
Top Ten Tips on Writing

Posted by Cori Orlovski - 2008/10/23 13:57

Tip One: Pay attention to images

Your right brain thinks in images, and when you write, you translate images from your right brain into words. Usually this process happens so quickly that you're unaware of it. If you can make this process conscious, you can goose up your own creativity. Stephen King calls this process "writing with the third eye --- the eye of imagination and memory."

Tip Two: Making mud/ laying track

Your first draft of any piece of work is "mud" --- raw material. Julia Cameron refers to your first draft as "laying track", another term I like.

If the first draft's awful, great! It's meant to be. It's only raw material. However, if you don't create the first draft, or you wait until you have a really great idea that's worth a first draft, you won't write anything. Write. Make mud.

Tip Three: Just write ---

think on the page, or on the screen, NOT in your head

Thinking too much while you write is treacherous, because you can spend two hours "writing" and end up with half a page of work. Write-think. That is, think on the page, not in your head.

Tip Four: Grow your writing with lists

Listing is a form of brainstorming. It grows your writing, and it's fun.

Listing is an excellent technique to use when you get stuck in your writing, and it doesn't matter what kind of writing you're doing, whether it's fiction or nonfiction. Listing also helps you in the revision process, to add texture to your work.

Tip Five: Use your magical thesaurus

Your most useful listing tool is ---- a thesaurus. Keep one on your desk to kick start your brain.

Your thesaurus and dictionary are perfect kickstarters. They're also vital tools whenever you're revising.

Tip Six: Make writing the FIRST thing you do each day

If you write at least page, by hand, as soon as you get up, you'll find that writing comes more easily to you for the rest of the day. You're also more focused and relaxed for the rest of the day.

Tip Seven: Set WIG goals --- the best goals are always unrealistic

Writer Martha Beck calls unrealistic goals WIGs: Wildly Improbable Goals.

A WIG is exciting. Just thinking about a WIG will get your heart pounding. Working toward your WIG (writing a book, writing a screenplay, getting signed on as a contributor at a mass-market magazine) takes hard work. Lots of hard work.

And at the end of that hard work, as Beck points out, you achieve your goal, but there's a twist. You never achieve it exactly as you envisioned it - you achieve something even better, something you could never have imagined.

I'm a great believer in writing ABOUT your goals. This is because when you write, you're using both sides of your brain, and are accessing your unconscious mind as well. You live in your left brain, which you regard as "you", but you have a silent partner, your right brain, which is also you, and which communicates via images and feelings.

Tip Eight: Separate writing and editing

Writing comes first, then editing. If you try to combine the two, you will block.

Writing should come as easily to you as chatting to a friend. If it doesn't, you're trying to edit in your head before you get the words on paper, or on the computer screen. If you're not aware of the danger of combining writing and editing, you'll make writing hard for yourself, when it should be easy. If you don't have trouble talking, how can you have trouble writing?

Tip Nine: It's good to struggle with your writing

When you struggle, and then completely give up the struggle --- just give up --- there's a chance that you can achieve a peak experience which leads you to a new level of functioning.

How does this work in your writing? Let's say that you're writing a novel. This work is hard for you. However, you keep at it faithfully, working on your novel each day. You struggle with it for weeks. Then you give up. Although you keep writing, you say to yourself: "I don't care any more what garbage I write. I'm just going to do it. I'm just going to write."

This release leads to writing magic. Suddenly you're inspired, and you finish the book in a rush. Although you will still occasionally struggle with your writing (because struggle is a part of life), you've broken through to a new level of functioning in your work.

This new level would not, and could not, have happened without the struggle.

Tip Ten: Good writing = truthful writing

Writing truthfully can feel like undressing in public, so many beginning writers worry about sharing their writing.

Be compassionate. Firstly, to yourself. Write. Write for yourself. All writing takes courage.

When you finally show your writing to others, you discover the amazing truth that no one cares. In her book "Writing To Save Your Life", Michele Weldon advises: "Get over yourself". No one is judging what you write. So write.

Re:Top Ten Tips on Writing

Posted by Daniel Gourley - 2008/10/23 14:22

Tip 10 is sad...so I have added:

TIP 11 - Punch that uncaring individual in the face.

Now I feel better! B)

Re:Top Ten Tips on Writing

Posted by Tamara McDaniel - 2008/11/02 19:06

Here's something one of my writers posted on our message board and as someone who gets asked to read scripts all the time - I hearily agree! :)T

You're an Idiot: Making Value from Reaction to your Screenwriting.

By Screenwriter; Gordy Hoffman.

If you're like me, if someone doesn't like something about my screenplay, my very first reaction is always the same.

You're not as smart as me. If you knew what I knew, you would understand what I wrote. And you don't understand what I wrote, because you don't know as much as I do. About everything, in general. In short, life. You know, people. Planet Earth.

If you really don't understand what I'm doing in my script, my first feeling is I don't respect you. I have contempt for you. I feel attacked personally, and with my feelings hurt, I want to denigrate your position, and while I won't call you an idiot, basically the foundation of my exchange with you in the wake of you reading my script is you are, in fact, some kind of idiot.

Someone once told me I can be right or I can be happy. Or you can be right, or you can get your screenplay produced into a motion picture. I have had this happen twice, and I can tell you if I had committed myself to being right about everything during the development of the screenplay, they would still be living as files in my hard drive. Any produced screenwriter will attest to this.

Whenever a reader doesn't get information from my screenplay, facts crucial to the function of the story, stuff I feel is so obvious that the only reason they could've missed it all is carelessness, I know I am responsible for the breakdown. Writers over and over complain about this, appalled that someone could miss something so blatant in the script. Two ways you can take this note. One, reader read poorly. Two, you have clarity problems. What is the constructive reaction? You have a clarity problem.

You might get a note saying they don't believe a character would do or say something, particularly dialogue or actions of a certain time period or profession, such as a cop, or a farmer from the 18th century in Russia. The writer defends the charge by citing historical facts, or stating they have seven relatives in law enforcement, or they grew up in Canada, and they do, indeed, talk like that. Well, it doesn't matter. If your audience is distracted by your authenticity rubbing them as

click? or improbable, you need to revise.

Screenwriting is compression and art. It's truth, not a transcription. Where do clichés come from anyway?

I recently got a reaction from an audience member to a movie I wrote that I had never heard from anyone EVER. My first instinct was to say to myself, well, um, that's stupid, because EVERYBODY else thinks differently. This is another reaction I've run into quite a bit with writers. "Everybody else thinks it's funny or realistic or a perfect movie or..." Who is your "everybody else"? Consider your sources, and keep your mind open. In the end, "everybody else" doesn't exist.

Notes on your screenplay are not a personal attack. They might feel like that. You have made an investment of self, and you love what you have created. It is you. But someone's reaction to your writing is not a reaction to you. It is a reaction of the person who read your screenplay. Same screenplay, different people, different reactions. So the reactions are personal to the readers. Detach from the notes to the degree to which you can improve your screenplay. Their reactions are formed primarily from their lives, not your words. Which leads me to this.

Do not embrace the extremes. Listen to the ends of the spectrum of opinions, but do not wallow there. If someone thinks your script is the worst attempt at screenwriting on record, take what you can, but do not stay with this, toss it off as something off and wild. If someone thinks your script is so awesomely perfect and beautiful that there's really nothing to be changed, take what you can, but do not stay with this, toss it off as something off and wild.

Let's say you've offended someone. They think your choices about language or characterization or action are patently offensive, maybe immoral, bigoted, racist, or sexist, disturbing to the point of quit. Do you need to change something? Perhaps. It's up to you. Know that you've offended someone. I have written disturbing material and I didn't change it. But I've learned to sincerely respect that reaction and allow it to help strengthen my creative positions.

Do not listen to hysterical advice about formatting, but if people say they found typos, that means you don't respect your movie and you need look at your attitude to your work on story.

Don't ever question the credentials of your reader. We can seek the experienced and the professional, but in the end, to discredit notes because the reader is "not a screenwriter" or "some punk in a mailroom" or "the assistant fresh out of blah blah", I put this to you. Where exactly do you think the studios come from? Do you know where the executives started? Do you know how Hollywood began? Who is sitting in the movie seats every Friday night across the planet? Screenplay consultants? No. Your audience.

Seek their reaction. They are the flashlight that works. You can glean the most incredible insights from any one who reads your screenplay, if you put aside your fight and remember the goal of production. We can't wait for the "qualified" to tell us what's wrong. We don't have to.

I don't remember what the newspapers wrote about the movies I've written, but I do remember what the audiences said. The hell with right. I want to make movies, and I strive for that direction.

About the Author

Winner of the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award at the Sundance Film Festival for LOVE LIZA, Gordy Hoffman has written and directed three digital shorts for Fox Searchlight. He made his feature directorial debut with his script, A COAT OF SNOW, which world premiered at the 2005 Locarno Intl Film Festival. A COAT OF SNOW made its North American Premiere at the Arclight in Hollywood, going on to screen at the Milan Film Festival and the historic George Eastman House. Recently, the movie won the 2006 Domani Vision Award at VisionFest, held at the Tribeca Cinemas in NY. A professor at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, Gordy is the founder and judge of the BlueCat Screenplay Competition

Edited by Ita on Mar 21, 2007 9:00 AM

=====