

10 screenwriting insights I wish I'd had 25 years ago

by [Allen Palmer](#) on July 22, 2010

Over the last quarter century I've stumbled and lurched my way to some understanding of the screenwriter's craft. As our AFTRS Graduate Certificate of Screenwriting students begin their journey, I thought I'd share the 10 things I wish I'd know when I started out.

1. [Why people go to the movies](#)
2. [It's not about the plot](#)
3. [The one screenwriting book you'll ever need](#)
4. [The 27-word concept test](#)
5. [The 4 basic questions of storytelling](#)
6. [The secret to character is contradiction](#)
7. [Don't keep your idea a secret](#)
8. [Why sometimes the best way to write is not to write](#)
9. [Get a day job but not just any day job](#)
10. [Choose a producer like you'd choose a spouse](#)

1. Why people go to the movies

If you're making films to be viewed by the cinema-going public, it would seem pretty obvious that you should seek to understand why people go the movies, wouldn't it? Not to me. I scratched around for about 6 years and had already written several very poor drafts of my first screenplay without ever contemplating this fundamental question. Fortunately, the inspirational UCLA English Professor, Lynn Batten, forced me to address the question – well, not so much about movies but about stories and myths in general. Why do humans need cracking yarns? Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* supplied the answer.

“What people are seeking is the feeling of being alive. They want to feel the rapture of being alive”.

They want to be moved, guys. They want to identify with a character who's struggling, as they are, with the exquisitely frustrating dilemma of life, and who, in facing their greatest fear, draws on their higher self. In my darkest hour in LA, this epiphany transformed my writing.

[Learn more about why people go to the movies](#)

2. It's not about the plot

Most writers starting out think story is plot and when you ask them to tell you about their film they'll go, “Well, this happens, and that happens, and then this other things happens, and oh, and I forgot to tell you, there's this three-legged dog who can talk ... “

However, once you understand that people want to be moved, you should realise that the main game in story is not plot. It's not the outer goal that ultimately triggers our emotions but the inner journey. That's not to say that the outer goal doesn't matter. It does. It's what gets the punters into the cinema in the first place. But if the hero pursues the outer goal with no inner change, no matter how spectacular your climax, no matter how many bodies or cars or interplanetary spaceships you lay to waste in that final 20 pages and no matter how eloquent that 3-legged dog is, we won't be moved one jot. Plot matters but only because it's what drives the inner transformation. Plot isn't the end. It's just the means.

3. The only screenwriting book you'll ever need

Blake Snyder bills his book, *Save The Cat*, as “the last book on screenwriting you’ll ever need”. This is categorically NOT the book to which I refer. *Save The Cat* has some useful things to say about concept but I’m not sure that it encourages writers to create films with soul.

McKee is treated like a screenwriting God. His expensive lectures are sold out and his book *Story* is only marginally less popular than the Bible. Unfortunately, what he says about screenwriting simply doesn’t resonate for me. By all means, check it out but the emotional journey isn’t emphasised sufficiently for my liking.

If you are to only buy one book about screenwriting, please, please, let it be Chris Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey*.

Vogler, a Hollywood story analyst who’s consulted on films like *Lion King*, takes the [Hero’s Journey](#) of mythology guru, [Joseph Campbell](#), and makes it both accessible to the average person and relevant specifically to the movies. It categorically changed my life.

There are 3 reasons why I love the Hero’s Journey and consider it the most useful story paradigm for screenwriters.

i) It was not invented. It was merely identified. Joseph Campbell read stories from all over the world, across all time, and found that every culture was telling the same story over and over and over again. The monomyth. The hero’s journey is not the get-rich-quick gimmick of some San Fernando Valley shyster. It’s the timeless storytelling blueprint of all humankind.

ii) The inner journey is intrinsic. I said the inner journey is what it’s all about and if you subscribe to the Hero’s Journey you can’t not have your character go on an inner journey. The Hero’s Journey doesn’t so much describe plot elements as identity stages in the transformation of your character. Become a Campbell/Vogler devotee, and your focus will shift automatically from plot to emotion. And that, my friends, is where it’s at.

iii) It works. It’s worked for the great films – even if the writers weren’t aware they were following its conventions. It’s worked for George Lucas – who consulted Campbell on the early *Star Wars* films. It’s worked for [George Miller](#). George is a huge Campbell fan and it’s no coincidence that he’s been Australia’s most successful filmmaker on the international stage. It’s worked for millions of storytellers for thousands of years so there’s a good chance it might just work for you.

If you haven’t got this book, buy it. If you haven’t read it, pick it up and see how it applies to the films you love. And if you want to spend a day exploring this amazing gift, come to my [Introduction to Screenwriting course](#). The Hero’s Journey is the foundation to everything I teach.

Update: You might be interested in these 2 more recent articles about the Hero’s Journey:
[Where I disagree with the Hero’s Journey – on character arc](#)
[A new character-driven Hero’s Journey](#)

4. The 27-word concept test

One of the most useful courses I did in LA was not a screenwriting class but a script reader’s class with seasoned story analyst, Peter Exline (who, incidentally, was one of the inspirations for *The Dude in The Big Lebowski*). In that course, I learnt 2 incredibly valuable lessons and one was the 27 word concept test.

Some people say that a logline – the description of the film’s concept – can be 2 or 3 sentences. Exline placed a much tighter constraint on the logline. He said it should be just one sentence of 27 words.

Film demands simple ideas. Complex plots but simple ideas. If you can’t express your idea in a single sentence of 27 words, you’re going to struggle on two grounds:

i) You probably won’t be able to tell your story in 110 pages

ii) The marketing department will have the devil's own job in trying to market your film.

The 27-word concept test interrogates the dramatic engine of your film and is just about the most valuable tool in the screenwriter's toolkit. Use it early. And use it often.

[Learn more about the 27-word film concept test](#)

5. The 4 basic questions of storytelling

The other piece of gold I picked up in Peter Exline's class was that there are 4 basic questions a screenwriter should be able to answer about their story:

1. Who is the hero?
2. What do they want?
3. What's stopping them from getting it?
4. What's at stake?

This might seem obvious to you but it was a revelation to me and I can tell you that 90% screenplays fail these basic tests. It's not clear whose story it is, the goal isn't distinguished in a way that will allow us to know when they've crossed the finish line, the forces of antagonism aren't great enough or it doesn't matter enough to the character so why should we care?

These elements shouldn't just be obvious in your overall story but in each scene. Who wants what in this scene and why? Who is stopping them trying to get it and how do they thwart our hero?

Without these elements, you don't have conflict. No conflict, no drama. No drama, no chance of screenwriting glory.

[Learn more about the 4 basic questions of storytelling](#)

6. The secret to character is contradiction

In our first class of Dramatic Storytelling in the Grad Cert last week, we watched the opening scene of The Godfather and I asked my writers, why do we find the Don engaging and one of the first things someone said was, "The cat". Spot on. The mafia boss is stroking a cat.

Now, antagonists in James Bond and Austin Powers films have given cat-stroking a bad rap, but what was the intention of the writer here with this touch of domesticity? To provide a counterpoint to the expectations of the stereotype. It's a contradiction and it's the key to great characterisation.

Think about Indiana Jones. Dashing, brave, handsome, fearless. Well, not quite. He's not too keen on snakes. Contradiction.

Tony Soprano. Brutal, murderous, brothel-keeping, drug running mafioso? Yes. But in episode 1 his character crisis is triggered because a family of ducks no longer comes to his backyard swimming pool. Contradiction.

And this is not just something that applies to heroes. Think about Anton Sugar (Javier Bardem) in No Country for Old Men. What makes him one of the great antagonists? Not just that he blows people away with that weird gas cylinder weapon. It's that, when he fears that the guy in the remote truck stop might compromise him, he gives the poor sap a sporting chance. He flips a coin. Heads you win, tails you get a cross city tunnel through your cerebral cortex. He also intrigues us because he has an unbreakable ethical code. He said he is going to kill the guy's wife so kill her he must. He's a psychopath but he's a highly principled psychopath.

Here are some others:

Hannibal Lecter – Cultured cannibal
Harry Burns in When Harry Met Sally – Romantic pessimist
Sally Allbright in When Harry Met Sally – Pragmatic optimist
Ronny Cammareri (Nic Cage) in Moonstruck – Opera-loving baker
Shrek – Sentimental ogre

The key to characterisation is credibly building these sorts of opposites into your characters. It stops them being clichés and helps the audience warm to them because no matter how great they are, they're flawed like us, and no matter how bad they are, they have redeeming qualities, like we do on a good day.

7. Don't keep your idea a secret

Australian screenwriters are very secretive about their film concepts. What's your film about? I can't tell you that!!! Go to LA and try to STOP someone telling you their idea. Not just writers in your UCLA Extension class, but the guy at the sandwich shop or the barmaid at Hooters. They constantly pitch their ideas and this is something I would encourage you to do too.

The danger with keeping your idea to yourself "until it's finished" is that your idea, with all due respect, might be crap. If you're a writer just starting out, they generally are. It's just the way it is. Mine was crap and I wasted years of my life drafting and redrafting it because I didn't bounce it off anyone.

The other reason you should verbally tell your story to people in the early stages is because you can tell as the words are coming out of your mouth whether it's working or not. You don't need their glazed reaction to know you've got yourself a stinker or to hear their "so what happens next" to know you're on a winner. You just know through some hard-wired storytelling instinct.

This is one place where I absolutely agree with Blake Snyder. Bounce your idea off people as soon as you can. If it's not working, try to reshape it. If they still say, "Yeah, it's ... nice" then trash it and find a fresh vehicle to transport your genius to the world.

Read more about [Why writers should take the oral before the written](#)

8. Why sometimes the best way to write is not to write

The worst mistake a writer can make is to not write – to sit down at your desk only when you feel "inspired". You need to create a regimen and stick to it. If you can only manage 30 mins a day, OK, but make sure you put in that half hour no matter what. There should be no excuse. Work. Kids. Alien invasion. If you have the conviction, you'll find the time. My routine at the moment is to get up at 5.30am, which doesn't sound too appealing but your body quickly adjusts and I now automatically wake up at that time. Just ask my wife.

But the next mistake you can make is to think you will only solve that problem at the Act 2 Turning Point by continuing to wrestle with it on the page. You're exhausted and cranky but you are not going to give in 'til you've found the answer. Bad move.

Do you do cryptic crosswords? I love them. But one of the amazing things I've found is that something I might struggle with when I look at it on Friday morning is bleedingly bloody obvious at Friday lunchtime. Why? Because my subconscious has had time to work on it. It's the same with your screenplay.

Your mind is an amazing bit of gear but you've got to start learning how to get the most out of it. And that's not by pounding it into submission. You need to become aware of the moment when it's ceased to be productive and back off. Go for a swim or walk the dog. Go play the piano, guitar, or, in my case, plastic recorder. Do yoga or meditate.

I'm amazed at the number of times the solution will come to me when I'm not looking for the solution. I'll be running around the park and I'll suddenly find myself seeing the answer and come out of the trance with no recollection of how many laps I've done.

Your brain is a gift. And sometimes it does its best work when it seems not to be working at all.

9. Get a day job. But not just any day job.

Even if you are the greatest writer in the world, it's going to take you time to develop your craft and – here's the problem – no-one is going to pay you to learn your trade. There were very few screenwriting apprenticeships available down at Centrelink the last time I looked. So before you can face the challenges of screenwriting in general and your current film in particular, you need to answer a more fundamental question: how am I going to support myself while I learn my craft?

I've tried every possible approach. For a long time I took incredibly poorly paid jobs that offered great time flexibility (hostel manager in NY, pizza cook in Ireland, housekeeper to a countess in London). On the plus side, you get a lot of writing done but on the down side, you make enormous personal and social sacrifices. You tell yourself that it's only until I finish this next draft and then all of a sudden you're 43, single with no assets, no super and about \$20k in debt.

The other approach is to try to write while holding down a real job. On the plus side, you don't hide when the landlord knocks and you can afford a loaf of bread without having to search for gold coloured coins down the back of the sofa. On the down side, the responsibilities and stress mean your writing is too often sidelined and years go by without you making any meaningful progress.

The best option I've found after years of trial and error is well-paid freelance work. Copywriting for instance. If you're good – and you won't be without practice – you can make \$100/hr and sometimes \$1000 a day so that you don't need to work 5 days to earn a decent crust. If you have some skill that allows you to earn a lot of money in a short time on a flexible basis, you can create the window you need in your life to develop your craft. If not, you will be faced with a choice: do I want lifestyle or do I really desperately want to be a writer? That's a question only you can answer.

10. Choose a producer like you'd choose a spouse

When you've finally written your screenplay and you find a producer who says that they love it and they want to option it, your response is, "Where do I sign?", right? Wrong. Oh, so, very wrong.

The writer-producer relationship is like a marriage. Only more important. It's probably going to take your producer 3 years to get your film up and possibly a whole lot longer. Producer Vincent Sheehan just got funding approval for a film he started on 8 years ago. That is a long time, particularly when people are poking and prodding around inside something very near and dear to you. If you choose the wrong producer, the development process will drive you absolutely insane and your baby will end up mutilated or murdered. I myself have been through this nightmare scenario and it almost made me quit the game.

Choose a producer who knows one end of a story from the other and who obeys the first commandment of the writer-producer collaborative process – that it's the producer's job to identify what's not working and the writer's job to fix it. It's amazing the number of producers who will tell you, "Well, I'm not a writer but ... " and then proceed to dictate (literally) what they expect to see in the next draft. That's a recipe for a bad relationship and a tragic script outcome.

The pitfalls where producers are concerned don't stop there. They might be wonderful collaborators but that same sensitivity might make them lousy at getting your project read by the people that matter. Producing, ultimately, is

selling. Of course, on the flip side, great salesman throughout history haven't generally been renowned for their ethics.

Am I scaring you? Good. Make the wrong choice here and all your talent and hard work could end up counting for nought.

So don't hook up with the first producer who asks you out. Research the market and find answers to these questions:

- What have they made?
- Do you like what they've made?
- Did it tell a good story?
- Have they made a film that's done business internationally?
- Do writers like to work with them creatively?
- Do they have a habit of screwing writers contractually?

Play hard to get. Of course, in order to play hard to get, you have to have produced a screenplay that gleams. But when you have laboured and sweated to produce that rare entity, don't give it to just any clown. Take some time and confer it on someone who's going to give your screenplay its best chance to delight and move the world. Sign in haste. Repent at leisure.

Conclusion

So that's it. That's not all I've learned. I hope. But these are the 10 things that would have made the greatest difference to my career trajectory if someone had told me them all those years ago. I hope that by getting the tips now, you can fast-track your path to screenwriting fulfilment.