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WHAT I DO ON THE PAGE

One of the most annoying things about art is that the moment you describe a rule, someone far more clever and talented will find a way to not only break it, but also turn the rupture into something so beautiful as to provoke coma-inducing professional envy. Screenwriting is no exception.

Some or all of what I am about to say may strike you as my trying to make "rules" out of my personal preferences, or excessive deference to (or defiance of) tradition, or, simply, bullshit. This is why the first and most important recommendation I make in presenting my technical advice is that you choose what works for you, ignore what doesn't, and mock what you find risible.

What follows is not a lesson, but rather, an explanation of how and why I write screenplays the way I do. I present this in the hope that by justifying my own style, habits both good and bad, quirks, grace notes, and pet peeves, you will be moved to dig deeper into your own practice and how it may be improved.

You are also welcome to read everything below and declare that I am overthinking it and, really, should just try writing. That's

fair enough, and I offer no counter. This sort of granular analysis of the page is part of how I do, and no two writers are the same in this respect.

Feel free to pity my micromania.

At some point or another, all screenwriters must endure the calumny that "a script is a blueprint for a film." To many, this means that a script need provide little more than a basic narrative beachhead to be occupied, and subsequently elevated, by the brilliance of the actors, director, cinematographer, and so on and so on and so on.

While it is true that the core function of a script is to provide a basis from which every other artist working on a film can excel their craft, I also believe that a script needs to be much, much, more than a "blueprint" in order to succeed. To me, there have to be a poetics of screenwriting servicing a greater aesthetic cause than the mere needs of production. To me, a successful script is one that strives to be as readable and literate as any novel, short story, or poem.

In short, a script needs to be a work of art in and of itself. Why? Because a script needs to persuade on multiple levels in order to truly succeed, and a work of art is a powerful tool for persuasion.

The first and most prosaic of these levels is as a work order:

Without a script with clearly numbered scenes labeled with slug lines describing the story's locations, an assistant director cannot create a grid in which the scenes are conformed to the number of shooting days, and the time spent in each set and location is allocated.

Without clarity on the page, the production designer, art department, set builders, costume designers, prop makers, and location scouts have no baseline from which to manifest all the things necessary for the story to be told.

Without clarity on the page, no one will know where to take all the cameras, and lights, and snacks for the crew.

Without a script that comprehensively lays out the business of its scenes, sequences, and greater story, none of the logistical challenges of physical production can be met.

Moving up a level, a script is also a loan application.

As profane as this may sound to us *artistes*, writing a script for film and tv is simply a protracted way of asking someone with money if they will give you some of that money that you may render a story that up until now existed only in your brain... all of it for mutual profit. For that reason, the script has to be the closest possible approximation of - if not seeing the actual movie - the emotions and effect of having seen the movie.

The worst thing a person, especially one with money, can say after reading a script is "I can't see it." Therein lies one of the biggest challenges of the entire endeavor: you have to use the static medium of words to create the illusion of a medium that is not only visual but which moves at its own speed without the intervention of the reader. Someone can always put down a book, walking out of a movie you have already paid to see is usually last resort.

Wishful thinking notwithstanding, most novelists know that their work will not be consumed in a single sitting. For a screenwriter, however, there can be no worse fate. Every time the reader pauses, the possibility of that check getting signed dwindles. Appreciably.

A screenplay, then, is a description of motion and emotion in real time.

Finally, a script is a confessional and exegetic outpouring of a writer's innermost emotional pain made real through drama rendered through the most competent and accomplished deployment of their artistic experience and ability.

Or so I've heard.

One of my favorite showrunners is famous among his colleagues for putting a sign above the writers' room white board that reads "DON'T STOP THE FUN TRAIN." It's his nice way of staving off excessive nitpicking in the story development process, and saying "we need the fig leaf of plausibility not the mink coat

of certainty." Presumptuously, I extend this philosophy it to every aspect of writing, from the allegedly mystical spark of an idea to the physical location of the words on the page.

How much you ask your words to do, and where you place them on the page to do that work is a good metric by which you can gauge the end reader's experience: which you want to be fleet and entertaining, regardless of theme or subject matter.

So maybe you aren't driving the fun train. Maybe it's the sadness train, or the unintended and tragic consequences train, or the quiet indie about not much but really EVERYTHING train...

... still, they're all trains, and they need sustained and propulsive forward motion to fulfill their purpose.

The most obvious difference between a script and pretty much any other form of prose is the format. The screenplay format exists to facilitate the first, most technical functions of a script: describing the logistical demands of production.

That doesn't mean, however, that the format's demands, made in service of workaday concerns like whether a scene takes place indoor or outdoors, day or night, or the location where it occurs can't become the instruments of an artist. There is no reason why slug lines, shot calls, transitions, and all the other cogs and gears of the screenplay format can't serve the same purpose as the syllabic limitations of a haiku or the repetition of phrases demanded of a villanelle.

Properly deployed, the technical requirements of a screenplay format become a set of tools that the writer can use to fill the technical bill, keep the audience reading, and, ultimately, create art.

To me, that "proper deployment" consists of using all of the elements at hand to create a "visual flow" on the page.

A common strategy in reading prose is to save time by skimming down the middle of the page. A script is an invitation to do this because the dialogue - which tends to comprise the greatest volume in a script - occupies the center of the page exclusively. It is common, then, for people who read scripts for

work to only read the dialogue in the hopes that it will provide the necessary context to understand the greater story.

While this sort of speed reading may save time, it completely counters the writer's purpose in writing the script: to engage the imagination of the readers so the movie comes to life in their heads.

In addition to the obstacle presented by the possibility of the reader skimming through the dialogue, there's a second, even more insidious, barricade to cross: the sad truth that reading scripts for a living is a tedious and soul sucking job.

Why? Because everyone whose job it is to read scripts has an endless river of material coming at them from all sides. They don't get to pick what they read and most of the time they have to read in their spare time. Agencies, management companies, studios and networks don't budget office time for reading. Most scripts, regardless of their auspices, arrive at the viewer's desk not as a pleasure, but as homework. With a side of spinach.

"Creating a visual flow on the page," then is the writer's version of what the director does with the camera: keep the viewer's eyes on what's important. Writing-wise, I am not talking about "directing on the page" or telling the director where to put the camera, but rather to deploy the elements of the format in such a way as to drive the reader's attention through the page the same way the director will use camera angles and editing in the final product.

"Creating a visual flow on the page" is my way of saying that your pages need to not just command the reader's attention, but also control the narrative pace and dissemination of information to steer the reader to the experience you want.

The screenplay format, it turns out, offers some very effective ways to accomplish just that.

Appended to this essay are the first few pages of a pilot script I was commissioned to write by the NBC television network, a reboot of the 1990's syndicated television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*. I am using this sample not because I think it to be some transcendent masterpiece, but rather because the opening scenes of a network pilot, especially, have to carry a lot of

freight. From introducing characters and setting to presenting a piece of dramatic or physical action compelling enough that the viewer will be left with no recourse but to power through the main titles to the rest of the story, pilot openings have a lot of work to do.

Successfully bearing these weights requires a great deal of craft. I will leave it to you to decide how well I have deployed mine.

Tradition and habit dictate that screenplays begin with "FADE IN." I find that to be a waste of space and time. The drum you will hear beaten continually in what follows is this: any combination of words on the page that does not actively propel the forward motion of the story is death.

In that spirit, my Xena pilot begins like this...

TEASER

A TORCH BREAKS THE DARKNESS... THEN ANOTHER... AND ANOTHER...

As six SOLDIERS in black resolve through the inky gloom of:

EXT. THRACIAN COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

The soldiers STOP. Into torchlight STRIDES THEIR LEADER.

The first word, "**TEASER**" is there because this is a network pilot, which means it has anywhere between four to six act breaks to make room for commercials, and a teaser that leads to main titles and then either into the first act or more commercials.

I could have probably gotten rid of it as with the "**FADE IN:**" but ultimately made the call to keep it for two reasons, one, to make sure everyone sees that I "understood the assignment" and two, because I want the reader to know that this is the sort of script designed for a "grab the audience" aesthetic.

"**TEASER**" is my way of saying "no, this is not going to be an emo slow burn like in those boring "prestige" dramas - shit's gonna go down, and then get twisted, and then cliff-hanged because I am going to need you to stay after the commercials and thus need to keep the action at a decent clip."

Does the reader really get all that from the word "**TEASER**"?

Probably not... but there are worse things than attempting to teach your audience what to expect and make them comfortable from jump-street.

So, in place of the staid and trite **FADE IN** (how many movies actually fade in nowadays anyway?) I chose to let you know that we start in darkness and that darkness breaks with the fire of several torch-bearing soldiers. I do this to set a tone early: yes, it's *Xena*, but not your mother's *Xena*; which was mostly shot in daytime to save money (this sort of light action adventure show shot on a budget used to be referred to as a "blue sky" show).

This also speaks to tone: torchlight breaking darkness and anonymous soldiers indicates mood and mystery. From the very first few words I want to create what a colleague of mine once called "good confusion," I want you asking "what is going on?" to yourself as you wonder where this is going.

What I don't want is for you to loudly and frustratedly ask "what's going on?" as you prepare to already throw the script across the room. That's "bad confusion." So I put the reader in the dark and have some imposing men move in.

Hopefully the reader will want to know who those men are.

Finally, the slug line following this couplet serves as a sort of reveal - I have placed the reader both literally and figuratively in the dark for two lines... my hope then is that the revelation of location and time anchors the good confusion and launches you into the fray.

Overthinking it? Yes.

That's how I do. Fasten your seat belts.

Before moving on, a word about bolding and underlining. Wars big and small have been fought between writers as to whether to bold and/or underline slug lines and other elements in the screenplay format.

I have never stopped reading a script because something was bolded, or not, or underlined, or not, or bolded and underlined, or not. There is no UN Security Council of bolding and underlining, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has not issued a ruling. So this is one of those judgment calls that will be debated for as long as writers have a need to procrastinate.

The reason I bold the capital letters in a number of the elements in my scripts is that they vary the visual environment of the page. If my goal is guide the reader's eye as it moves across the page, then a bold element among plain text prose and dialogue can provide a visual change that catches the reader's attention even before they read the bolded element.

Part of the contract between the reader and writer is that the latter isn't going to squander the former's time. Too many bolds and capitals create a busy and disorienting visual environment on the page. At the same time, large chunks of dense text followed and long columns of dialogue make me feel like I am road tripping to Marfa on a two lane blacktop with no world in sight. Your page is not just a place to put your text, it's a canvas, and there's no reason it shouldn't look pretty.

The first slug line in the Xena script reads...

EXT. THRACIAN COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

The soldiers STOP. Into torchlight STRIDES THEIR LEADER.

This is a terrible slug line and every time I read it I cringe for all the opportunities missed. On a technical level, the line fulfills its purpose: it tells the assistant director and crew that the scene takes place outside, in the country, and what time of day the scene takes place.

The reason this slug line is a total clam is the word "Thracian." Even now I had to stop to remember whether the place was called "Thracia" because that doesn't sound right - then I looked it up on Wikipedia to make sure that I have my facts right and don't look like an idiot... it's "Thrace" by the way.

So I literally just tripped myself up a paragraph's worth for absolutely no purchase other than to prove to you the shameful truth that I do historical research on Wikipedia. What was that pilot again? Who was the main character? What was I looking at anyway?

When I see "Tracian countryside," I see the slug line equivalent of a speed bump covered in spikes and doused with piss.

Skunk piss.

Screenwriting is often a subversion of the idea that good writers "show don't tell." Counter-intuitive as it sounds to the accepted poetics of prose narrative, screenwriters don't just need to "tell don't show" quite a bit of the time, they also need to "tell concisely, and efficiently" so that the reader moves quickly from one idea to the next without second thoughts.

Imagine, then, that instead of reading...

EXT. THRACIAN COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

The slug read...

EXT. A FOREST IN ANCIENT GREECE - NIGHT

Neither is more elegant or poetic than the other... but, the former sends you to Wikipedia to figure out if there ever was a place called "Thracia," where it was, and who lived there. The latter hands you an archetypal visual that plays with what came previously, and tells you place and time - ancient Greece. The second clause, "ancient Greece" gives you, if not a specific visual of the soldiers, at least the idea that they are in some version of the swords-and-sandals game.

With the extant slug, I have confused and slowed down the reader, with the second, I have provided a faint glimmer of

genre, a concrete sense of place, and a setting that is part of a commonly understood storytelling mode.

Honestly, even though this script is several years old and will never be produced, I frequently consider back and changing that slug.

Continuing down the page, there's the introduction of a main character in both the pilot and series:

EXT. THRACIAN COUNTRYSIDE - NIGHT

The soldiers STOP. Into torchlight STRIDES THEIR LEADER.

You know his name. Synonymous with strength and virility. His appearance - from the cunning, brutally handsome eyes to the muscular shoulders (armored with the indestructible pelt of the Nemean lion) and powerful hands grasping a knotted club only a demigod could wield - bears out the legend.

This is HERCULES. He looks past the trees to see...

First there's the visual - the man walking into light. Again, another reveal. Much of the power of film comes from how things enter and leave the frame - both conceptually and materially. Hercules is not the titular character, so I am not going to give him the best entrance, but he is profoundly important, so the prose has to reflect power.

This is why the soldiers STOP. I want you to STOP and pay attention... this is also why Hercules STRIDES in. Where the others merely "resolve" into the light, Hercules enters confidently, which I then drive home by telling you (I'll show you later, don't worry) that he is the LEADER.

I use words or clauses in all caps frequently in my prose description. Some writers limit themselves to only all-capping sounds or verbs, I am a little looser with the convention. If I need for you to SEE something in the prose, I CAPS it, just to make sure you aren't skimming, or that if you are skimming, this one catches the eye.

As I said before, the use of all caps, as with bolding, has to be weighed against how busy a line of prose, paragraph, or page

you want to present: too much becomes mere visual noise. Deciding what to highlight in your prose is no different from the director's job in making sure your eye goes to the correct place in the frame: you just have a different set of tools with which to accomplish the same goal.

Then comes the paragraph describing Hercules. It's a separate paragraph - why? Because at this moment, I want you to see that I draw a line between what some may consider "editorializing" and "what is actually happening on the screen."

One of the things I want to get across with the paragraph describing Hercules is that even though this is a darker, higher-budget, definitely-not-as-goofy version of the story than its antecedent, I still want you to have fun, so this is where I let some of my own voice slip in.

"You know his name" may not be the wittiest or most individual of statements but it introduces a colloquial tone that will now carry through the text. I want you to know I'm in charge as the storyteller, that I have done my research as to Hercules's appearance, and want to engage with you.

I want you to know you're in good and friendly hands.

Next on the agenda, everyone's favorite chore: exposition. The hardest part of writing expository dialogue is making sure that your characters aren't just telling each other things they already know. This seems obvious, but you would be surprised.

One of the most egregious tropes in the pantheon of characters telling each other what they know is the "recitation of the resume" speech. This is when a character loudly declaims either their own or someone else's resume to make a dramatic point. You've seen this a million times.

A particularly egregious example is in the pilot for the TV series *Heroes*:

"Mohinder, listen to me. Your father was my colleague and my friend - a respected professor, a brilliant geneticist, but he lost touch with reality!"

No. The context of this scene is not that Mohinder had a head injury that led to a loss of memory. This line takes place in a scene in which a colleague tries to convince him not follow in his old man's footsteps. Thing is, I'm pretty sure Mohinder knows who and what his father was, and so does the guy saying this.

Now, I am not going to give you the bulldada that your characters should "talk like real people" - all dialogue is artifice. Your job isn't to mirror the way people talk in "reality" but to convince the reader of a reality in which people talk the way you write them.

So the infraction here is not that the dialogue doesn't sound like something someone would actually say, but rather that the line serves a clear technical purpose that is in no way supported by the writer's craft. It practically emits a screech as it stops the read.

All that said, here is my attempt at some early-in-the pilot exposition:

EXT. CASTLE OF DIOMEDES - CONTINUOUS

Looming in darkness: a creepy and imposing tower and stables overgrown with ancient trees, guarded by ARMORED SENTRIES.

RESUME ON HERCULES

As his nephew, IOLAUS, scampers to him. He's a scamperer.

IOLAUS
Any sign of the giant?

HERCULES
Giant's asleep.

IOLAUS
They say he's trained his beasts to eat the flesh of men.

HERCULES
Calm down. They're just mares.

IOLAUS
If they're "just" that, why would the King send us... I mean, you, to steal them?

HERCULES
If this is how our liege wants to taunt his enemies, then we will be his hand.
(a smile)
Long as his gold lasts.

This brief exchange carries a great deal of freight: it has to specify that Hercules is the leader in case you didn't get it from him wearing the pelt of the Nemean lion and from WHEN I TOLD YOU. It has to establish that Hercules is on a mission (so making Iolaus afraid of the mission at least gives a dramatic reason for them rehashing their plan in some way. For history buffs, the scene establishes that this is one of Hercules's legendary labors... and in the final line, there's a hint that this Hercules is a lot more mercenary than his noble and equanimous incarnation in the original *Xena* show.

A few lines down in the the scene Iolaus refers to Hercules as "uncle" thus explaining their relationship, and the particulars of the mission come into focus as Hercules reconnoiters the target with his men. Additionally, the dialogue here serves to establish tone.

The style-target for this show is that sort of mid-Atlantic, profound-and-portentous-though-not-really-Shakespearean, quasi-BBC, *Game of Thrones*-adjacent type of speech. My hope is that the way the characters speak tells you that while I am going to be colloquial in my scene descriptions, these heroes belong to another time, place, and conversational style.

This new *Xena* is intended to be epic, and even the coward Iolaus talks pretty.

In apropos of Iolaus, his introductory description is short and sweet. You already have an idea what company he keeps and what context he is in from the opening of the scene, so all I really need to do is to intimate that he is cowardly and perhaps mousy in contrast to his uncle. So I double down on the term "scamper" with "scamperer." To me this is a single and vivid word that even intimates the nervous scurrying of a mouse with the way it sounds coming out of the mouth. The clause "He's a scamperer" is sort of like a punchline - it's me telling you that this is all you need to know about this guy. The rest of his trepidatious character can come through in dialogue.

Another part of the reason for the brevity of Iolaus's introduction is that I don't want to slow the story down before I bring out the title character...

IOLAUS

And if our strife awakens the giant
before we can get to the stables?

HERCULES

Then I crush the giant.

A commanding FEMALE VOICE sounds out from behind Iolaus:

FEMALE VOICE

Why not just sneak in and take the
horses?

HERCULES TURNS TO SEE XENA - ENTERING INTO TORCHLIGHT

EPIC in black armor. Face slashed with war paint. She's every
bit as imposing as the men, every bit as capable, and
significantly smarter and more ambitious.

HERCULES

Xena. This is not smash-and-grab.
The mares of Diomedes are feral -

IOLAUS

They eat the flesh of -

XENA

I've heard the myths. But
with your plan, if the guards
put up a fight, we'll awaken
the entire compound before
the prize is in our hands.

Hercules shoots Xena a shut-down glare. She understands, and
stops talking, backing away as Hercules waves in the huddle:

So, as Hercules bosses the men around, and Iolaus persists in
his pusillanimous abetting of exposition, Xena enters the scene
- first as a disembodied voice that draws the men's attention,
then in a shot call that details her entrance in bold and all
caps, then in the moment I take to tell you that she is a
badass, and then Xena's first line on camera.

Ideally, the blocking within the scene makes your head
metaphorically turn with the literal turning the characters, the
shot call tells you what you are looking at, the description
tells you what it means, and the first line serves as a very
expedient character witness. While everyone else is in awe of
Hercules and takes his orders, our heroine has other ideas.

Basically, I gave myself three bites at the apple to make sure no one doubts that this is the titular character.

Shot calls, like the one I use to show Xena's entrance into the scene, are a place where I like to load a lot of visual information. Many writers restrict themselves to "ANGLE ON" or "RESUME ON" shot calls. In my mind, this is underusing a very powerful element: the one that tells you "Hey! Same scene but new thing!"

For me, shot calls are extremely helpful in delineating changes in the location within the scene, what the characters are seeing that you were not seeing before but should be seeing now, who is important that we see in this new field of vision, and any other significant visual changes caused by the unfolding of the plot within the scene.

Shot calls have also become a key element in how I write action. They give me a natural place from which to separate bits of information and keep the reader grounded in the geography of the scene. I use the word "bit" very deliberately here because one of my loose rules (I am sure I break it often, but you don't have to call me out on it) is that no element should carry more than a "bit" of visual information.

I take the word "bit" from the world of computing, where a bit is the smallest possible unit of information: yes or no, zero or one. By and large, I try to craft paragraphs that only ask you to visualize one thing. If there is another thing to visualize, I break the paragraph and move to the next one. One paragraph = one bit.

This is my way of getting you to see only what I need you to see. By holding any other information until it serves to move the scene, I force myself to tell you only what is necessary for the scene to proceed. Ideally, this way of handling the flow of information does two things, first it helps in estimating the total time it will take to tell the story.

There's a loosely accepted guideline in the writing community that says each page equals one minute of screen time, but that

only works if you break down the action in a consistent manner. A single line that reads "the Roman legion marches to the fortress, lays siege, and burns it down before escaping on horseback with the treasure" also throws the timing of the script into turmoil.

That plot point can be an entire act, sequence, movie, or a single line of dialogue. That plot point also describes a massive expenditure of time and money which most budgets cannot accommodate. On the technical level, accuracy in this respect is crucial for production to work effectively.

In my mind, "bits" are specific, bullet-like pieces of information that replicate the real-time motion of the image. Bits are defined not just by what piece of visual information they present, but because that bit of visual information must be a focus because it serves plot or physical action, character, or theme.

Using single bit paragraphs, and paragraph breaks and shot calls in concert allows me to do the second thing: achieving that "visual flow" I keep talking about, a smoothly flowing stream of synchronized text and placement of text that gives out the necessary information without needing you to pause to figure anything out.

The fun, hopefully, train rolls on.

You may have noticed in reading the dialogue above that I use a weird variation of dual dialogue in Xena's introductory exchange with Hercules and Iolaus:

IOLAUS	XENA
They eat the flesh of -	I've heard the myths. But with your plan, if the guards put up a fight, we'll awaken the entire compound before the prize is in our hands.

I have been using this construction for a while with mixed results. Most of the time, the readers get that I don't want the actors to actually talk over one another, but that the way the dialogue is formatted is intended to imply an uptick in the

rhythm of the scene. The format is there to indicate that Xena has no time for Iolaus's dissembling and is going to continue talking as if it were her turn...

Enough times, however, the script has come back from someone asking if this is a formatting error. Now, I think the purpose of this formatting is sort of self-evident, but, as the old adage goes, if enough people tell you you are drunk... you're drunk. That much said, I do like how this formatting lays out the words on the page - it breaks up the "read down the center" dynamic and the change in layout is a sign to the reader that things are changing in the scene.

My fix in scripts I have written after this one is to add a parenthetical stating very clearly the intent of the formatting:

HERCULES	
<u>Xena</u> . This is not smash-and-grab. The mares of Diomedes are feral -	
IOLAUS	XENA
They eat the flesh of -	(cutting him off) I've heard the myths. But with your plan, if the guards put up a fight, we'll awaken the entire compound before the prize is in our hands.

While I prefer the empty space from a purely graphic standpoint, this is one of those places where clarity is crucial, so the parenthetical stays.

Parentheticals are a place where I allow myself a lot of latitude. For me the perfect parenthetical is one that gives the actors additional information about their motivation without overtly directing them. "Cutting him off" is a good example of this. "Shutting him up" might have been a better one.

Either way, this sort of parenthetical serves to describe action and motion. Whether this motion is emotional ("Cutting him off"/"Shutting him up") or physical ("Turning from Iolaus"/"Holding her hand up") you will notice that the opening verb always ends in "ing."

Again, the point here is to never stop the motion. Even emotion needs to be active and seeking a goal. One of my least favorite parentheticals is the time-honored "beat" or "pause." Though effective in communicating a temporary stop as part of the motion of the scene, I avoid these two because they don't provide any further insight. A "beat" could just as easily be an ellipsis in the middle of the speech. For me a parenthetical has to do more to earn its keep.

So instead of "beat" I may go for something like "considering," "processing," "letting it sit there." Any one of these indicate a change in the state of mind of the character in a way that presents the pause without causing one for the reader.

This is a distinction with a serious difference in terms of the smoothness of the read.

I also use parentheticals to suggest the subtext of a scene, or to provide a colloquial reading of a line, for example, later in this scene, Hercules exclaims "Zeus's balls!" as an expression of surprise.

In the final script, the line occurs without embellishment, as I figured the meaning is pretty clear in context. As I wrote the script, however, that line had several parentheticals at different times.

One of these parentheticals was just plain "what the fuck?" but I felt that was overdoing it and kind of giving a line reading, even if I occasionally use this as a parenthetical when appropriate. A second possibility was "absolutely fuckstruck" but with that one, I ran the risk of stopping the read even longer since "fuckstruck" is not exactly a common term and may have caused further confusion... not to mention that I didn't go through all that trouble to establish Hercules as formidable to have him get "fuckstruck" this early on.

So I left the line to fend for itself.

In consideration of that, you may ask yourself whether I am laying it on too thick for the actors, trying to pre-empt their choices in some way to make sure the line is delivered how I want it. There's two answers to that, one, most mature writers know that there is no such thing as an "actor proof

script" (just as there is no such thing as a "director proof script"). In fact, trusting trained professionals to do their job well is part of the reason we chose this collaborative medium. The actor's job is to interpret the line, so the parentheticals will either guide that in a very pointed and useful way or get ignored.

The second answer is that if actors are reading your script, your script has most done much of its work already. If the actor is reading it because they want to get attached to the project or to produce the project, then they are no different than any other reader. You take them on your journey until it becomes your shared, collaborative journey.

If the actor is reading the script on their trailer or on set... well, then you have successfully secured your loan, gotten a director to commit, and have the backing of a major studio. All of which is to say cut out the parenthetical, let the actors do their job, grab ankle, and hope for the best...

...and by "the best" I mean "that if the actor makes a completely bonkers choice, the director agrees with you on the script and will gently guide the actor in the right direction."

Having now established that...

A. this is a darker show than it's predecessor both in tone and literal setting...

B. but not so dark that I will recuse myself from using my personal voice to address you...

C. that this show has higher budgets and ambitions than its predecessor...

D. that Hercules is a main character, but he's a little wlier than you may remember...

E. that he travels with his cowardly nephew...

F. that he is in the middle of his legendary labors but is not doing them alone but with a team...

G. that these labors are paid for by a king...

H. that they are here to steal mares from a giant named Diomedes...

I. that the giant is a formidable foe... and finally...

J. that in Hercules's team is a loose cannon named Xena and she is the only one who openly questions his judgment...

...the time to get our full-tilt boogie on is at hand.
(but first, and in apropos of the list above, if you think the dialogue wasn't all that good or that the scene felt ham-fisted, know that it was my best effort at establishing all of the conditions stated above - the challenge here was both artistic and logistical, as always, I leave it to you to decide whether and how well I rose to it)

With all this expository and introductory business, it's time to get some of that good ol' fashioned *Xena: Warrior Princess* ass-kicking you came to see...

I view action sequences, musical numbers, and sex scenes as all serving the same purpose: they are what happens when dialogue is no longer sufficient to carry the action. All three of these types of action, from singing to fighting to fucking, have the same basic requirements of any scene:

A. a three-act narrative progression (by which I mean "a beginning set-up in which the state of mind of the characters and the geography are established, a middle with a complication that changes the set up and creates obstacles for the characters, and an end in which the dramatic conditions with which the scene began have changed and so has the emotional state of the characters)

B. Clear geography (most action sequences are about taking down obstacles to get from point a. to point z., so I always begin by picturing the physical space of the journey, then I replicate that on the page so as to keep the reader anchored)

C. Air traffic control ("air traffic control" is my metaphor for "know where every character is, what they are doing at all times, and only tell the audience where the one character is

that needs to be paid attention to in order for the scene to unfold as clearly and concisely as possible")

In establishing that Hercules and his gang are reconnoitering the Castle of Diomedes from a clearing in a forest, I made sure that the initial description includes the stables and the sentries guarding the perimeter. The geographical stakes are set early on - well before the dramatic turn, which is when Xena decides that she is tired of Hercules and Iolaus's conversation and she's going to go at it alone.

Here is the opening of the action sequence... Hercules and his men are in a huddle making a plan, and Xena is not into it...

HERCULES (CONT'D)
Tassos, flank and Await the signal.
Xena, you and I - Xena... Xena?

SMASH CUT TO

XENA - RUNNING THROUGH THE WOODS TO THE CASTLE

A gazelle. Soundless. Lightning-quick.

INTERCUT WITH HERCULES AND HIS MEN, REACTING

As Xena takes uses her momentum to GRAB onto a low-hanging tree branch, losing no speed as she CLIMBS onto the canopy.

EXT. CASTLE OF DIOMEDES - PERIMETER - CONTINUOUS

A SENTRY does his rounds, clueless, until he looks up to see:

XENA - TUMBLING DOWN FROM A BRANCH

And LANDING to SNAP HIS NECK LIKE A TWIG! Xena turns to face:

This is where the rubber meets the road in terms of all the tools of screenwriting coming together to create pacing and movement. The shot calls, like "**XENA - RUNNING THROUGH THE WOODS TO THE CASTLE**" do a great deal of heavy lifting, including calling out the intercut between Hercules and his men.

The reason I use a shot call to indicate the intercut is that we have already established a set up with Hercules and his men. The intercut could have been a slug, but to me that would take away from the speed I am trying to sell. Slug lines have two spaces before them as opposed to one in the case of shot calls, so that

creates a sense of pace. If it's slugged it's new, if it's shot-called it's taking place intercut with somewhere you have already seen.

Another benefit of this approach is that it allows me to spell the progression of Xena's journey from the clearing to the tree canopy to the perimeter to the stables. If I am doing my job right, the elements serve to support the reader's awareness of the geography without stopping the action.

One of the most freeing aspects of using shot calls this way is that they can become an organic part of the narrative even as they tell you what to look at. Take, for example, the following description:

EXT. THE STABLES OF DIOMEDES - CONTINUOUS

And spots a SENTRY at the gate. He sees her. Before he can -

XENA DRAWS HER CHAKRAM - WHOOSH! - IT SHUNKS INTO THE GUARD

Xena rushes by, TAKING IT BACK as she ENTERS the stable.

ANGLE ON HERCULES AND HIS MEN

IOLAUS
She's in, let's go.

HERCULES
Hold fast. Let her make her play.

A dread silence settles on these hard men... and sits...

IOLAUS
It's taking her too long.

The first four lines are a description of what I hope would play as a fluid streak of motion. The action line after the slug is basically the start of a single thought - and I even try to simulate the abruptness of the sentry's death by beginning that thought as though the sentry might have a moment but "Before he can -" I cut it short, hopefully shocking you into further attention.

The shot call and the following piece of prose are one single thought intended to give life to Xena's ruthlessness and physical ability: "Xena draws her Chakram - WHOOSH! - it shunks into the guard, Xena rushes by, TAKING IT BACK as she ENTERS." I

won't direct it on the page, but in my mind this action could easily take place in a single fluid take and that's how I want you to perceive it. Don't worry, the director will have a better idea when the time comes.

When that piece of action ends, I resort to the more prosaic shot call "**ANGLE ON HERCULES AND HIS MEN.**" It's less flashy on purpose: I need you to sense this break in the action to denote a slight passage of time.

This pattern continues throughout the sequence - simpler shot calls are there to control pace (the next one is "**ON THE STABLES**" - again, boring on purpose to provide a dramatic pause before you find out what Xena is doing in there). The more complicated shot calls blend into the action lines, hopefully creating a cohesive motion across elements, and hopefully giving you incentive to read every word, perhaps while feeling the tension and excitement of the scene instead of begrudging me my writing style.

While I don't use transitions in the passages I have offered, that doesn't mean I don't see them as an important part of the format and one that can easily vary the visual environment on the page.

For most writers, transitions seldom go beyond "CUT TO," "TIME CUT TO" (to denote that time has passed within a scene and location) and - when they are feeling frisky - "SMASH CUT TO" (to denote a jarring or otherwise shocking transition).

Other more specific transitions, like "FADE OUT," "FADE TO BLACK" and "DISSOLVE TO" are there but not necessarily considered essential arrows in the quiver. I use "DISSOLVE TO" fairly frequently, but I must confess that when I do, I feel like I am day drinking with the rest of the fellas at the Warner Bros. contract writers bullpen.

Not to mention that "CUT TO:" is also known to most screenwriters as "the first thing that goes when cutting to reduce page count."

I have never had cause to use some of the other, more antiquated transitions - like a "WIPE TO" for example. This is how you know I have never written for *Star Wars*.

My ambivalent attitude toward transitions continued until I went to work on the TV series *Medium*, a horror/family/crime procedural about a psychic soccer mom. At *Medium*, the writers frequently used the transition "SHOCK CUT TO:" to denote a moment of extreme horror after a placid set up.

I found this freeing. It had never occurred to me that I could vary the language of transitions beyond the traditional forms - and soon began experimenting with alternatives in language more frequently reserved for paragraphs or shot calls. For example, in one place in the Xena script, I use the transition formatting (right justified, all caps, bold for me) to denote a much greater shift than a fade between scenes:

(NOTE: the page breaks between the action line describing the transition and the slug for the following scene)

EXT. HILLS NEAR THE VILLAGE - DAY

Gabrielle now has a real staff. Xena - standing on her own - coaches her, using the sword for mock attacks.

As Xena recognizes that Gabrielle is, in fact, improving...

TILT UP TO THE BLUE SKY

Darkening as the camera reaches a starry apogee and then TILTS DOWN into the red, torch-lit roofs of...

EXT. CITY OF ARGOS - NIGHT

A sprawling hub of art and empire... and, of course, wherever there is art and empire, there's also...

This is not the traditional role of the transition, but, in truth, the form is elastic enough to accommodate it. This is also a rare place where I allow myself the indulgence to tell the camera what to do.

In this case, I have a poetic visual in mind and feel that it serves story, character, and theme and thus justifies a little

overreach into the director's territory. This is one of the few times I saw exactly how I want it and hope the director agrees.

Similarly, later on I have a transition that reads...

DISSOLVE TO XENA'S EYES

As with the above, directors might take this as me presumptuously telling them their job, but as long as I am in charge of the experience (which I am until that check gets written), I get to say what is the best visual for the job and even dictate it... albeit politely. Again, this is one of a small number of occasions in which I respectfully tell the director the exact thing I want and hope for a consensus.

Another untraditional use of the transition - one that I have come to rely on for surprises and other dramatic turns - is using the formatting to tell you what new information has just entered a scene without there being a transition from one location to another. In many places, you will see that the *Xena* script has transitions that read:

WIDER TO REVEAL

Or...

PULL AWAY TO REVEAL GABRIELLE AT

(this one would be followed by either a new slug or a description of a hitherto unseen location within the scene)

Or even a combination like...

SMASH REVEAL

These unconventional transitions serve a very specific purpose in that they a. single out some piece of information as important enough to merit some special visual treatment, and b. they move the reader's eye all the way to the other side of the page from either the left or the center, keeping the visual experience of the page from becoming monotonous and reinforcing the idea that every part of this material has something to which you need to pay attention. Everything on the page works on two or more levels at the same time.

You may notice that I don't put the traditional colon at the end of my transitions (the by-the-book formatting would look more like "CUT TO:"). The reason for this is that, as I mentioned with shot calls and action paragraph prose, I like to be able to see these elements as potentially all being part of a single unified thought.

While I am certainly promiscuous in my use of colons and dashes pretty much everywhere else, what I don't want is for my transitions to denote any sense of finality unless I absolutely want that - in which case, I will put a period on the transition like this:

FADE TO BLACK.

There is no punctuation in my standard use of the transition because I don't want to stop the fun train - what's on the edge of the page should drive your eye right back to the other edge of the page.

I know, this is a quirk and may seem arbitrary, but to me it makes internal sense and keeps my writing - and hopefully your reading - in a flow.

Another place where I find transitions extremely helpful is in establish rhythm in a sequence.

One of the set pieces later in the *Xena* pilot is her training of her future sidekick Gabrielle in the ways of armed combat. The passage of time here is denoted in a series of DISSOLVES, the lengthy blending of the scenes ideally prepares you for a dramatic change from one condition to the next, and also gives you the distinct sense that time is slowing down, the narrative is taking a beat, and this is a time for character development and not action:

THE FOLLOWING DISSOLVES SHOW THE PASSAGE OF TIME

Xena's wounds heal - her bandages get smaller and eventually go away entirely - lacerations scab, scar, and VANISH...

DISSOLVE TO

HERODOTUS'S ANVIL

The hammer BANGING out a sword.

DISSOLVE TO

Xena, hammering with her good arm (the other in a sling) as Herodotus holds the tongs for her. And off the sword... SLOWLY TAKING SHAPE...

DISSOLVE TO

EXT. HILLS NEAR THE VILLAGE - CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS

Gabrielle STRIKES the tree with the cane. Xena watches: the look on her face making it clear that Gabrielle is hopeless.

DISSOLVE TO

XENA'S SWORD - GOING INTO THE HOT WATER

As Xena - now able to handle the tongs - lifts it up to see:

DISSOLVE TO

THE SWORD - NOW IN GABRIELLE'S HAND

As she SHAKES HER HEAD and tries to return it to Xena, at:

Looking back on this page after the fact, I do wonder why I chose to head the sequence with an all-caps and bold statement that "THE FOLLOWING DISSOLVES SHOW THE PASSAGE OF TIME," followed by a description of what that entails. The gesture feels obvious based on how I staged it, but I imagine I felt that there was a rhythm to be lost if I spent time within the dissolves explaining the process of Xena's healing.

I will leave it to you to decide whether me from several years ago made the correct judgment call in staging the sequence on the page this way.

Transitions are useful but can also come across as pro-forma. It's very easy to just put a "CUT TO:" at the end of every scene as it leads to the next one as if it were the rote requirement of the format, but that's just the ticket to cutting out all those "CUT TO:" calls when the script turns out to be too long and you need to save space.

However, in a different script, one that used lengthy flashbacks, I came up with the rule that "CUT TO:" would only occur as a transition to a flashback. The hope there was that after a few pages of this pattern, the appearance of a transition has trained the reader to know a flashback is coming, and to emotionally prepare for a change in time, style, and story.

As with all the little enhancements, road blocks, and elements I describe in this essay, the slowdown in the read - or it's expedition if the elements are doing their job - is not considerable with any one misstep. It's a second here, a half a second there. It's important to remember that these fractions of time add up to a whole, they are each a small cog in a machine that either works flawlessly or rattles and snores its way to the final fade to black.

Or cut to black.

Or dissolve to black.

Or cut to end titles.

Or fade to white.

Or dissolve to...

If you were to read the complete script for *Xena*, you would notice that these stylistic choices are pervasive in my work. I'm consider myself responsible for both a compelling story, but also a page that looks attractive to the eye and thus encourages the reader not to skim, but to enjoy every word.

Just as I don't think there is such a thing as an "actor-proof" or "director proof," there certainly is no such thing as a "reader-proof" script. What there is is your own ability to entice the reader and to carry the reader on the ride - the less work the reader has to do, the more likely the readers are to stop thinking that they are reading a script for work and instead find themselves engrossed in a story that is as interested in their pleasure as it is in describing the technical parameters of producing a motion picture.

There are several other quirks in my writing that I want to share. Though it may seem strange that I would spend all this time describing the gross anatomy of my writing only to conclude with a list of pet peeves, I assure you that a writer's style is every bit a collection of their idiocies as it is a collection of their passions.

Regardless of whether the items on the list below cause you to nod in agreement or shake your head in disdain, know that your good and bad habits as a writer all come together to give the reader an impression of who you are as a storyteller and how much you care about their enjoyment of the work.

Michael Piller - the writer/showrunner who shepherded *Star Trek: The Next Generation* through its best and most influential years - had an adage: "words are the enemy." As I have been told, he meant it in apropos of overwritten scenes and dialogue - but I also (and also presumptuously) extend it to the prose in a script.

This is what it means to me: the more words you use, the more words the reader has to process. The more words the reader has to process, the longer it takes to become involved in the narrative, and the easier it is to fall out of the narrative.

This potential for disconnection is sown at the most basic level of how you build your clauses, and could metastasize out there to weaponize the entire script against your commercial, artistic, or technical goals.

Brevity, concision, and economy are so important to the work of a screenwriter that I am willing to break a paragraph, use three synonymous adjectives, and even use ALL CAPS to get you to pause and consider this.

As with all that preceded, everything that follows is about one thing and one thing alone: kill as many of the enemy as possible.

One of my personal *bêtes noires* is not dissimilar from one most likely articulated endlessly by your middle-school English teacher: the passive voice.

Now, when I say "the passive voice" I am also talking about its close relative, the present progressive tense - or, really, any other word construction in which "something is being done to something" or "someone is doing a thing." I don't necessarily believe that this syntax is useless in all contexts (this essay is riddled with examples) but in screenwriting, the passive voice is downright lethal.

Why? Because, as I have said *ad nauseum*, screenwriting is a description of motion and emotion in real time. The difference between "what is being said by Javi is that you shouldn't be using the passive voice" - or "Javi is saying not to use the present progressive tense" - and "Javi says don't do that shit" is a pretty big one for me.

In the examples above, the word "is," along with "shouldn't be" cause the following cognitive break in my brain (it's a weird one but try to stick with me): I already know that I am. You know that I am. My existence is a given if you are reading this, the existence of the characters in a script is a given, but the use of these sentence structures - embodied by the word "is" - subconsciously stops that assumption, even if for a microsecond.

The difference between action and my describing the action of something being done by one thing to another thing - the

seemingly minuscule difference between "He writes" vs. "He is writing" - is the gulf between "look at this event" versus "visualize multiple objects in space and time and consider how they relate to one another."

The microsecond it takes to process this difference may not seem like much, but I think of that microsecond as a microdose... of poison. One microdose may not be enough to kill you, but the cumulative effect of one microdose after another after another for the course is death.

In the same way, a script loaded one of these tedious sentences after another, after another, after another might as well be a collection of speedbumps, each adding to a tedious and exasperating whole.

Related to the above is the clause "begins to." This phrase annoys me beyond all reason and accountability. In a moving picture, things are either happening or they are not, there is no "begins to."

In most cases, when you use the word "begins," what you are really communicating is that you are about to use the wrong verb:

"Javi begins to drink" is not a description of motion, but a description of a quasi-motion/intent preceding actual motion.

"Javi drinks" is motion.

"Javi raises the glass to his lips" is an even more descriptive and interesting motion.

Lifting the glass to my lips and stopping before taking the drink because someone has said something dramatically relevant is a specific that easily becomes a picture in the mind. "Begins to" is another roadblock, a squishy little blob of diffusion on the way to a verb that doesn't actually say the thing you want me to picture.

In life, things may begin to happen. I guess. In film, things either happen or they don't. The judge of it is the inexorable motion of those twenty-four to thirty frames a second. Use the

most specific verb possible for the action you describe and don't waste words making the wrong verb do your work.

If I have to write more than one sentence denouncing the majority of instances of the word "suddenly" as an abdication of your responsibility as a writer, then what was the point of even living?

My final pet peeve, the one that will really make you wonder why I chose to close with these items instead of really useful guidance is this...

There is no "we" in my writing.

Every time I see a script in which the writer uses the word "we" to imply the movement of the camera, the entrance into a setting, or any other business that involves how the audience experiences the film's visuals... every time I read an opening line like "We travel over the city, seeing all the lights as we descend into the streets" I am moved to loudly quote one of the thugs in the first Dirty Harry movie:

"Who is we, sucka?"

To me the relationship between storyteller and audience is one that relies on performative distance and solid boundaries. You put your trust in me to tell you a story to the best of my ability and to make your life better or at least easier if you are reading me for work.

I may choose to talk to you like a friend, I may choose to editorialize, I may choose to ignore you altogether - but I know the difference between you and me: and I need for you to know it so that you know I know it and know I am treating your time with respect.

Slogan version? there is no "we" in "script."

Whenever I see the word "we" in a script I feel like I was given free tickets to the symphony and, upon arrival, was handed a bassoon and asked if I knew the second chair part of the "1812

Overture." It makes me stop. It makes me quote Dirty Harry, it makes me come up with metaphors about the symphony.

You know what it doesn't make me do?

Keep reading your goddamn script.

Harsh as that sounds, those are the sort of issues I (and every other person on Earth) have to break through when I sit to read someone else's script... and there is very little you can do about it other than writing the best script you can, with the clearest and most evocative language and style available, and hoping that you envelop me in the flow of your story without hitting so many of my personal land mines that I am moved to give you whatever it is you want from me - be it money, a good review, a job...

Because the needle is so hard to thread, regardless of who is reading, I want to share with you two passages from scripts written by other writers, scripts that have made me forget all my little rules and pet peeves and go along for the ride.

First, here is a short passage from a script by Lawrence Kasdan, whom you may recognize as the writer of a couple of small independent films titled *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

This is from the latter:

12 EXT. THE JUNGLE - INDY'S RUN - VARIOUS SPOTS - DAY 12

Indy runs like hell through steadily falling terrain. And always close behind, a swift gang of angry Hovitos. Occasionally they get close enough to send a dart or spear whizzing past Indy's head.

13 EXT. THE URUBAMBA RIVER - DUSK 13

An amphibian plane sits in the water beneath a green cliff. Sitting on the wing is JOCK, the British pilot. Indy breaks out of some distant brush and runs along the path at the top of the cliff.

INDY
(yelling)
Get it going! Get it going!

Jock hops in and fires up the plane's engines. Indy reaches a spot on the cliff above the plane, glances back, then jumps into the river. He comes up, swims to the plane and grabs a strut.

INDY
GO!

Jock starts the plane moving across the water as Indy walks across the wing and falls into the passenger compartment.

14 OMIT 14

15 OMIT 15

16 INT. JOCK'S PLANE - DUSK 16

Indy relaxes and lies across the seat, a big smile on his face. One hand drops to the floor of the cabin and Indy jumps, hitting his head. On the floor of the cabin is a huge boa constrictor. Indy tries to get his whole body onto the seat. Jock sees what's happening.

JOCK
Don't mind him. That's Reggie.
Wouldn't hurt a soul.

INDY
I can't stand snakes.

By all of the standards I have listed, this man is a very bad writer, perhaps a very bad person, and this page is an unholy mess.

The first paragraph of the scene, slugged as #12, takes approximately 90 seconds of screen time. That's the first three sentences on this page. Additionally, while the first paragraph loosely sketches out the action, the 90 seconds of screen time it encompasses have a great deal more business in the final product - including the pilot of the airplane struggling with catching a fish and then discarding the catch and his fishing rod when the peril becomes impossible to ignore... none of that information is present here.

In both paragraphs, Kasdan also asks the reader to track multiple objects simultaneously, making the entire thing feel very abbreviated and making the stakes anything but visceral. There's no "bits" in Kasdanland, just chunky paragraphs covering multiple characters, actions, and vantage points. I would have, of course, chosen to shot-call every poison dart and spear to put the reader in the protagonist's head.

In the second paragraph, of all the details Kasdan chooses to highlight - in the middle of the very first action sequence of the film - he chooses the nationality of a pilot who is in no way a character in any other part of the film. I mean, come on:

"An amphibian plane sits in the water beneath a green cliff. Sitting on the wing is JOCK, the British pilot. Indy breaks out of some distant brush and runs along the path at the top of the cliff."

Later, the joke of Indiana Jones finding a snake on his seat - a fun character moment that pays off later in the film, to be sure - is given more prominence on the page than any of the action that comes before.

This is strange, because while that grace note is a funny one, much of the nonverbal storytelling of the sequence as finally presented on film - including Indy's botched attempt to swing onto the plane Tarzan-style on a vine - give a huge window into his character and how he usually comes on top even though he has the hardest luck against the world.

And blah-blah-blah. Bottom line? *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is one of three scripts I consider the only perfect ones of the 1980s

(the other two are *Back to the Future* and *Die Hard*) - a script in which the characters sparkle, the action is thrilling, every detail planted early pays off later, and the plotting is deliciously, forget-your-troubles-come-on-get-happy tight.

Lawrence Kasdan's scripts have been the basis for several of the best moviegoing experiences I - and many others of my generation ever had - and they does very little of what I would do to make a script "successful."

The next example I am just going to leave here without introduction. This is from the middle of an action sequence during a football game featuring a player named "Cole." The field was slugged in the previous page:

CONTINUED:

The ball floats through the snowy air. Pitch-out to Cole.

He takes it on the run. Tucks it under his arm. Behind him, the quarterback bites the dust, leveled.

Cole turns the corner. Picks up a blocker. Feet pounding. Arms pumping.

Up ahead, the free safety barrels toward him. Low and hard.

Cole does not blink. He reaches beneath his jersey. Pulls out a GUN. Pumps THREE SHOTS into the free safety's head.

The bullets go straight through. On the back of his helmet. A mixture of blood and fiberglass.

Cole keeps going, jogging for the end zone. Around him, sound. Fury. Impact. Confusion.

Another defensive back. Straight ahead. Reacts with almost comical terror. Dives to one side. Cole FIRES. Blows out the guy's knee. Ends a career. Keeps going.

We are now in full-scale panic. The players are fleeing the field. Shouts. Pandemonium. A few brave men gather around the fallen players.

POLICE

are on the field now. Running full out. They've got riot guns, cocked and locked. Sprinting through the snow.

Cole crosses the goal line. Touchdown. Drops the ball.

Turns, facing the cops. His eyes are insane.

The crowd is screaming. People are running back and forth like extras in the Keystone Cops.

The first TWO BLASTS from the cops' RIOT GUNS go high and wide. One SHOT BLOWS APART the base of the goalpost.

The forty-foot-high monument pitches over, collapsing like a wounded giant. Lands in a shower of snow and ice.

Cole is oblivious to the bars crashing around him. He smiles and says:

(CONTINUED)

I mean, if the last script I showed you was an unholy mess, this one is a tsunami of authorial malfeasance.

Paragraphs break in all sorts of weird and inconsistent ways, the passive voice/present progressive is endemic, the author's personal voice is all over the place, and the lack of a cohesive geography beyond knowing that this takes place in a football stadium should be confusing beyond the capacity for rational thought.

Nothing here should work.

Except it does. It works all over the damn place, all week and on Sunday. In this case, the weird rhythm of the paragraph breaks and sentence structures, be it paragraphs holding information taking place in multiple venues without slugs or shot calls, the inconsistent use of "we" as a point of view, and the scattered use of shot calls - there's only one and it's the word "POLICE" - all works to not just create a strangely formatted yet compelling page, it also completely mirrors the hyperkinetic experience one has watching the final movie.

This is a page of seeming chaos, but the way the writer organizes that chaos not only communicates the chaos, it also embodies it in a physical way that makes me as a reader see it down to the cutting pattern. All without telling the director where to put the camera, the editors how to cut, or the audience how to feel.

The previous page came from *The Last Boy Scout*, by Shane Black.

In its time - 1990 - *The Last Boy Scout* commanded the highest purchase price ever paid for a spec script: \$1.75 million (thirty-two years later, this is still a fee any screenwriter would envy). While the film described by this script may not have turned out to be the best execution of one of Black's scripts (that honor goes to *Lethal Weapon*, the ur-text of the modern buddy/cop movie) the script remains one of the best reads in screenwriting history.

Shane Black's scripts are crucial for writers to consider for several reasons - not the least of which are the financial boons they have earned for their writer. Pretty much every modern writer dines at Shane Black's table whether they know it or not.

Black writes nothing like I do, but I consider myself a product of his generation: for many of us, he was the one who ripped up the rule book and made screenwriting an adventure.

Bringing techniques usually reserved for beat poetry, ultra-tawdry pulp fiction, collage art, gonzo journalism and music video to turn a script into not just the foundation for a movie but a snap-cracklin' read on its own right may just be Black's greatest contribution to our craft.

Regardless of whether you like or dislike his choice of subject matter, the violent themes, style of dialogue, or the disposition of his characters, Shane Black's scripts triumph on many levels, not the least of which is that of the successful loan application. If, ultimately, a viewing of the film made of *The Last Boy Scout* doesn't equal the thrill of reading Black's writing, that blame certainly can't be laid on the writer.

Black understood the assignment and, in doing so, broke open the form for the rest of us to play.

One of my college writing professors was a novelist named Ted Weesner. When I asked what he considered "good writing" Weesner gave me an answer that has remained etched into my very soul:

"Good writing is whatever you can get away with."

And that is the ultimate blessing and vexation of what we do.

Craft can be taught, rules can be established, and conventions can be understood, but ultimately - even if what is on the page doesn't fit within those rules or conventions, or deliberately shatters them - the result of a great read is a great read is a great read.

Sadly, artistic triumph, even one that is undeniable is impossible to quantify and teach. All we writers can do is hope to understand it so that we can take a leap into the unknown with our own material.

Achieving the goal of "an undeniable artistic triumph" in the case of the screenwriter also leads to the writing of checks, the attachment of a director, the hiring of hundreds of artists

and artisans, and a large corporation's commitment to use all of its resources to disseminate that writer's vision globally.

But there are other forms of triumph.

Consider the script for *Xena*. While that particular reboot will never see the light of day, the script is one I still enjoy reading for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that it is a marker of who I was at that particular time. I like revisiting that person, and analyzing what he was good at on the page, what he was bad at, and how much he has changed... or not.

Xena is also, at least currently, the sample most commonly sent by my agents and managers to prospective employers. By this metric, *Xena* is a huge success. The *Xena* script is the reason I have gotten my last six jobs, writing and producing shows like *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*, *Blood and Treasure*, *From, Raising Dion*, *Cowboy Bebop*, and *The Witcher*.

In that list there's one Emmy Award winning show and the better part of a decade of employment (and countless medical bills, and school tuitions, and mortgages, and bags of groceries paid for) - all of it the result of a single piece of material delivering the goods; a piece of material I chose to write in a style that I felt would make it a worthy read even without a frame of video ever being exposed in its name.

Also, in my darkest hours... In my most private moments... in the middle of endless nights of pitch-black despair, I call up the manuscript and - as I luxuriate in a warm blanket of my own proficiency - occasionally declaim "MISTER SARANDOS... I'M READY FOR MY GREEN LIGHT."

As I have mentioned previously, none of us writes the same way, none of us writes about the same things, and none of us knows what will truly connect with the audience until we have tried and either succeeded or failed. While the elements of screenwriting - slugs, shot calls, transitions, the formatting of dialogue, etc. - are there for technical reasons and have to be used at least vestigially in order to fulfill the requirements of the form, everything else is up for grabs.

We learn these rules in the same way that actors learn lines: so we can "forget" them and make the best choices for our own

stories based on experience and instinct. With all of my rules, edicts, and peeves, I do not, for a second, believe that I am as good a writer as the majority of my peers. I certainly don't consider writers like Shane Black and Lawrence Kasdan as "peers" but rather as teachers, prophets, and demigods.

As a writer, I have merely found the box in which my thematic concerns fit best, and I use those constraints to free myself to express my truth. Whether I have helped you, or hindered you, made you laugh, in my rationalizations, I do not need you to follow any of my ways. Having laid it all bare to you, my final message is the same with which I began: know the tools, find your voice, take what works, chuck what doesn't, and then let your own artistic instincts guide you to the promised land.
