

# The Umami of Story

***Art Holcomb explores how to elevate your writing from the simply competent to the extraordinary with seven questions to ask of your script, and reveals why a script must be a work of art.***

*Cinema should make you forget that you're sitting in a theatre.*

Roman Polanski

There is something undeniably palpable about a great movie.

All the elements come together, inspired by an exceptional script and the vision of the director and others to see the possibilities within.

As writers, we long to create works that have the potential to become the kind of films that make you forget that you're in the theatre, the ones that grabs you and take you into the screen, to strike at the very heart of who we are as a people, and to reverberate inside us for days after credits roll.

This alone is the goal – the Holy Grail – of screenwriting.

We have said in this column before that there are only two fates for a script under submission. Either it is fantastic and is immediately optioned or sold. Or . . . is it not, and has little to any chance of ever finding a home as is.

I appreciate that this hard to swallow, but I am confronted by a couple of truths.

- First, a survey of professional scripts readers tell us that approximately 95% of what they read is not only un-producible but *unreadable* (as in that there are so many problems with the script both technically and story-wise);
- And second, I know a number of producers who have read thousands of scripts each in the past few years and have yet to find one that they are willing to back and produce.

Clearly, there is something that separates the very best written scripts each year even from the rare ones which receive an “Recommend” and rise above the standards of the reader. In short, those films which leave us *enthralled and spellbound*.

We cannot as writers simply aim for that recommendation. We have to strive at every moment to be to create the best possible.

## The Truth of the Struggle

There are many places along the journey of a script where a writer longs to just stop and say, “This is as good as it gets – I have told my story as well as I can”. And they are nearly always wrong.

Because it is not enough to write the script *from the writer’s perspective*, or to try and provoke the eventual audience’s reaction. The writer must take the impact of the script to a higher level yet and work to stir the talents and imagination of all who read it. That is to say, the agents, producers, actors, cinematographer, and all the other talents who could spend the next year or more dedicated to telling this story. How will these primary customers be inspired and spellbound by this script?

That higher goal takes it from the simply competent to the extraordinary.

I call this difference the ***Umami of the Story***.

So let’s talk about that.

- The term comes from gastronomy and it’s often called “the fifth flavor” in cooking.
- It is that flavor that can be hard-to-describe but instantly recognized.
- It has a lasting aftertaste (or finish) that many crave.
- It induces distinctive visceral reactions and sensations that go beyond the normal experience.
- It represents a deeper layer of appreciate and understanding.

In art, then, it is that power within the work to insinuate, to overcome our naturally jaded expectations of a lifetime of commonplace tales, to strike at the heart of who we are as a culture and individual.

The key concept here is to explore the art of a thing– whether it’s a painting, a song, a script or a culinary dish – for the way it makes us *feel*.

For this emotional connection is there in every great work of an artist. And it is there in the stories that move and shake us, the films we can watch over and over again for the thrill, the pain, the longing and the revelations they produce in us all.

This demands ***universality and predictability of reaction***, and it is a quality that many screenwriters – both new and experienced – fail to grasp.

## Can a script be that work of art?

I have heard many times that a screenplay is not art, but I think that’s ridiculous, for what better definition of art can there be? One has only to read scripts by Shane Black and Mamet and Sorkin to see the difference.

But how to teach that to the screenwriter?

I think, as in all good educational approaches, it's best to draw it out of the writer through asking direct questions.

In the rewrite process, powerful and pointed questions constitute either conscious or subconscious passes of refinement. And a set of powerful questions, asked of the script and the writer at just the right time, can bring that extra dimensionality out.

In my teaching, there is a final pass that our writers put their script through, where it is reviewed through the lens of seven questions: **the Umami Pass**.

### ***1. Have I found the absolute truth in each moment of the story?***

Regardless of what we may tell ourselves, that what we are looking for in a quality entertainment experience – what we all want from our stories – is authenticity. We want the genuineness of experience to cement the relationship between protagonist and audience

Consider:

- A really good movie will look at something in the human experience (loss, heroism, romance) and approach it with complexity and empathy.
- A bad movie will approach it in an overly-abridged and inelegant way. As in the film *Saw*, where people are tortured half to death because they're drug dealers or deadbeat dads.
- But a passable movie (perhaps the worst label I can imagine for a creative work) will look at something, then approach it in terms that the audience is already familiar with: from not watching humans in their daily life but from watching *other movies*, using its clichés and tropes as a shortcut for say something deep.

In other words, when passable movies portray human experience, they observe it not through the lens of real life, but through the lens of other movies.

Truth authentically comes from going deep into the writer's own experience and motivations to find the genuine. And when a writer does this well, the audience and the creatives alike recognize *that something different is happening*.

It takes practice and commitment to write authentically, to portray real humans in real situations. But it is the very heart of drama.

### ***2. Is there at least one moment where the story says something undeniable about who we are as a species?***

The Protagonist/Audience Connection is based on the emotions that the film or script evokes in the reader or audience. Love, despair, hatred, jealousy, and envy can all be

brought out by any number of situations, but in each, the writer must seek to bring out the *poignancy* of the moment.

The script must be crafted for maximum emotional impact, and your first reader can be of great value here. In my own work, I always watch my first reader actually read my script, and I watch for their reactions as they read. All that matters here is the reaction – the impact (used here in the physical sense) and effect it has.

### ***3. Can I provoke emotion through the drama any further?***

No matter what you've written, you can go bigger, dig deeper. No audience wants to experience the second worst thing that ever happened to your hero.

I find that most writers are tentative about approaching the drama of the moment. The personal relationship with one's own emotions – what it takes to write a powerful scene – demands that we channel something from our past and our own deeply personal. That is, we use our own experiences, challenges, limitations or losses – to fuel that moment. If, as a person, you are hesitant to mine your own pain and emotions, there is little hope for expressing them in a compelling way on the page.

This is where the courage of the writer is most important. It is, in its own way, the Dark Night of the Soul moment for the writer in every script that they write.

Are you willing to plumb those depths, to revisit the pain, despair, joy and elation of your own life for the sake of your art?

### ***4. Will the actors and director see and feel the internal in the external?***

As screenwriters, we are hobbled by the limitations of our form. The novelist can rely on techniques like interior monologue, but we have only dialogue and description to create our tales.

This is where we must consider the actors to come, because the intersection of the internal and external is the soul of acting. They must bring out into the light the inner turmoil and emotional churn of the characters, and make manifest the change in character that sells the story.

And, of course, if it's not on the page . . .

It's the writer's job to seriously consider this, and the ones who can do it well will have actors of all stripes lining up to join the cast.

I find that it is more than merely writing roles that “speak” to the actors; it is more of a conversation that the writer is having with the actor within the script. A way of letting the actor know that the writer understands what they need in a role.

## ***5. Is the story’s meaning, its theme, palpable?***

This can be achieved through several means.

**Set-ups and payoffs.** The most powerful point in any sequence is the impact that the payoff has. Payoffs represent the emotional pulse of the story, driving into the viewer the theme and consequences. As the character react, the audience must react as well.

This has been called a manipulation, and I’m not afraid of that word. You have a message and theme that you’re driving home. It’s the whole reason for the story in the first place.

**Subtext.** There are three considerations that must be made in considering the subtext of any segment of dialogue:

- What the character is saying,
- What the character is actively *not saying*, and
- The struggle of what the character is fighting hard not to say.

**Character layers and complexity.** I seek to write about wonderful characters who do despicable things, as well as despicable characters who can be driven to do wonderful things. Characters are illuminated by what they say but they are absolutely defined by what they do. A hero at odd with his/her own better nature, or of a villain who sees him/herself as the hero of their own story is always more interesting.

## ***6. Are the emotions I’ve brought out universal?***

From the beginning of a project, actor/director Will Smith makes a point of concentrating on bringing forth at least one universally relatable emotion in a work. A palpable and real experience of at least one tangible emotion.

It’s that one idea that’s the key to reaching an audience. And it has to go beyond being thrilled through heart-pumping action or visual majesty. It should be a pang of the heart through an unexpected line or visual. That moment, through the visceral connection the audience (and before that, the actor and director) have with the hero, bonds the two together forever. It’s what allows an individual film or performance to haunt us hours, or days, or years after the fact.

I find this is lacking in most films today. But one need only go back to a film like *Fail-Safe*, and Henry Fonda’s gripping performance to see it done so well.

In this one consideration lies the art of the form. This – the protagonist/audience connection – makes or breaks the script, and therefore a performance.

## ***7. Have I made both the story – and the experience of reading the script – beautiful?***

In other words, have you made the “event” of reading the script and hearing the pitch a *beautiful experience*?

I know this may be an extraordinary consideration, especially since we already ask more of a script than we do of nearly every other written document in our world.

But a script has to do more than tell a story. It must immediately evoke in the mind of the reader not only clear image of the tale itself, but inspire the listener to consider devoting years of their lives to bringing this film concept to both artistic fullness and to the marketplace.

Art is meant to stir us, move us, spark within us our own creativity as we are drawn into the delicious detail of the works. And so, a script must be a work of art.

To think of a script as mere scaffolding is to deny ourselves as writers the opportunity to create something that goes beyond mere storytelling, something so moving and so well done that it simply cannot be ignored.

## **Conclusion**

Stories are emotion delivery systems.

If your goal is to write a great script, you must see the work before you for what it is: a rare opportunity to create something that moves us.

This is not easy. But this is exactly what you have to commit to, you choose the path of a screenwriter.