

NEW TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



WRITING SCREENPLAYS THAT SELL

MICHAEL HAUGE



CollinsReference

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

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PART ONE

DEVELOPING THE STORY



ONE

THE GOAL OF THE SCREENWRITER

PEOPLE DO NOT GO TO THE MOVIES SO THEY CAN SEE THE CHARACTERS on the screen laugh, cry, get frightened, or get turned on.

They go to have those experiences themselves.

The reason that movies hold such a fascination for us, the reason the art form has been engrossing and involving audiences for more than a century, is because it provides an opportunity to *experience emotion*. Within the safety and isolation of a darkened theater or in the privacy or comfort of one's own home it is possible to leave the real world behind or at a safe distance and experience emotions, thoughts, feelings, and adventures that would not be encountered in everyday life. In watching a movie or television show, we can feel the love, the hate, the fear, the passion, the excitement, or the humor that elevates our lives, but in a safe, controlled setting.

All filmmakers, therefore, have a single goal: to elicit emotion in an audience. Every director's, every actor's, every gaffer's, and every production assistant's ultimate objective is to create a positive emotional response in the audience. When the movie or TV episode does that, it is successful; when it doesn't, it fails.

THE PRIMARY GOAL OF THE SCREENWRITER

The screenwriter's primary goal is even more specific: *The screenwriter must elicit emotion in the person who reads the screenplay.*

The effect of a screenplay on a reader must be the same as the effect of the movie on the audience: a positive emotional experience. All of the stated considerations of commerciality, big stars, hot topics, low budgets, high concepts, and strong demographics go out the window if this single objective is not achieved.

If the producer, executive, agent, manager, or star who can get your movie made doesn't smile, laugh, cry, get scared, get excited, or get turned on while reading your screenplay, then your script will never reach a real audience.

In other words, for the screenwriter, the term *reader* and the term *audience* are synonymous.

HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY IN ONE EASY LESSON

Knowing what a screenplay needs to accomplish is simple; I can tell it to you in one sentence: *Enable a sympathetic character to overcome a series of increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve a compelling desire.*

That, in nineteen words, is what almost every successful feature film has ever done. The few exceptions are those films where the character *fails* to achieve the compelling desire, as in *Brokeback Mountain* or *No Country for Old Men*, or a film where the hero realizes that his compelling desire is a mistake, as in *Rain Man* or *An Education*. But the essence of all successful movies is still the same.

The difficulty is not in understanding what you must accomplish as a writer. The tough part is actually accomplishing each of the facets of that objective. How do you make a character sympathetic? How do you establish a compelling desire? How do you create and arrange the series of hurdles that must be overcome? How do you write this in such a way that the emotional involvement of the reader is ensured?

And finally (and probably the reason you bought this book), how do you get rich doing all of this?

THE FOUR STAGES OF ANY SCREENPLAY

Every aspect of writing your screenplay will be contained in one of the following four stages:

1. **The Story Concept:** the single sentence or two that identifies the hero of the story and what he or she wants to accomplish.
2. **The Characters:** the people who populate the story.
3. **Plot Structure:** the events of the story and the order in which they occur.
4. **The Individual Scenes:** the way the words are laid out on the page and the kind of action, description, and dialogue that will increase the reader's emotional involvement.

This book will outline each of those four facets in detail, in the above order. You should note that beginning with a single-sentence story concept and developing that into a full, 115-page screenplay is one way to write your screenplay. It is very organized, logical, and left-brained, and it allows each expanded phase of the screenplay to grow out of the previous one. Its big advantage is in its safety, so to speak.

However, this logical, step-by-step approach is not the *only* way to write a screenplay. Of equal value, depending on what works for you, is the more free-form, right-brained method of writing FADE IN, and then simply seeing where the story takes you. In other words, letting the story "write itself."

Like any other journey of unknown destination, what you sacrifice in safety and security you may get back in surprise and excitement. This approach may enable you to tap into your unfettered creativity more easily and provide a more effective, fulfilling screenwriting experience.

The key is to use whichever method, or combination of the two, works for you.

Regardless of the approach you choose, the outcome must be a screenplay that effectively elicits emotion because the story concept, characters, plot structure, and scene writing are all outstanding.

This book is going to give you a foundation from which you can depart in whatever direction improves your ability to get the screenplay written. If something's working, keep using it; if it's not working, find something better. My goal is to give you a method that prevents you from getting blocked at any stage of the process.

BRAINSTORMING, EDITING, AND WRITER'S BLOCK

Throughout the process outlined in this book, you will repeatedly encounter the word *brainstorming*. This refers to the periods of creativity that require you to go for quantity and not quality, when you want to give your creativity free rein to extend its limits without fear of censure or criticism.

It is only after you have allowed your creativity to blossom through the nonjudgmental brainstorming phase that you enter the editing phase of screenwriting. This is the critical, evaluative phase that will determine which of the multitude of ideas that your brainstorming generates will best serve your screenplay.

Art Arthur, who was a successful screenwriter for more than forty years, used to say that there are two secrets to success as a writer. Secret #1: *Don't get it right, get it written*. (Sorry, but you'll have to wait until the end of the book to get the second one.)

If you wait for your writing to be perfect, it's never even going to be good. You'll become so frozen with fear and judgment that you'll eventually give up on the entire process and start buying books on real estate investment. In other words, you'll become *blocked*.

Writer's block is the flip side of brainstorming. *Brainstorming* gives the mind freedom to go in whatever direction it chooses, holding back

criticism and judgment so the writer can freely tap into her own creative source. *Block* is when the mind isn't going in any direction at all because of some fear—of failure, of success, of change, of criticism, or of imperfection.

Writer's block doesn't mean that you're staring at the page for fifteen minutes until you find the line of dialogue that works best. Block is when you haven't worked on your screenplay in two weeks, and now you're watching *Jeopardy!* and eating Hostess Snowballs instead of writing. Writer's block feeds on itself, so the longer it continues, the less the chance of escape.

So even if you choose to follow the logical, ordered, step-by-step process outlined in this book, you will still need to depart from it occasionally and move around a bit.

For example, there might be situations where you are working on the character development stage of your script, but you just can't get a handle on your villain. Instead of waiting for perfection and blocking yourself, a better solution would be to jump over to the scene-writing stage. If you know there's going to be a terrific confrontation between your hero and the bad guy, and you know how that scene should look, then go ahead and write it. Writing the scene will then reveal to you things about each of those two characters that you can take back to the character development stage in order to re-prime your pump and keep the story flowing.

Writers often fear that the use of formula (of which I am an unapologetic advocate) will stifle creativity. But a formula is simply a method for consistently achieving the same result. If you consistently want to elicit emotion with the way you structure your story, or reveal your characters' inner lives, and there are formulas for that, then it only makes sense to try them out to see if they work for you. A formula never tells you *what* to write—it only reveals the storytelling tools and patterns that have worked for decades of successful movies and television.

And a formula can actually enhance your brainstorming. If an element of your script might seem contrived or unbelievable, but you know that there are proven methods for overcoming that problem (which there

are, by the way—they're revealed in chapter 5), then you can start brainstorming ideas for creating those prescribed actions and dialogue.

Eventually, the four stages of your screenplay will only form a general pattern, and you'll be jumping all over the map in order to ensure the flow of ideas and creativity, alternating between your nonjudgmental brainstorming and your selective editing. This will both prevent writer's block and maximize your ability to elicit emotion in the reader and the audience.

THE FORGOTTEN STEP TO SCREENWRITING SUCCESS

Just one more major step before diving into your screenplay: *you've got to see movies.*

There was a time when I would have thought it obvious that screenwriters should see lots of films. But in my travels around the world, I am repeatedly astounded by how many people pursuing this career hardly ever bother to visit a movie theater or even rent a DVD. And when they do, it's some classic film from the forties or fifties, a cartoon to watch with their kids, or something with subtitles.

There's nothing wrong with art-house fare or animation, and it's certainly helpful to have a broad knowledge of film history. But no matter what profession one is pursuing, knowing the marketplace is essential.

You wouldn't want to be represented by a lawyer who hadn't been to law school or who didn't keep abreast of recent legal decisions and statutes. Well, the film industry isn't looking for screenwriters who don't know what's being produced or who don't know which of those recent releases have been successful.

As a serious screenwriter, you can no longer regard movies as something you only do when you have a date on a Saturday night, or as something the whole family must enjoy together. Your MINIMUM quota of movies should be a hundred a year: at least two visits to movie theaters or two video rentals or downloads every week.

If your immediate reaction to this advice is “I can’t possibly watch that many movies,” it’s usually for one of three reasons:

1. **You don’t have time.** I’m only talking about four hours a week here. If your life is *truly* so full and hectic you can’t find any spare time at all, you’re probably too busy to pursue a second career as a screenwriter until your kids are in school, you find an easier job, or you rearrange your priorities.
2. **You can’t afford it.** A movie is cheaper than a new book, two six-packs, or most restaurant meals. Netflix is less than ten bucks *a month*. And remember: now that you’re a screenwriter, every movie ticket is a write-off.
3. **You have children.** Tell your spouse or significant other that every Wednesday is his night for quality time with the kids. Or, if you’re a single parent, find another single parent in your writers group, neighborhood, or twelve-step program, and swap babysitting nights.

I know that families can sometimes become obstacles to your screenwriting pursuits. You must sit down with them and explain how important this dream is to you, and that going to see movies isn’t just for fun and entertainment anymore; it’s as important as taking classes would be if you were a real estate appraiser or an architect. At first they’ll look skeptical and whine about being neglected. But the more seriously you take your career, the more seriously they will.

They must also accept that sometimes you’ll be watching movies by yourself, when they’re not of interest to, or appropriate for, the rest of your family. They’ll survive.



ONE OTHER ISSUE ABOUT YOUR VIEWING REGIMEN: I’VE JUST GIVEN you permission to see two Hollywood movies every single week. If

you're not excited by that prospect, if it doesn't sound like fun, then are you certain this is the right path for you?

If you aren't going to the movies or watching television because you don't *like* what Hollywood's producing these days (a comment I hear frequently), then why do you want to be a screenwriter? Is it really wise to pursue a career in the film industry if you think that the stuff that Hollywood produces is crap? If that's your belief, then your screenplay is likely to be so strikingly different from current mainstream films that it will be impossible to sell.

This doesn't mean you have to like everything you see. One of the advantages of this process is that no movie you ever see will be a waste of time—it can still serve as a good “bad example.”

HOW TO WATCH A MOVIE

To make the process of watching films as informative as possible, approach them in the following way:

- 1. Avoid reviews, trailers, and previews.** The best way to see a film is with as little knowledge as possible about what will happen, so you can fully experience whatever surprises and emotional peaks the writer intended. Save any reviews or publicity articles until *after* you see the movie, so you can enter the theater as receptive as possible.
- 2. See movies uninterrupted.** Whether in a theater or at home, the key is to be able to totally focus on your movie-watching experience. If you can, see movies at a conscientious theater delivering great pictures and sound with a minimum of talking and texting patrons and unruly kids. If you can't, a Blu-Ray player, premium channel cable system, and HD TV make watching films at home superior to many theatrical situations.

However, if you do watch a movie at home, you've still got to treat it like a movie, and not like some TV talk show or local news

broadcast that plays in the background while you visit on the phone, chat with your family, raid the refrigerator, or hit the john.

3. **See it the first time for fun.** Don't take notes, don't read along with the script, and don't even think about the screenplay when you first view a film. Ride the roller coaster the filmmaker created. You can figure out how the movie worked after it's over. (In a really good film, this rule is unnecessary; you'll be swept up in the emotion in spite of your intention to analyze the work.)
4. **See the good stuff twice.** When a movie touches you deeply, watch it a second or third time to thoroughly analyze all the details of story, character, structure, dialogue, and theme. This is especially important for any movie similar to your own screenplay in terms of plot, setting, or genre. You can reexperience all of the highs and lows, and can now appreciate much more deeply the ways the screenwriter and filmmakers elicited your emotion. And you'll *always* discover things you didn't catch the first time.
5. **Analyze your emotional reaction.** Whenever you become engrossed in a film, ask yourself why. What kept you on the edge of your seat? Fascinating characters? Hilarity? Suspense? Big action? Sex? Romance? Sadness?

When you find yourself distanced from the story, determine the cause of that as well. Is it illogical? Too predictable? Repetitive? Boring? Why? And what would make it more emotionally involving?
6. **Did it follow the rules?** Every movie you see should reinforce the principles of screenwriting contained in this book. Which methods did this screenwriter employ for creating character identification, anticipation, surprise, curiosity, believability, conflict, character growth, and theme? Was the story concept simple, original, and commercial? Did the structural turning points occur as

expected? Was the dialogue unique, varied, and interesting? Was the ending satisfying?

Did the film intentionally “push the envelope” in any way, and violate traditional structure or character development? If so, was the film more effective as a result? Could this departure from the norm be duplicated (especially by a writer trying to break into the industry) or was it an approach that would only be new and different once?

7. **Pitch the movie.** If you had to sell this story to a Hollywood executive, how would you do it? How would you express the story concept in a single sentence? What would you emphasize to maximize your chances for selling the script? Which companies would you have pursued with it? How would you have packaged it? If you had been an executive, would you have given it a green light? Why or why not? (Be honest; checking the box-office returns isn't fair.)
8. **Research the production.** Check the box-office success of the film, domestically and internationally. Read any articles and watch any interviews you can that reveal how the movie got made. This research will not only sharpen your commercial sensibilities, it will give you a much greater working knowledge of the people in power, what they're looking for, and the avenues for marketing your own scripts.
9. **Write a scene.** Pick a scene from a movie you enjoyed, watch the scene two or three times, and then try writing it yourself. How vividly and succinctly can you describe the settings and characters? How would you describe the action as simply as possible without losing its emotional impact? How would you convey what's shown on the screen without resorting to camera directions? (Skip copying the dialogue, unless you want to try writing the scene using different, more effective language.) When you're finished,

compare your version to that of the original screenwriters when you . . .

10. Read the script. You can't possibly hope to improve your craft and improve your own writing style without reading lots of examples of scripts that have successfully done what you're trying to do.

Screenplays for most Hollywood movies are now available online (usually at no cost, at sites like scriptstork.com, script-o-rama.com, simplyscripts.com, scriptcity.com, and dailyscript.com) or in printed or published form (at thewritersstore.com and sites such as scriptshack.com and scriptcity.com).

In addition to reading scripts for your favorite films, read as many as you can from the genre of the script you're working on. And include scripts for movies you haven't yet seen, and then watch the movie versions of those scripts to see how they were transformed into film.

After reading a screenplay, ask yourself how effective it was at eliciting emotion, and how closely it followed the principles presented in this book. Did the written version of the movie create an emotional experience as effectively as the film did? Why or why not? How did the style of the script match the tone of the film itself—was it fast-paced for action, humorous for comedy, etc.? And if you were an agent or an executive, would you have wanted to represent this writer or produce this project based on the screenplay?

If you want to write for television, this process (minus the movie theater stuff) applies to you as well. See at least one episode of as many dramatic series or sitcoms as you can. Then select a series for which you will write a sample episode, watch every episode of that show, and see one or two additional episodes of every series similar in genre to the one you've picked. Then ask yourself the same questions, and do the same exercises listed above.

Once you've mastered the art of watching movies and TV shows, you'll

be ready to move on to the other essential aspects of screenwriting: HOW TO SHARPEN A PENCIL; HOW TO STARE OUT THE WINDOW; and HOW TO TAKE A NAP.

SUMMARY

1. The primary goal of any filmmaker is to elicit emotion in the audience.
2. The primary goal of the screenwriter is to elicit emotion in the person reading the screenplay.
3. In order to succeed, your screenplay needs to accomplish the following objective: enable a sympathetic character to overcome a series of increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable obstacles and achieve a compelling desire.
4. The four stages of any screenplay are:
 - Story concept
 - Characters
 - Plot structure
 - Individual scenes
5. The great pitfall of screenwriting is writer's block, which is rooted in fear of failure and desire for perfection. To prevent block, alternately brainstorm for a quantity of ideas and edit those ideas for quality.
6. Seeing movies or TV shows and reading screenplays are essential steps to screenwriting success:
 - See at least two recent Hollywood movies a week—a hundred movies a year
 - See the good ones twice or more
 - Analyze your emotional reactions and relate them to the principles in this book

- ▶ Purchase or download screenplays for successful films and episodic series—particularly those within the genre you’re writing—and read at least one of those per week
- ▶ Watch and read all of the episodes of any television series you’re attempting to write

MARKETING YOURSELF AS A SCREENWRITER

THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK IS INCOMPLETE. IT IS NOT THE SALE OF YOUR screenplay but the sale of *yourself* that should be your primary goal in pursuit of a screenwriting career. You ultimately want to make money writing for the movies or television. Selling your completed screenplays is certainly one way to accomplish that. But keep in mind that *you* are the commodity. It is your talent that you are marketing, and your screenplays will exhibit that talent.

The majority of films produced by Hollywood do not originate with completed screenplays. Sequels, remakes, adaptations of novels, comic books, games, and true stories, and movies that originated as ideas—these comprise most of what appears in movie theaters and on television. “Spec” scripts—screenplays written speculatively, which are completed before any deal is negotiated—account for less than a third of the movies seen on the big screen, and essentially none of the episodic series shown on television.

It is far more important that your screenplay indicate your talents and abilities as a screenwriter than that your script is sold outright. The sale of your screenplay is always a goal, and it is wonderful when it happens, but you must also use your screenplay as a calling card and a writing sample that will enable you to get additional work as a screenwriter.

Those of you who have heard me lecture, or who have worked with me as a consultant, know that I believe writers place far too much emphasis on getting an agent, and far too little on writing a script that won't *need* an agent. Talent and commitment rise to the surface quickly in Hollywood, and once you have a well-written, emotionally involving screenplay that has real commercial potential, there are many paths to a deal.

Unfortunately, this doesn't mean you can stick your completed masterpiece under your pillow and wait for the Script Fairy to bring you a three-picture deal. Developing relationships and getting your work read is essential to your success.

I'm talking here about *selling*. Good, old-fashioned, pavement-beating, door-knocking, phone-dialing salesmanship. If your goal is to support yourself as a screenwriter, you can't spend all your time in the closet, writing. You must accept the fact that part of your job entails risking rejection, frustration, and discouragement by putting yourself on the line and selling yourself to the people who can get your movies made.

MAKING SURE YOUR SCRIPT IS READY

Before you begin your marketing campaign, you must be sure you have the *essential* item for pursuing your career: a good screenplay.

In order to market yourself as a screenwriter, you *must* have a completed screenplay. This is absolutely critical. It will not suffice to have book rights, a treatment, a hot idea, interest from a star, or anything else short of a complete screenplay. You can use those other things to pursue producing, but not to become a screenwriter. The exceptions to this are so rare that they are best ignored. Take it as law that until you complete a screenplay, you cannot begin pursuing any of the avenues toward your ultimate goal.

Not only must you have a completed screenplay, it must fall into the category you're pursuing: half-hour situation comedy, one-hour episode, or feature-length film (feature film or TV movie). And two com-

pleted screenplays in your area of interest are more than twice as good as one. Each additional screenplay will be better than the previous one, increase your chances of success, and show your contacts that you are committed to your goal.

Don't consider writing a miniseries or a pilot for an episodic series that does not yet exist. These two television forms are almost always written by established screenwriters who have already proven themselves.

And most of all, to market yourself effectively, you must have a *professional caliber* screenplay. So before you start submitting your script, you must be certain it's good enough.

Unfortunately, you can't trust your own judgment in this regard. Of course *you* think it's great; you've been working on your screenplay so long and hard by now that *Plan Nine from Outer Space* would seem great to you if it was your creation. So, to get a more objective sense of the quality of your script, follow this process:

When you finish what you believe is your final rewrite, put your screenplay in a drawer for a week, just to get some emotional distance. Otherwise you'll be so relieved to have completed it that you'll have no objectivity about it at all. Then give it one final polish, making certain, as honestly as you can, that your script meets all the requirements outlined in this book. Go over it carefully for typos and grammatical and spelling errors and put it in the best form you possibly can.

When your screenplay is as good as you can possibly get it, register it for a copyright with the U.S. Copyright office (copyright.gov/register) and with the Writers Guild of America (wgawregistry.org/webrrs). This is your best protection against plagiarism, and for proper credit should your script ever be rewritten and then produced.

Then ask five people whose judgment you trust to read the screenplay and give you their suggestions. You trust their judgment because they are intelligent, know something about movies, and work in the film business, or at least have read lots of screenplays.

It won't hurt to give one to your mom, so you can be certain of at least one good response. But the other copies should go to people who

you know will be honest, neither overly sensitive to your feelings nor falsely critical.

Script Consultants

Instead of these five friends and contacts, you might want to hire a consultant to either critique your script or coach you on it.

I'm one of those people, and I've been coaching writers and filmmakers for a long, long time. So I'm partial to this choice, provided that: (1) the consultant is knowledgeable about story and screenwriting; (2) the consultant is experienced (both in Hollywood and as a consultant); (3) their fee is fair and within your budget; (4) they are ethical and honorable, and don't promise more than they can deliver; and (5) their personality and approach are a good fit for your own needs, project, and personality.

You can determine all of this by checking out the consultant's background and experience with an Internet search, by hearing the consultant lecture and reading his or her books or articles, by talking to others who have used the consultant's services, and especially by talking to the consultant directly.

The advantage of a good consultant is that working with one should guarantee you both honesty and a high level of expertise. The disadvantage is they cost money—sometimes a lot of money. Fees for script consulting services range anywhere from \$50 for simple “coverage,” or comments by a relatively inexperienced reader, to thousands of dollars for a top-level consultant.

When I first began coaching writers on their scripts, the term barely existed, and there were just a handful of us offering such services. Now you can throw a stick anywhere in Los Angeles and you're likely to hit someone calling himself a script consultant.

In my experience, and according to a recent poll done by *Creative Screenwriting* magazine, most screenwriters who have used consultants are very happy with the guidance they received. But I have also worked with a lot of screenwriters who came to me after working with consul-

tants and teachers who had never been professional enough (or perhaps knowledgeable enough) to tell them their story had no empathetic hero, no clear story concept, wasn't remotely commercial, wasn't properly structured, or that it wasn't even formatted properly. So do your homework before selecting a consultant and plopping your money down.

Rewriting

When your five contacts or your script consultant have responded to your screenplay, you face one of the toughest stages of the entire process. Because *most of the time* they will tell you that your screenplay isn't ready to show. Nearly all professional-caliber screenplays have to go through lots of drafts, and at least a couple rounds of comments from outsiders, before they can be submitted to anyone in power.

As emotionally wrenching as it will be, often you have to go back to square one (or at least back to square five or six) with your story concept, and do a complete rewrite, using all of the principles you know and all the feedback you got. You might even have to accept that you've done as much as you can with this particular idea, and now your best course of action is to trash it and go on to a new story concept that possesses greater potential.

Either path (a major rewrite or moving on to another story idea) is excruciating for a while. But take courage in knowing that every successful writer has faced this decision many times in his career, that your next script or your next rewrite will *always* be better, and that the process up to this point has been both fulfilling (probably) and educational (certainly).

Never bypass this outside-feedback stage. To submit a weak screenplay to people with the power to get you a deal is worse than submitting nothing.

Let's say, for example, that through your contacts you are able to get your script to Ridley Scott, and in your eagerness to take advantage of this good fortune, you send him a screenplay that isn't ready. So he politely rejects it. Then you write your next screenplay, which *is* terrific.

How eager is Ridley Scott going to be to read another script from the same guy who a few months ago sent him a piece of junk? Now let's assume, more positively, that out of the five contacts who read your script at least two have a strong positive response. If at least two out of the five think your screenplay has strong potential and is ready or nearly ready to submit, then you can move forward. You'll never get all five people to agree on anything, including your script, and two out of five is a positive enough reaction that you should prepare the script for submission.

If you're using a script consultant, they will tell you when they believe it is ready to submit. Or, more likely, they will say, "If you make this and this and this correction, it will be ready to take to producers." When these suggestions have become simple and minimal enough that they are easy to follow on your own, use them as a basis for your final polish.

When you have gone through this entire process and are now confident that your script is as good as it needs to be, register it once again for a copyright and with the WGA. Now you are ready to begin the marketing process.

THE THREE KEYS TO MARKETING YOURSELF

Once your script is ready, and you're willing to put yourself out there with the determination of a Terminator in order to launch your career, there are three principles to keep firmly in mind:

1. **Try everything.** Talk to ten working screenwriters, and you'll hear ten different stories of exactly how they broke into the business and reached that first rung of success. Anything that doesn't hurt anybody should be attempted, even if it stretches the limits of your courage and chutzpah.
2. **Don't listen to statistics.** All of those stories about the number of screenwriters who are out of work, or the thousands of unsold

screenplays the Writers Guild has registered, or the impossibility of getting an agent, only serve one purpose: to dissuade you from your goal.

You shouldn't pursue a screenwriting career in blissful ignorance of the realities of the marketplace. But once you decide that your dream, your path to personal fulfillment, is through screenwriting, then you must focus on those methods and attitudes that will enable you to realize your goal. *The fact that someone else failed to achieve the same goal has nothing to do with you.*

But if you're determined to hear some cold, hard statistics, here are some to consider very carefully:

- *100 percent of the screenwriters who now have agents at one time didn't have agents*
- *100 percent of the screenwriters who are now working at one time weren't working*
- *100 percent of the screenwriters who have made money at screenwriting at one time hadn't made a dime*

And in addition, if you had any notion of the amount of absolute garbage that's floating around Hollywood between script covers, you'd never again wonder if you could compete for talent. In all my years of meetings and pitches and negotiations and interviews and writers' conferences, I have never *once* heard any producer or agent or star or studio executive say, "We are no longer looking for good screenwriters."

The difficulty you face has nothing to do with statistics. It's that wherever there is so much garbage, there has to be a filtering system. And that's why God made the reader.

That's also why so many of those same producers and agents and stars and executives *do* say that they won't read "unsolicited"

material. Your goal must be to penetrate that filtering system and get your work read by people (including readers) who can help launch your career.

- 3. Knowledge is power.** It is insufficient to assume that somewhere out there somebody is looking for a screenplay and maybe it's yours they will buy. You must know specifically *who* the people are who are getting movies made, *what* they are looking for, and *where* you can reach them.

ACQUIRING INFORMATION

To begin pursuing your career as a screenwriter, you must ignore all negative statistics, find the courage to put yourself and your work out there in the marketplace in any way you can, and start acquiring loads of information. And there are two ways to find out the things you need to know:

Contacts

A contact is anyone you know. It is not just anyone in the film business, not just anyone who has ever written a screenplay, not just anyone who lives in Hollywood. It is anyone you know, period. Your accountant's sister's boyfriend's daughter might be the Hollywood manager who will be willing to read your screenplay or the financier who will want to invest in your movie.

Networking is simply the process of meeting two people and having them each introduce you to two people who in turn each introduce you to two more. By continually pursuing this process, you eventually will have a massive pyramid of names that will lead you to the specific people who will pay you for your work. What you are actually acquiring from each person in that chain, each individual in your network, is information: information about (or introductions to) other people, or about that particular individual's screenwriting needs.