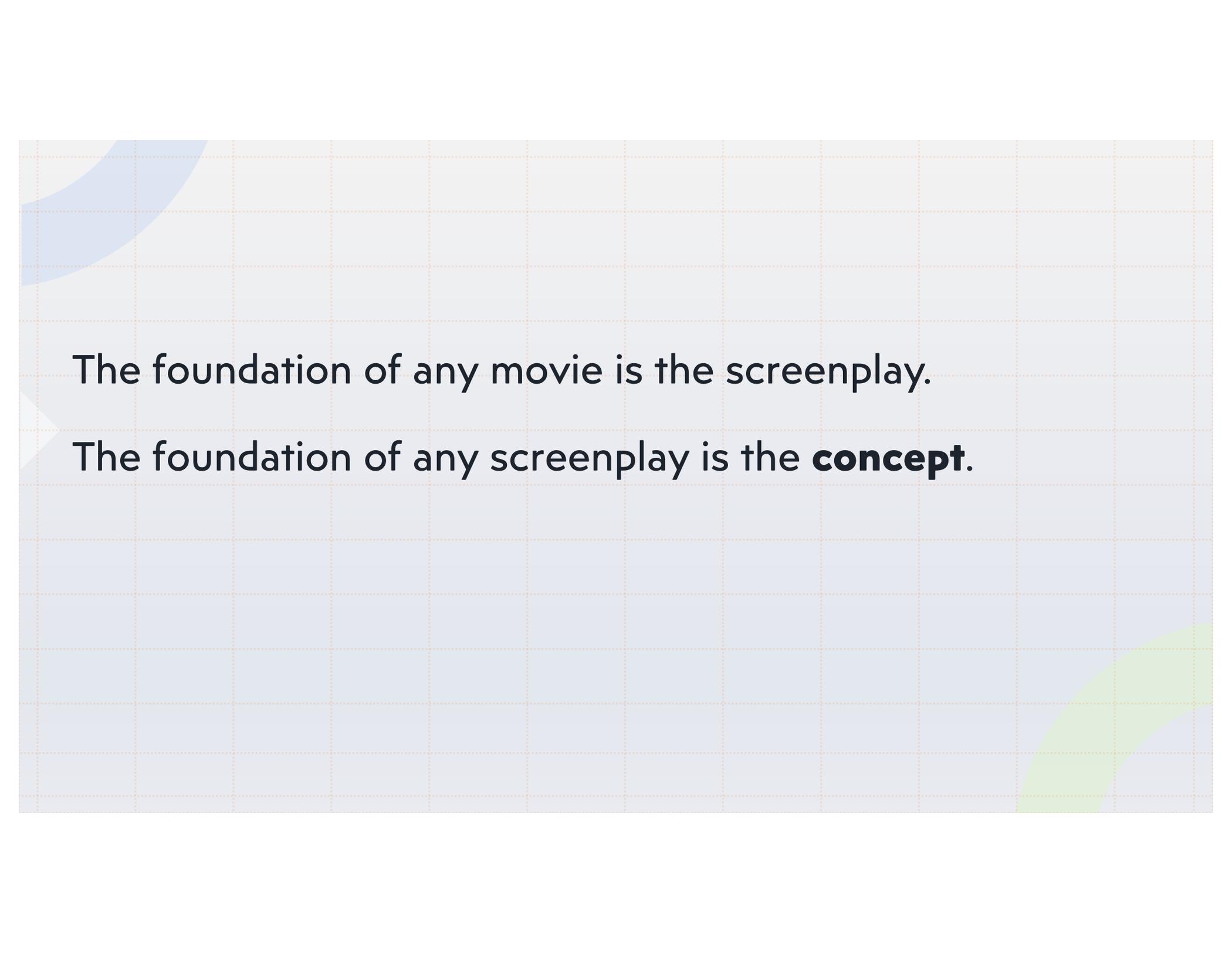
Spec Script Spirit Guide — Shane Black

# Three components to a marketable screenplay

CONCEPT

CHARACTER

VOICE



The foundation of any movie is the screenplay.

The foundation of any screenplay is the **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*)

"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*)

**Concept =  
Hook**



# A story concept is a hook in at least three ways

- Script acquisition process
- Movie marketing
- Script development process



## *SOME LIKE IT HOT (1959)*

Two musicians witness a mob hit, then run for their lives disguised as women in an all-female band.



## *THE GRADUATE (1967)*

A recent college graduate has an affair with an older married woman, then falls in love with her daughter.



## *JAWS* (1975)

A gigantic great white shark menaces a small island community.



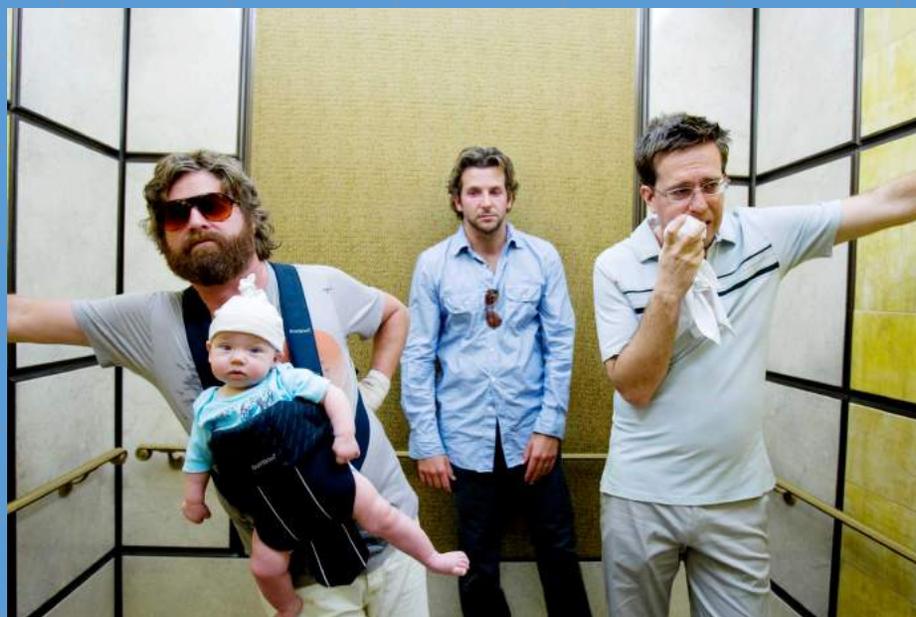
## *FATAL ATTRACTION (1985)*

A married man's one night stand comes back to haunt him when his lover stalks he and his family.



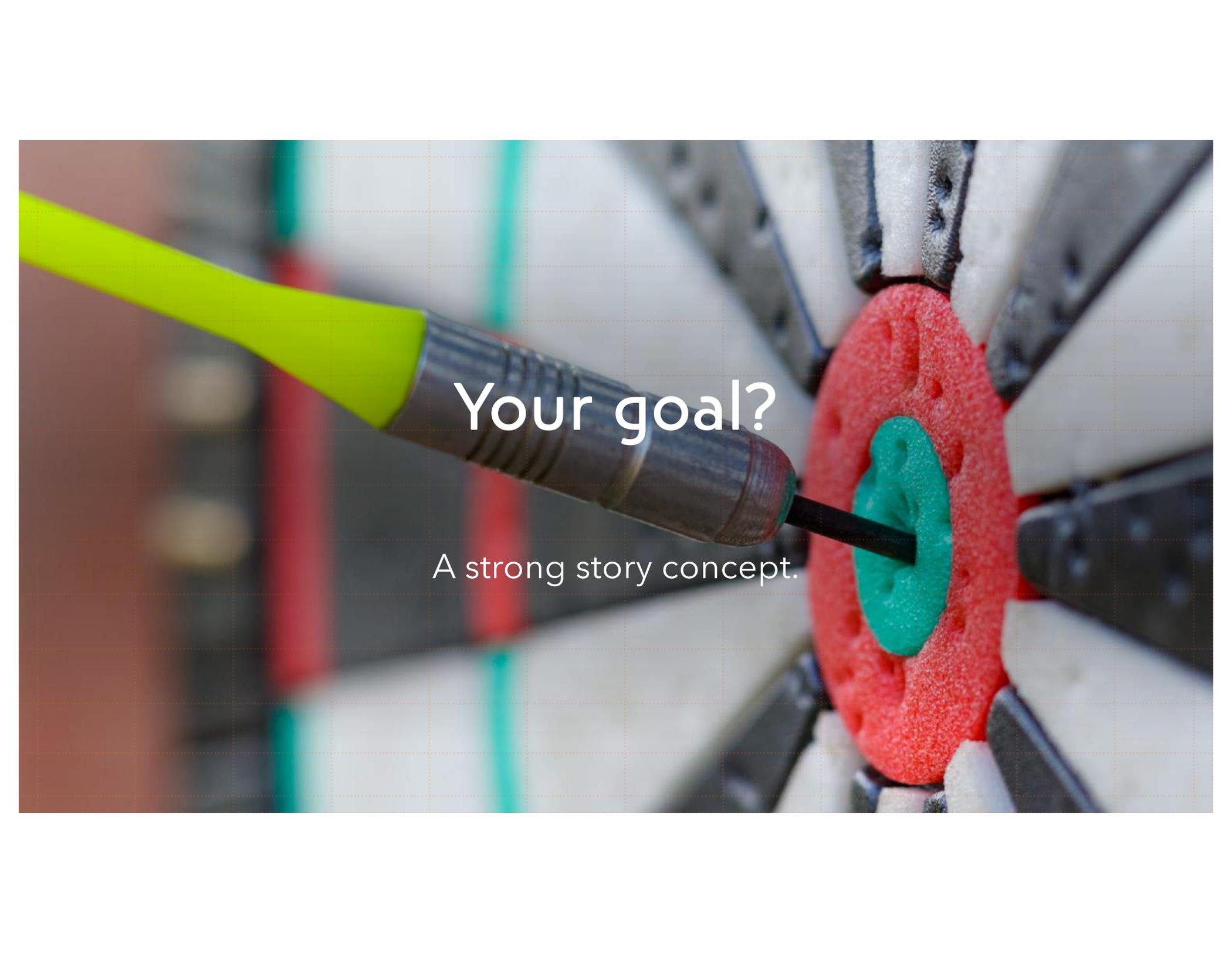
## *SEVEN* (1995)

A serial killer takes down his victims based on their violations of the seven deadly sins.



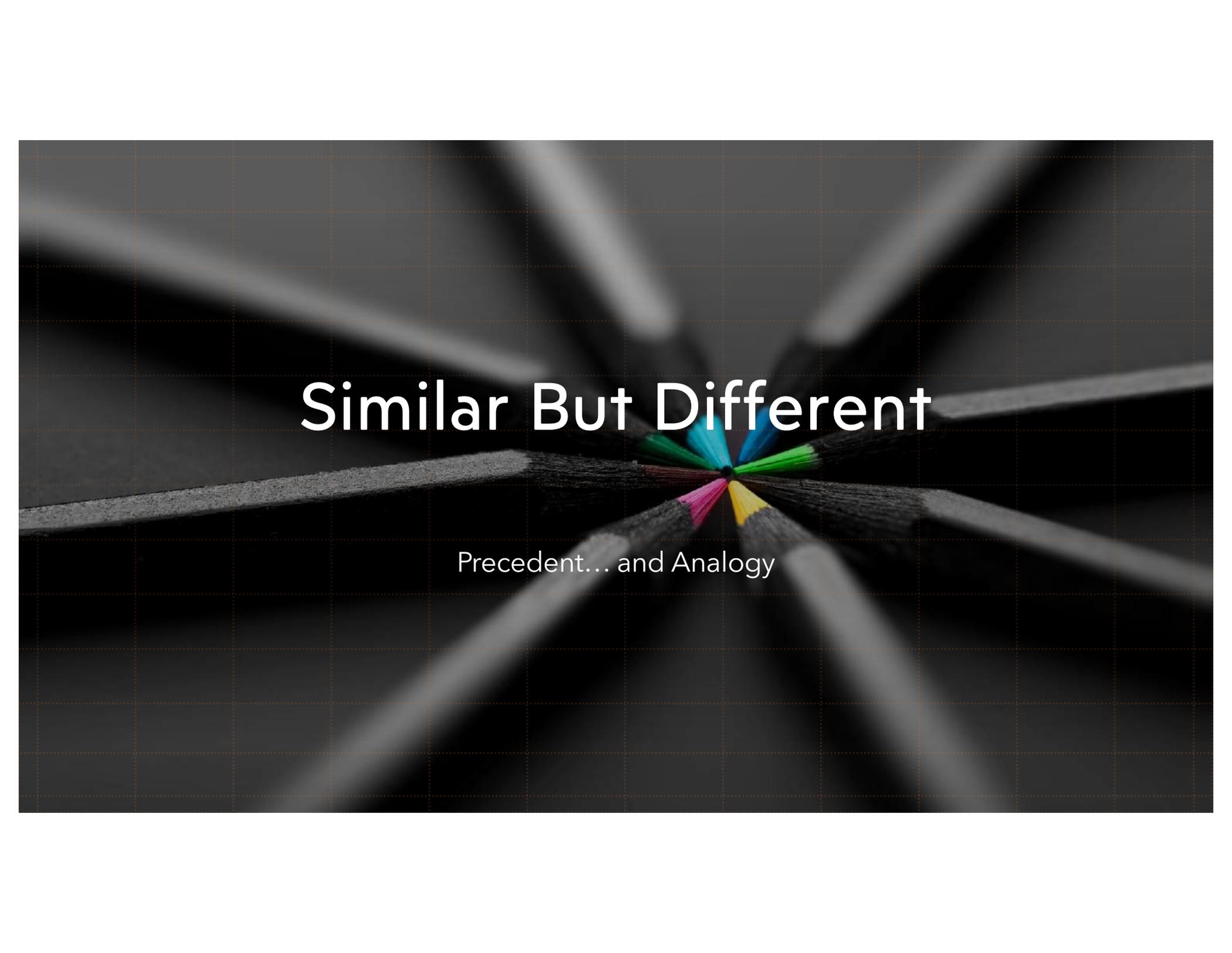
## *THE HANGOVER (2009)*

Three guys retrace their drunken bachelor party steps to locate the lost groom-to-be.



Your goal?

A strong story concept.



# Similar But Different

Precedent... and Analogy



**Story Concept  
Brainstorming Tip #1:  
Recycling**



plan

Creativity

Community  
Efficiency



Community

Investment



“Every writer has certain subjects that they write about again and again. Most people’s books are just variations on certain themes.”

-- Christopher Isherwood

“I think one writes and rewrites the same book. I lead a character from book to book, I continue along with the same ideas. Only the angle of vision, the method, the lighting change.”

-- Truman Capote

“Mostly, we authors must repeat ourselves – that’s the truth.”

-- F. Scott Fitzgerald

# **Story Concept Brainstorming Tip #2: Genre-Bending**

**Action, Comedy, Drama, Family, Fantasy, Horror, Science Fiction, Thriller**

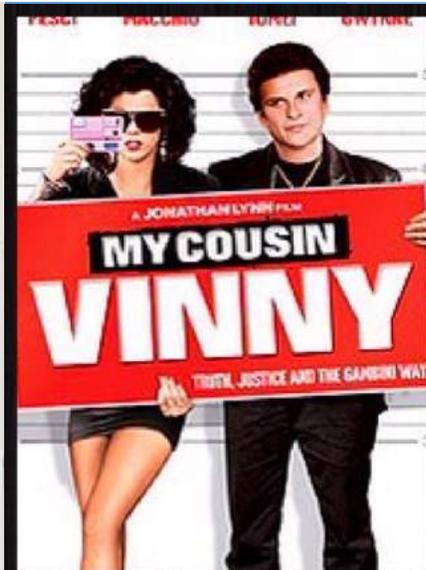
Frank Galvin Has One Last Chance At A Big Case.

The doctors want to settle,  
the Church wants to settle,  
their lawyers want to settle,  
and even his own clients  
are desperate to settle.

But Galvin is determined  
to defy them all.  
He will try the case.

## THE VERDICT

TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX Presents A ZANUCK/BROWN PRODUCTION  
PAUL NEWMAN / CHARLOTTE RAMPLING / JACK WARDEN  
JAMES MASON / THE VERDICT / MILO O'SHEA  
MUSIC BY JOHNNY MANDEL / EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BURT HARRIS  
SCREENPLAY BY DAVID MAMET / BASED ON THE NOVEL BY BARRY REED  
PRODUCED BY RICHARD D. ZANUCK AND DAVID BROWN READ THE SCREENPLAY BOOK  
DIRECTED BY SIDNEY LUMET





**Story Concept  
Brainstorming  
Tip #3:  
Gender-Bending**

# GH0STBUSTERS

ANSWER THE CALL



SANDRA BULLOCK | CATE BLANCHETT | ANNE HATHAWAY | MINDY KALING | SARAH PAULSON | AWKWAFINA | with RIHANNA | and BONHAM CARTER | HELENA

EVERY CON HAS ITS PROS



A mind map diagram is shown on a white grid background. The diagram consists of several colorful beads (red, blue, green, yellow) connected by thin brown string. The beads are arranged in a circular pattern, with some beads connected to a central point and others connected to each other. The text "Story Concept Brainstorming Tip #4: Geo-Bending" is overlaid in the center of the diagram.

**Story Concept  
Brainstorming Tip #4:  
Geo-Bending**



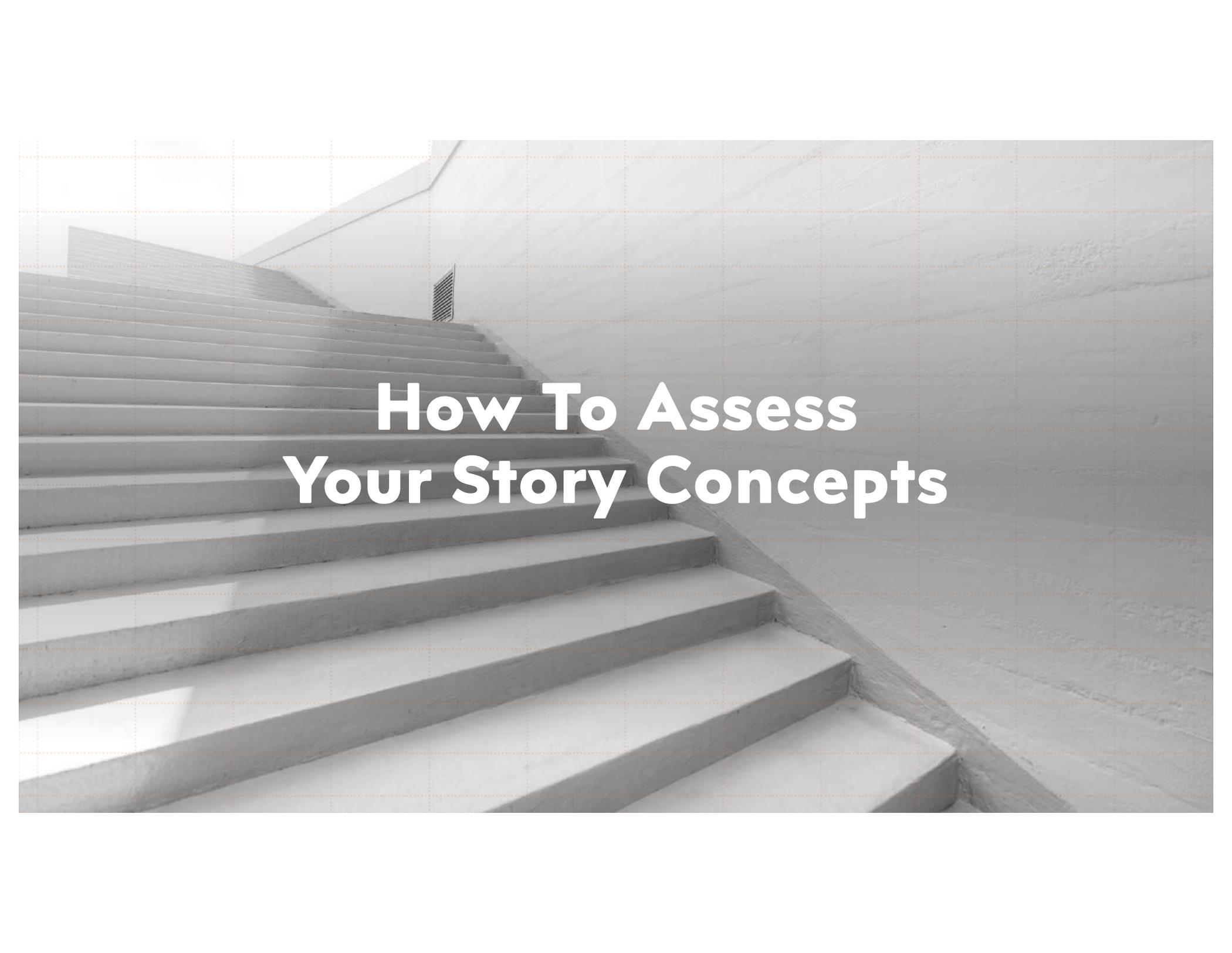


Get the bends!

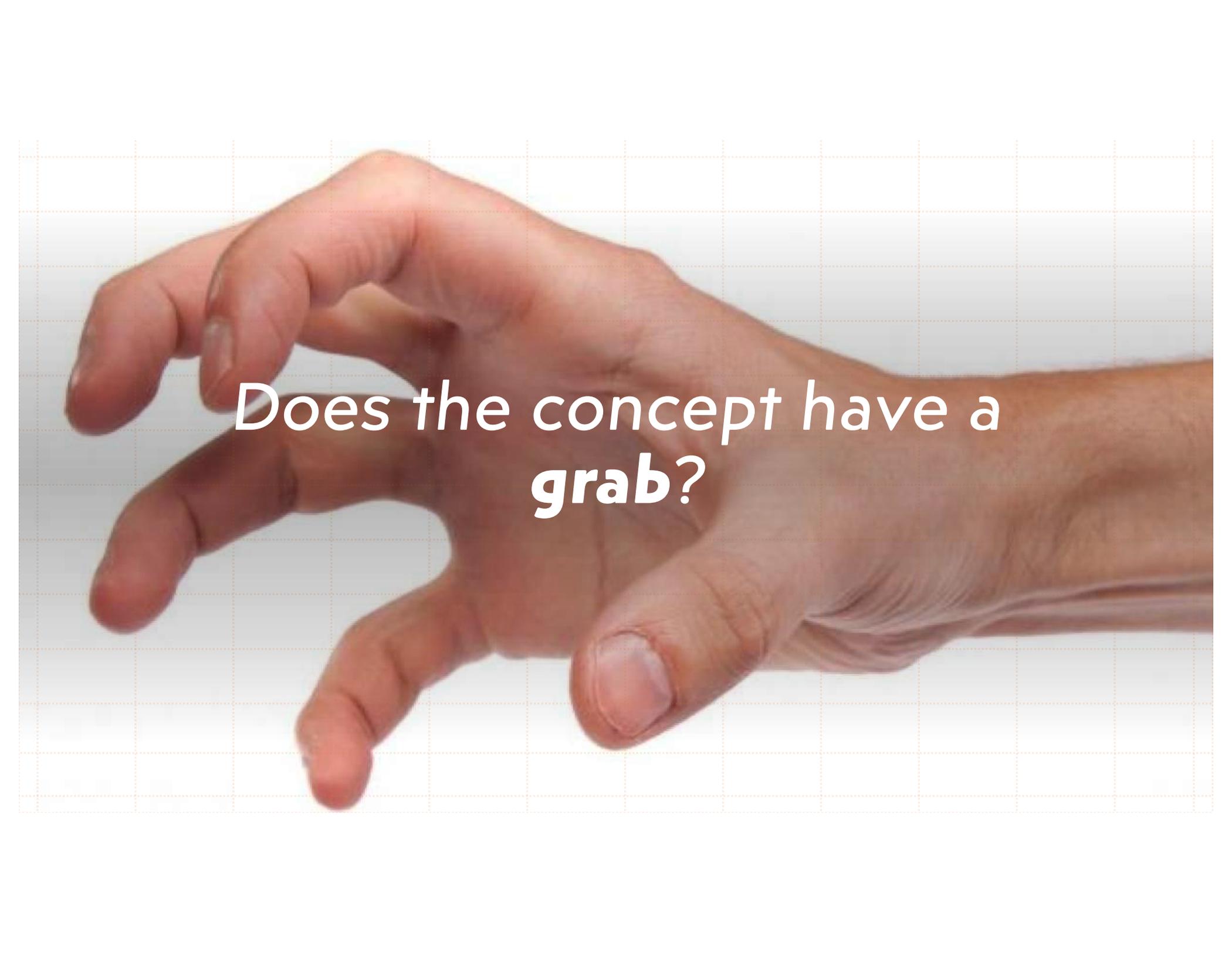


**Story Concept  
Brainstorming Tip #5:  
What if...**





# How To Assess Your Story Concepts

A close-up photograph of a human hand, palm facing up, with fingers slightly curled. The hand is positioned against a light blue background with a faint, orange dotted grid pattern. The text "Does the concept have a grab?" is overlaid on the hand in a white, sans-serif font. The word "grab" is bolded.

*Does the concept have a  
**grab?***

A photograph of two hands, one above the other, with their index fingers pointing towards each other. The hands are set against a dark background with a faint grid pattern. The text "Does the concept have an indicator?" is overlaid in the center in a white, sans-serif font. The word "indicator" is bolded.

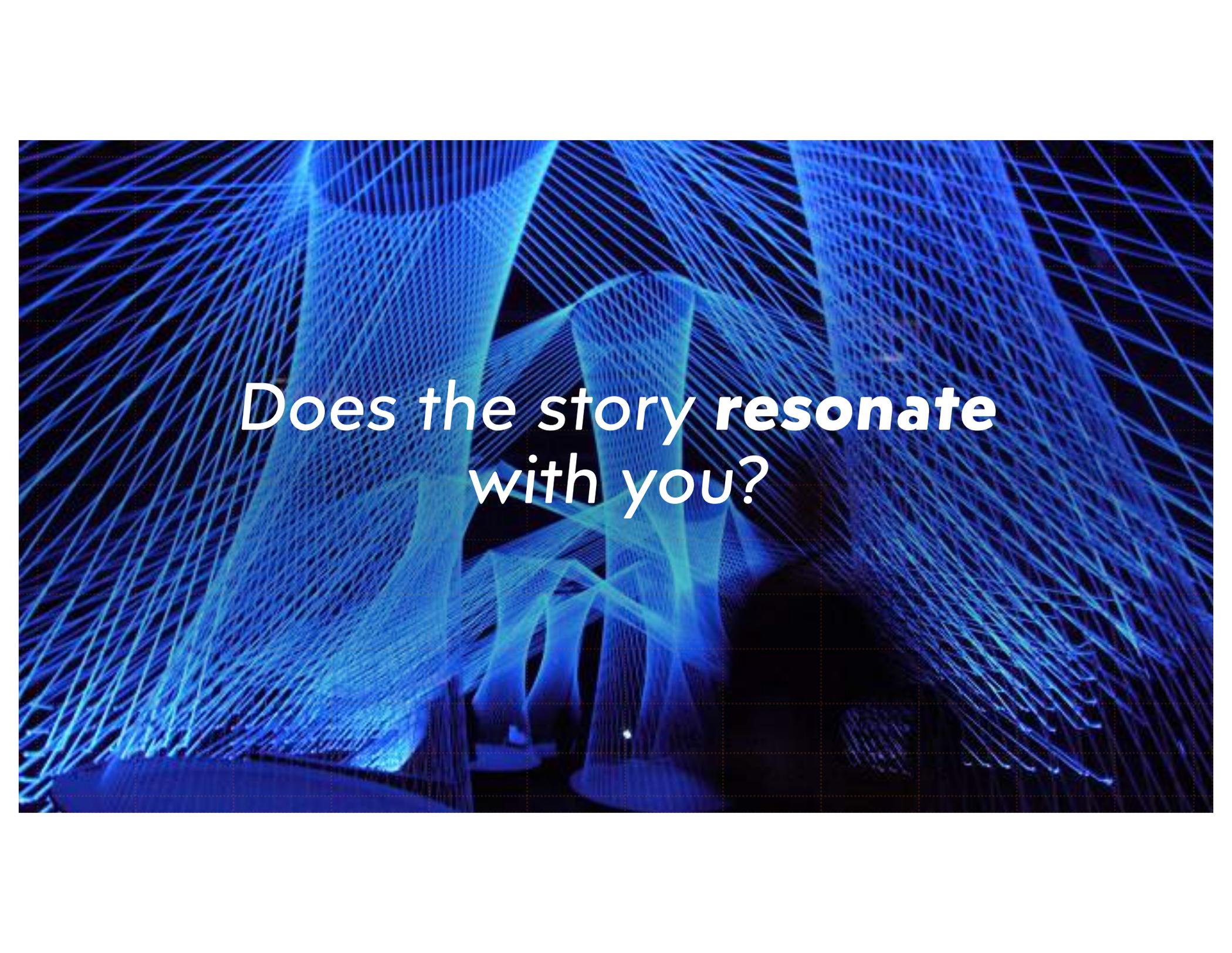
*Does the concept have an  
**indicator?***



*Does the concept have an*  
**audience?**

A red carpet event with spotlights and silhouettes of people. The scene is set against a dark background with several bright spotlights illuminating the area. A red carpet runs through the center, flanked by gold stanchions with red ropes. Silhouettes of people in formal attire are visible in the background, some standing and some walking. The overall atmosphere is glamorous and high-profile.

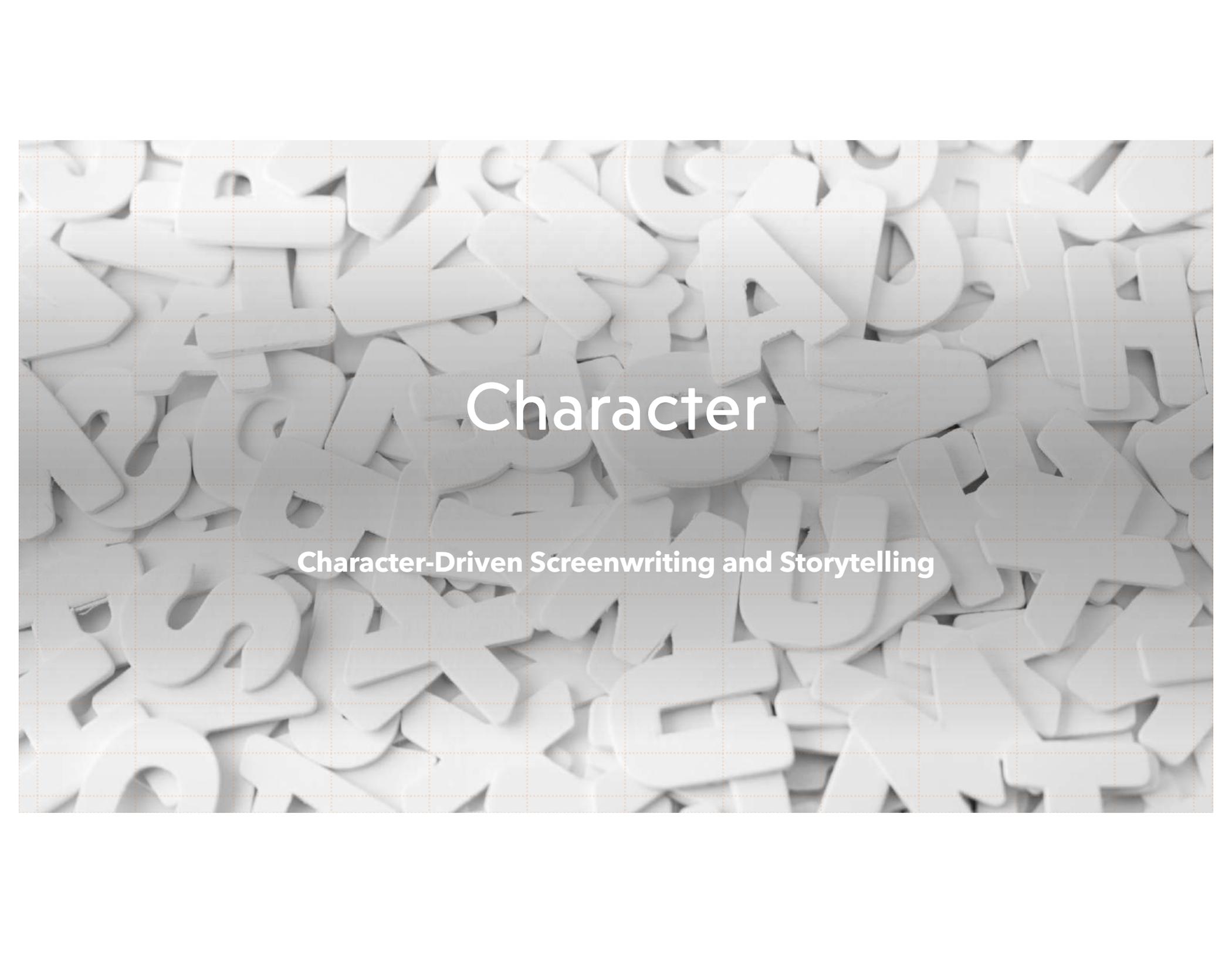
*Is the concept **big enough**  
to be a movie?*



*Does the story **resonate**  
with you?*

An aerial photograph of a long, multi-span bridge crossing a wide body of water. The scene is captured during the golden hour of sunset, with a warm, orange glow across the sky and water. A faint grid of dashed lines is overlaid on the entire image. The bridge's structure, including its numerous piers and spans, is clearly visible against the water. In the distance, a small island or headland is visible on the left, and a mountain range is silhouetted against the horizon on the right.

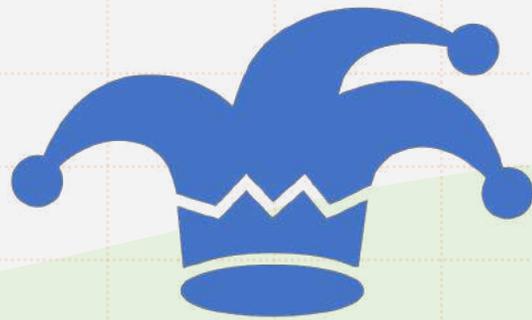
# Strong Story Concept



# Character

**Character-Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling**

**“A screenplay is actor bait.”**



# The Protagonist



# The Prominence of the Protagonist

The Protagonist usually goes on some sort of physical and/or emotional journey.

That journey creates the spine of the plot.

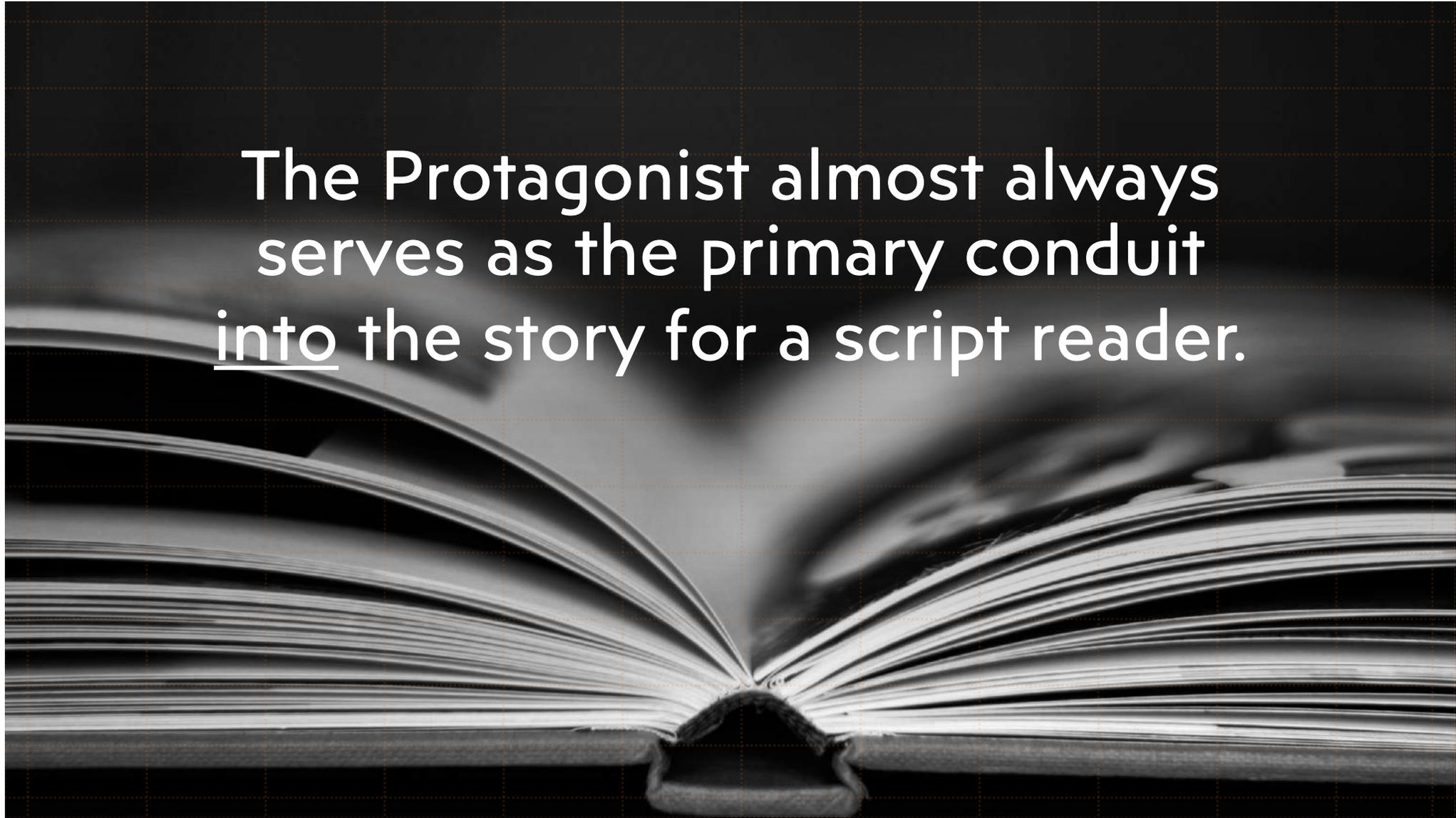
That journey shapes the contours of the character's psychological arc.

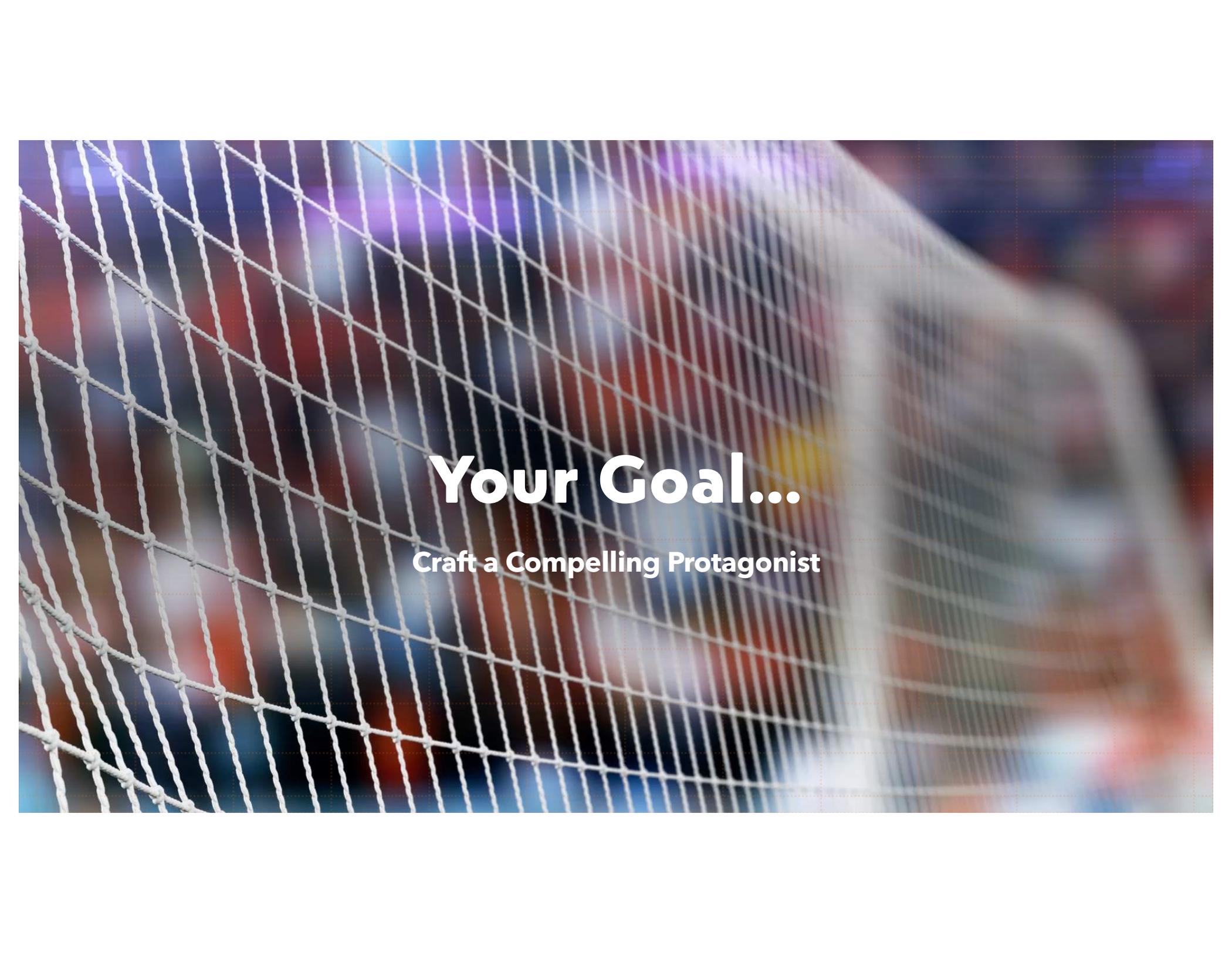
The Protagonist's goal almost always dictates the story's end point.

All the other major characters are linked to the Protagonist and their journey.

Of all the story's characters, the Protagonist generally undergoes the most significant personal metamorphosis.

The Protagonist almost always serves as the primary conduit into the story for a script reader.





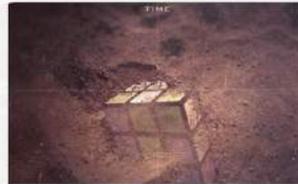
# **Your Goal...**

**Craft a Compelling Protagonist**



**Justin Olson** @JustinHOlson · Nov 15

Hey! My sci-fi pilot EXPONENTIAL scored 8/10 on @theblacklist and got an industry download today! Thank you @franklinleonard for your generosity and to all the awesome people who helped me make my script better, like @GoIntoTheStory, @TimSchildberger, @DominicDMorgan, & @obryantcj!



Overall	Premise	Plot	Character	Dialogue	Setting
8	7	7	8	8	8

**Title:** *Exponential*

**Location:** *Nevada (Las Vegas) / Nevada / Various*

**Genre:** *Sci-Fi / Fantasy*

**Logline:** *Twenty years after his family was killed in a nuclear testing accident, a brilliant but broken scientist discovers a way to communicate with his past self on the day of the incident, including his terrible blunders upon the very fabric of the world.*

**Pages:** *88*

**Strengths**

This is an incredibly well-written script. Even in scenes where the nature of the technology plot is not completely clear what is going on, the script consistently explains the logic that the writer knows exactly where they are taking the story. The decision to make the opening scene a question, essentially, is a wonderful premise in the right direction because it allows the story to build an affinity for the world of the film. The writer makes the best use of the genre as well as the logic of the film (one of the main premises). Once the script begins to pull the camera back on what the writer is actually about to do, most of the scenes go to work in a way that makes the writer's logic clear because about what he is trying to do. It is a case of the writer's script that is so well written that it is a pleasure to read. It is able to take all their critical path and just enjoy the way that writing is presented. It is a pleasure to read the writer's script and that's why you're doing so well because the film is a pleasure to read. It is a pleasure to read the writer's script and that's why you're doing so well because the film is a pleasure to read. It is a pleasure to read the writer's script and that's why you're doing so well because the film is a pleasure to read.

**Prospects**

... writing sample and a promising potential pilot for a series ... as a comp, and it's easy to imagine that network or a similar genre would want to take a look at this.

12 5 103



**Scott Myers** @GoIntoTheStory · Nov 16

Getting an 8/10 on the Black List website "is" an accomplishment. Hopefully, that will translate into some interest in the project. Best of luck!

1 3



**Justin Olson** @JustinHOlson

Replying to @GoIntoTheStory @theblacklist and 4 others

Thanks! And thank you again for all your help, Scott! My idea probably would've languished and remained unwritten if not for your story prep class. It was your approach that finally made the process click for me in a way it hadn't before. I can't recommend it highly enough!

3:43 AM · Nov 16, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

# Protagonist Character Treatment

---

Who is the Protagonist?

---

What does the Protagonist want?

---

What does the Protagonist need?

---

What is the eventual resolution of the Protagonist's want and need?

---

What is at stake for the Protagonist?

---

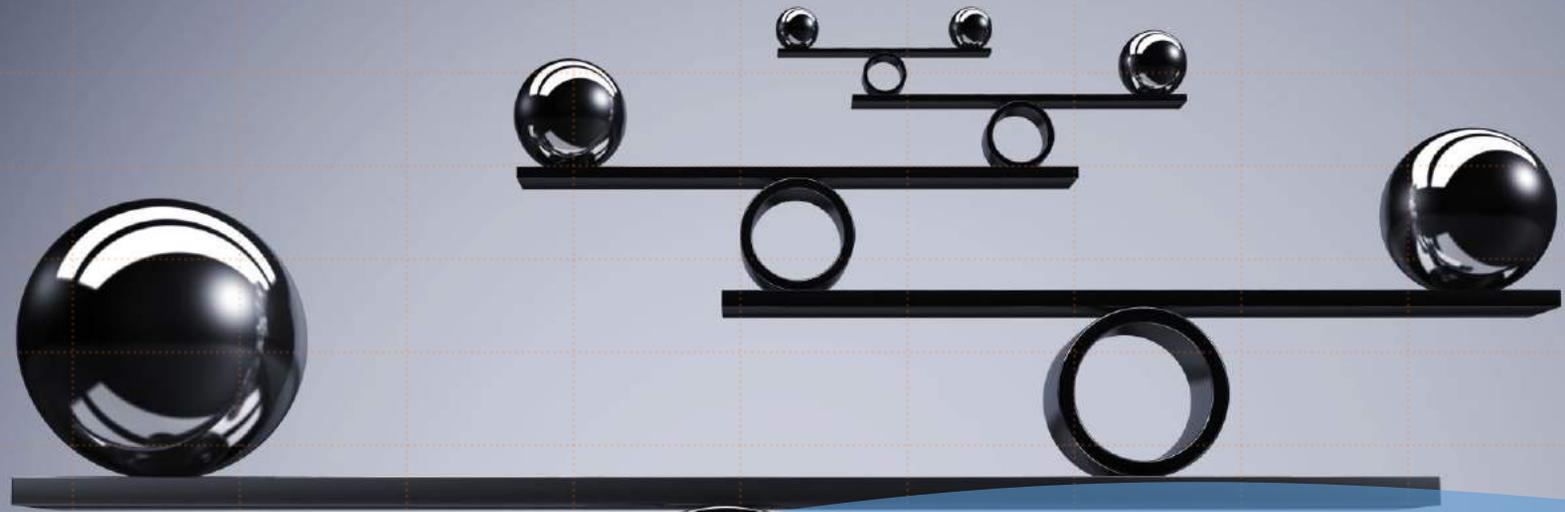
Who or what opposes the Protagonist?

---

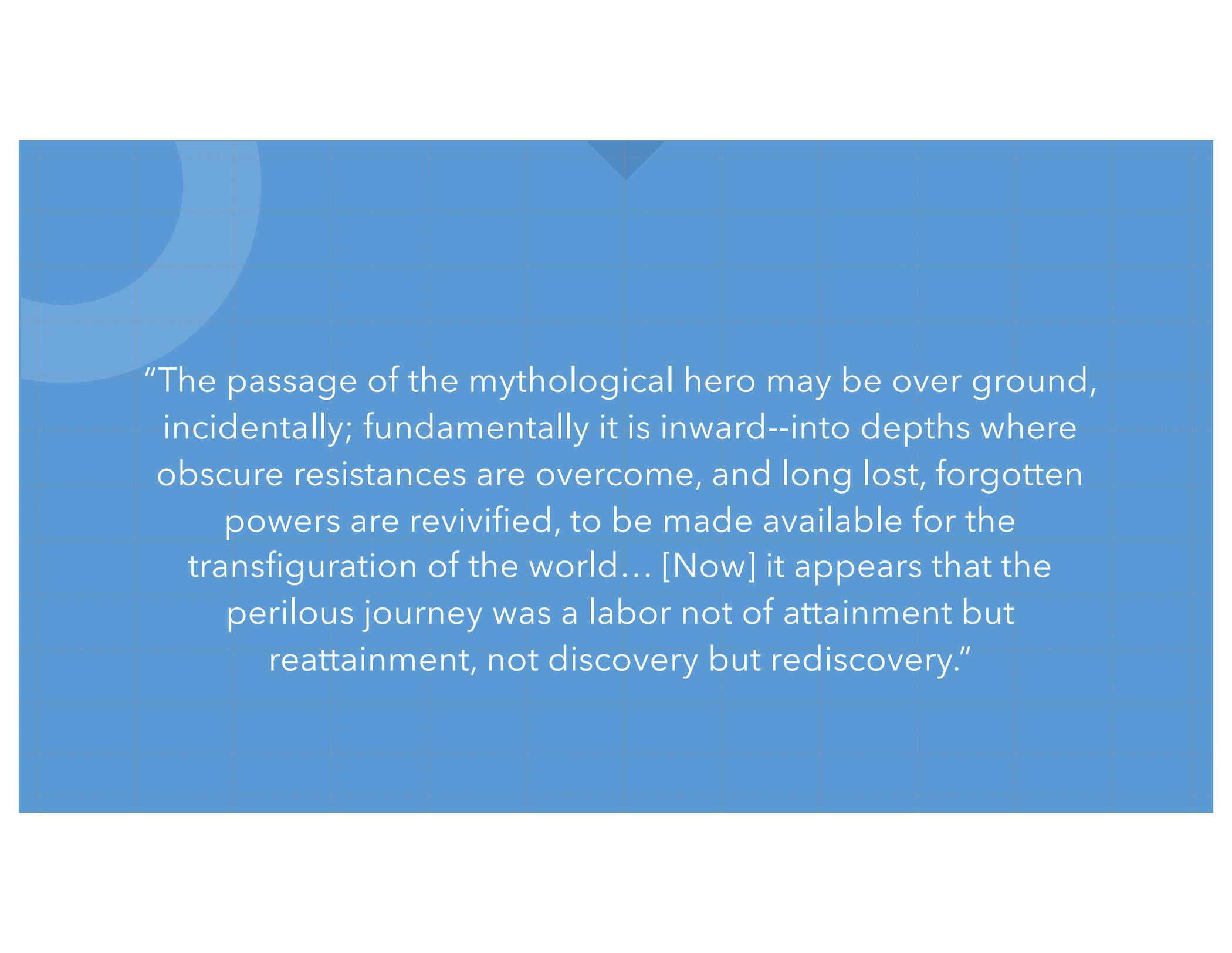
What does the Protagonist fear the most?

---

Why does this story have to happen to this Protagonist at this time?

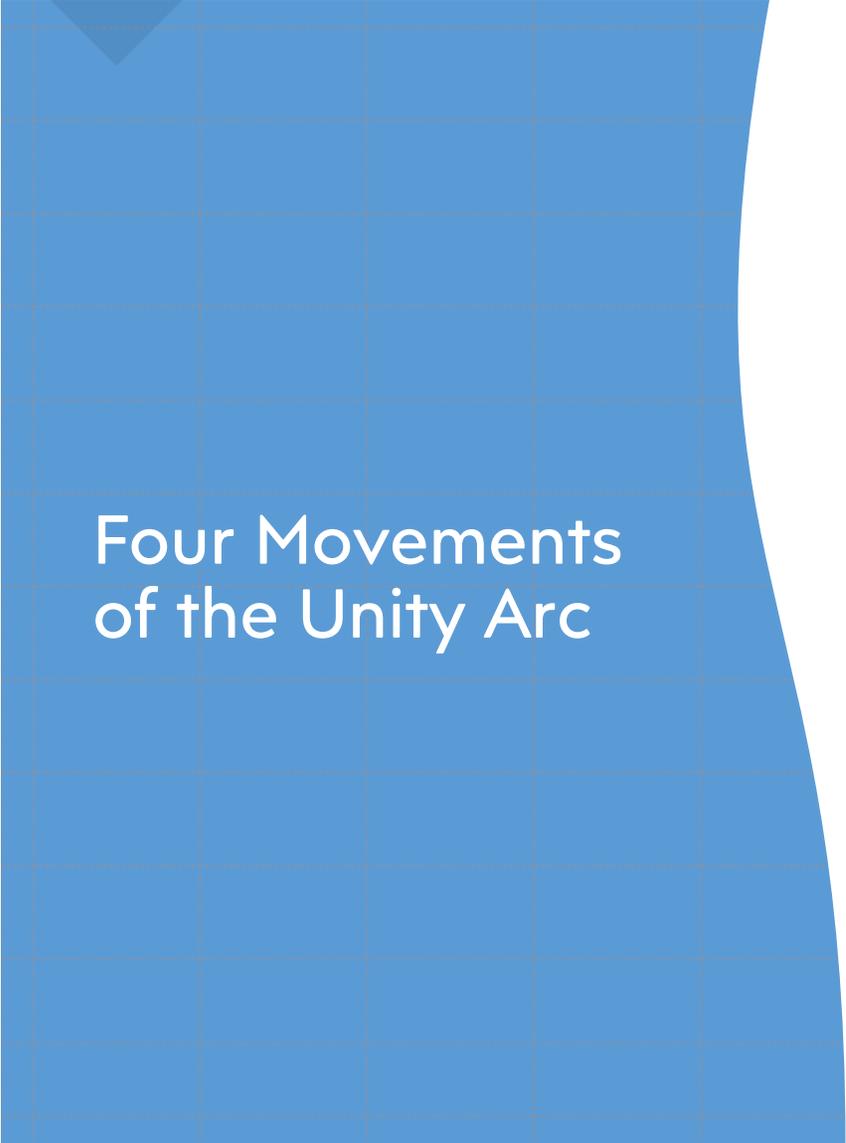


# Protagonist Metamorphosis



"The passage of the mythological hero may be over ground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward--into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world... [Now] it appears that the perilous journey was a labor not of attainment but reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery."

# The Unity Arc



Four Movements  
of the Unity Arc

Disunity

Deconstruction

Reconstruction

Unity

# Disunity

**The Protagonist is living an *inauthentic* life. They are just making do and whether they realize it or not... they need to change.**

# Deconstruction

**Their *old ways of being* are found wanting in the new world and the Protagonist sheds them in their journey.**

# Reconstruction

**Once their old beliefs and behaviors are set aside, their *authentic* self emerges from their inner world, their Need is revealed.**

# Unity

**As the Protagonist connects with their true nature, they move toward a state of *wholeness*.**

A group of approximately ten grey, stylized human figures made of paper or cardboard, standing in a circle and holding hands. The figures are set against a solid green background. The central figure is in sharp focus, while the others are slightly blurred. The overall composition is simple and symbolic, representing a community or family.

# The Family of Characters

# The Family of Characters

Protagonist

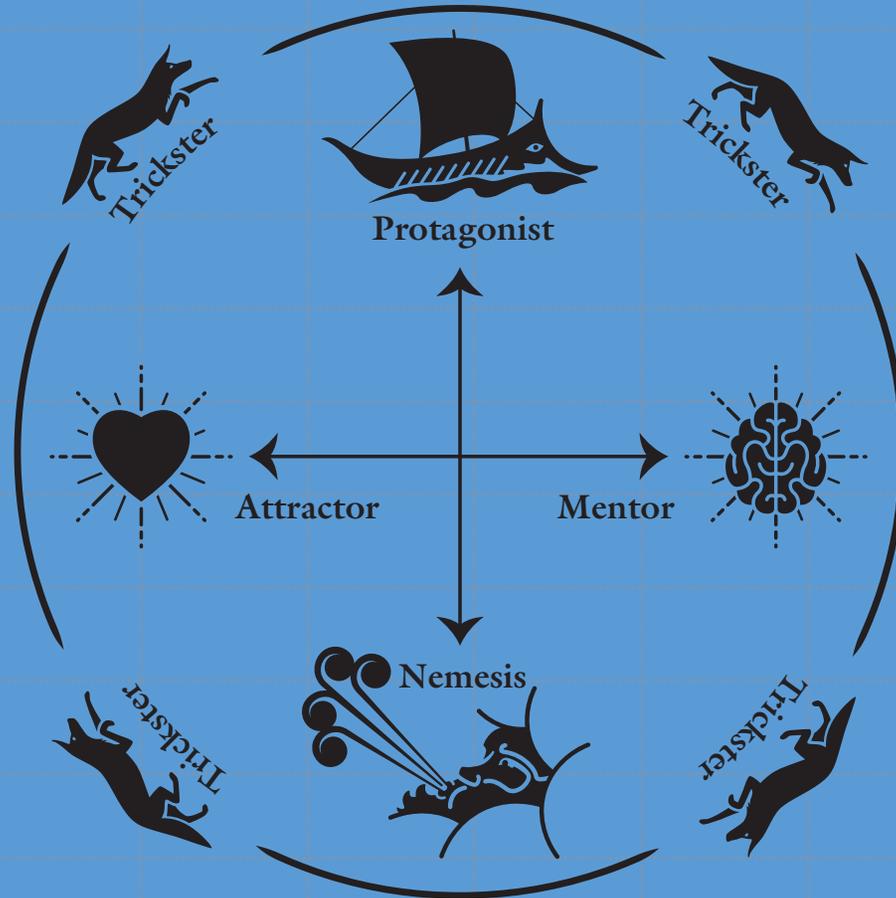
Nemesis

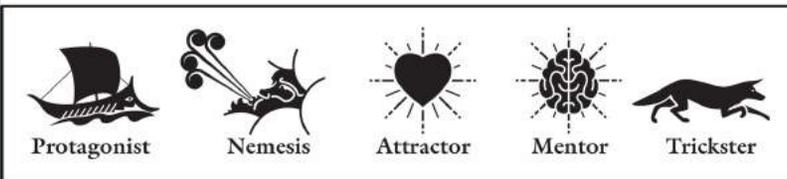
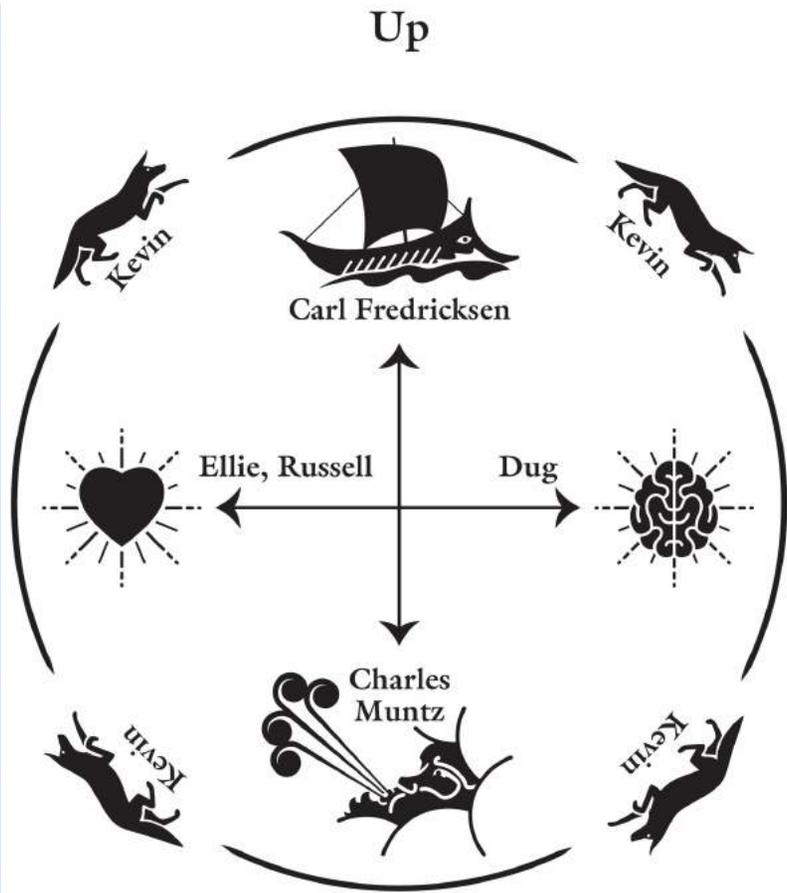
Attractor

Mentor

Trickster

# Character Map





# Character Development Keys

- Questionnaire
- Biography
- Free Scene
- Interview
- Monologue
- Stream of Consciousness

# Indirect Engagement Exercises

Questionnaire

Biography

Free Scene

You engage the character by reflecting about them, thinking about them. Get curious and ask questions about them.

# Questionnaire

---

What is their name?  
How old are they?  
How would they describe their physical appearance?  
How do they feel about the way they look?

---

Who are their parents?  
Describe their relationship with their mother.  
Describe their relationship with their father.

---

Who is the most important person in their life? Why?  
Are they in love?  
If so, describe their lover and their relationship with them.  
If not, why not?  
Describe what their soul-mate would be like?

---

Do they believe in God?  
If so, describe their relationship with God.  
If not, why not?  
When did they stop believing in God?  
Do they consider themselves to be an optimist or a pessimist? Why?

# Biography

**Who are they?** Origins, ancestry, life goals.

**Why are they?** Upbringing, education, seminal moments.

**Where are they?** Neighborhood, travel, subcultural influences.

**How are they?** Temperament, personality, character flaws.

# Free Scene

Create a scenario which might arise out of their life experience in which they engage with at least one other character.

As you write the free scene, you act as an observer, recounting in words what you see and hear transpiring in the individuals' interactions

*Why are they saying what they are saying? Why are they doing what they are doing? What are they thinking? What are they feeling?*

# Direct Engagement Exercises



Interview



Monologue



Stream of Consciousness



Whereas indirect engagement exercises exist more at an arm's length from the characters - watching them, reflecting about them, speculating about them - with direct engagement exercises, the writer connects with individuals personally.

# Interview

You are interviewing them for a job.

You are out on a date with them.

You are a journalist writing a feature on them.

You are a police detective interrogating them.

You are a therapist interviewing a patient.



# Monologue

1. An extension of the interview exercise is where the writer enters into the inner consciousness of a character and “hears” what they are saying. This emerges as a monologue.

# Stream of Consciousness

1. Like the monologue exercise, it is analogous to meditation.
2. Instead of dialogue, the writer goes deeper into the character by entering their psyche. What emerges? Random words. Images. Inner thoughts. Feelings.

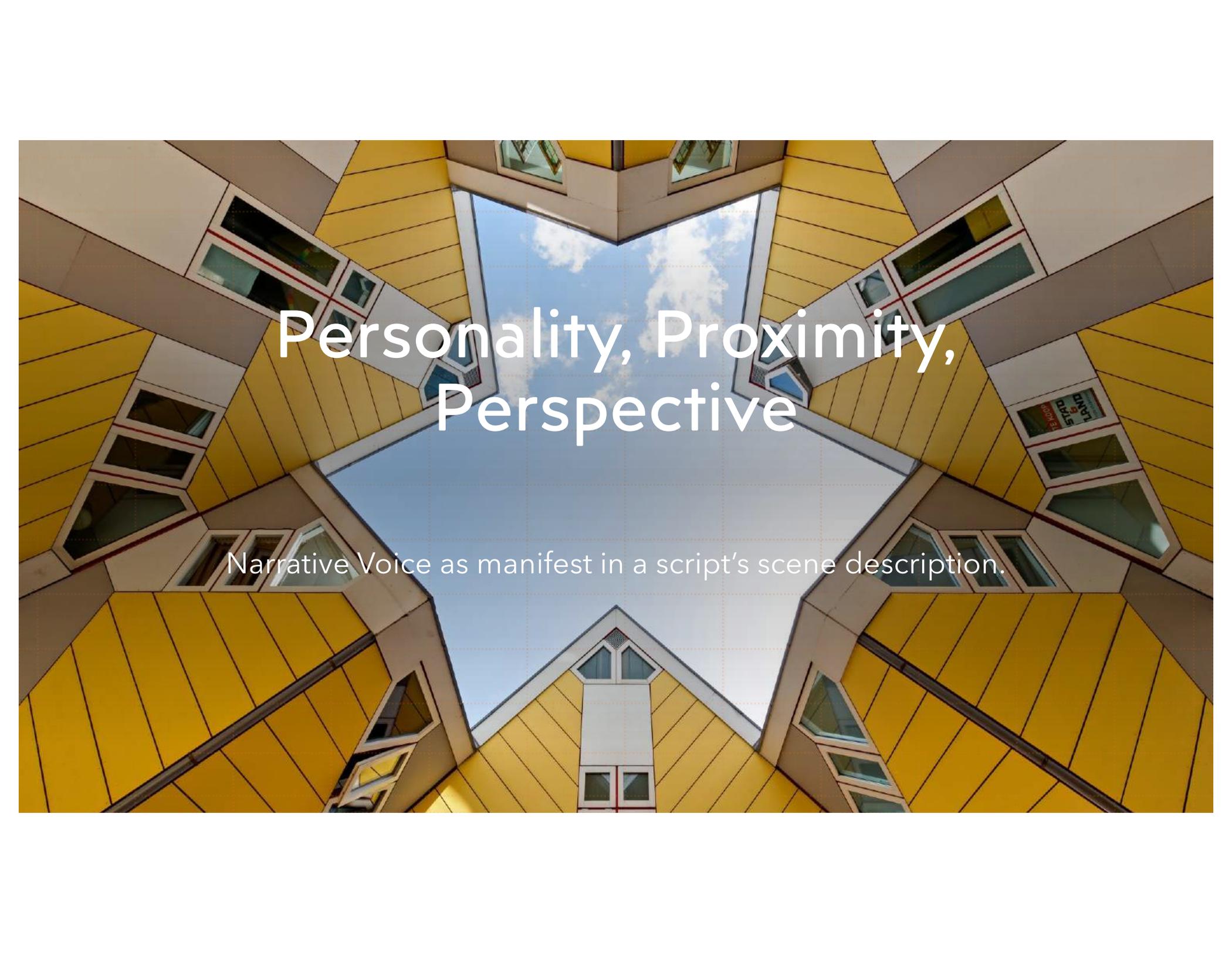
# Characters...

But what if there is  
an invisible character in your story?

# Narrative Voice

You write the story...  
But who tells the story?



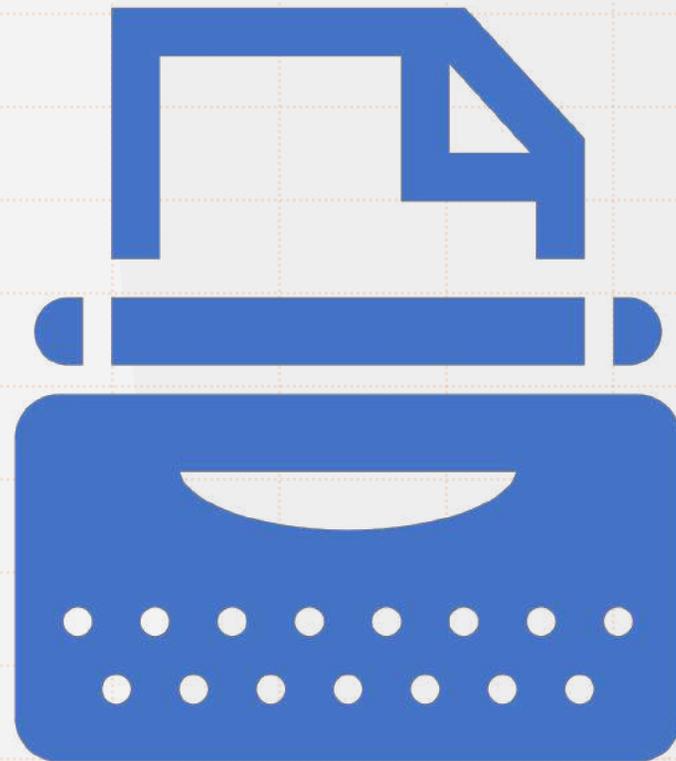


# Personality, Proximity, Perspective

Narrative Voice as manifest in a script's scene description.

“Screenplays don’t have to read like an instruction manual for a refrigerator. You can write them as a pleasurable read.”

– William Goldman



# Genre + Style = Narrative Voice

If it's a comedy, the scene description should be... funny.

If it's a thriller, the scene description should be... tense.

If it's a horror, the scene description should be... scary.



## INT. CHASE HOTEL

The Big Cop flicks out his cuffs, the other cops holding a bead. They've done this a hundred times, they know they've got her (Trinity), until the Big Cop reaches with the cuffs and Trinity moves –

It almost doesn't register, so smooth and fast,  
Inhumanly fast.

The eye blinks and Trinity's palm snaps up and his nose explodes, blood erupting. Her leg kicks with the force of a wrecking ball and he flies back, a two-hundred-fifty pound sack of limp meat and bone that slams into the cop farthest from her.

Trinity moves again, BULLETS RAKING the WALLS,  
flashlights sweeping with panic as the remaining cops try to stop a leather-clad ghost.

No one knows what to make of Olive rocking, her back turned.

However, when the first verse begins, Olive turns and strides up the stage -- hands on hips, shoulders swinging -- with an absolute and spectacular physical self-confidence.

She rocks out, busting crazy moves this stage has never seen: shakes, shimmies, twirls, dips, undulations -- a mélange of MTV rump-shakin', Solid Gold Dancers re-runs, and out-of-left-field inventions of her own. Other moves are clearly drawn from Grandpa's sixty-year career of strip-bar patronage.

She dances with a total command -- an exuberant, even witty master of her body, the music, the moves, everything.

Most of all, she's doing it for herself -- for her own sense of fun -- and the judges are instantly irrelevant.

The place is packed with tired, dusty men and they are not really jubilant so much as they are excited by the hysteria of events.

There is a general whoop and hubbub as Little Bill turns back to his conversation at the bar with Charley, Fatty, Clyde, Andy and WW Beauchamp.

Little Bill is suddenly conscious of his own loud voice in a sudden silence that has swept the bar like a brushfire and turning he sees what everybody is staring at.

Munny, with his ten-gauge shotgun leveled from the shoulder, is standing thirty feet away in the doorway. Taking a couple of sideways steps to get the door from behind his back and sweeping the twin barrels in an ominous arc, he surveys the scene.

Nobody says a thing. Skinny stares pop-eyed from behind the bar and the sweat starts on his forehead and Little Bill is thinking coolly and everybody else is swallowing hard and looking at the shotgun.

BAH-WHOOM! Munny fires and smoke belches and...

Skinny is blown back against the wall and falls to the floor a bloody mess and...

Little Bill is reaching for the Spencer which is leaning against the bar near his leg but he freezes because...

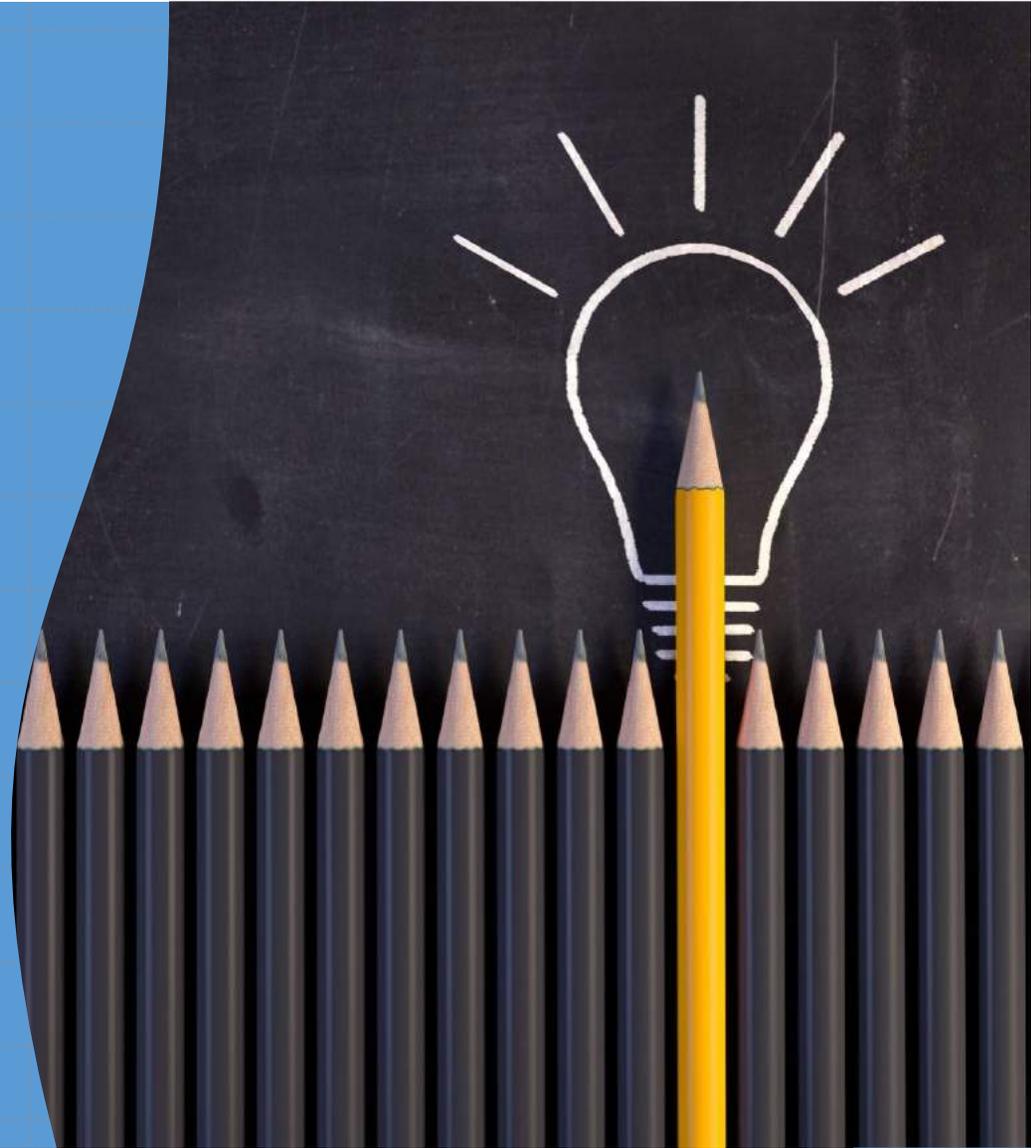
Munny has turned the shotgun on him and Munny sees Ned's Spencer there and his eyes show how he feels about it.

For a moment while the smoke clears the bar is silent and there are nervous glances cast at the bloody body of Skinny but Little Bill keeps his eyes on Munny.

It has become a very formal moment and there are, figuratively speaking, only two people in the room, Munny and Little Bill... and WW Beauchamp is watching them, scared to death, but this is it, what all those Easterners dreamed about, the showdown in the saloon.

# Three Ways to Use Narrative Voice to Give Expression to Your Writer's Voice

- Imagematic Writing
- Psychological Writing
- Poetic Writing



Concept

Character

Voice

# How to Write a Marketable Screenplay

# Scott Myers

DePaul University: Offering B.A., B.S., M.F.A. in screenwriting, plus comedy writing program with The Second City

ScreenWritingMasterclass.com: Unique online educational resource for writers, now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year

GoIntoTheStory.blcklst.com: Official screenwriting blog of the Black List

@GoIntoTheStory: 80K+ twitter followers

Zero Draft Thirty Facebook Group: 4.3K+ members

*The Protagonist's Journey: An Introduction to Character-Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling*

[GITSblog@gmail.com](mailto:GITSblog@gmail.com)