

Maine Media College – MFA Program

White Paper – Screenplays and Treatments

This paper reprints in their entirety two letters composed by MFA faculty. Each of these engendered extensive discussion on the creation and presentation of screenplays and treatments at retreats among members of the MFA Committee. Although the Committee decided to adopt as policy only those items described as required in the MFA Handbook, the letters may nevertheless be instructive to Candidates. The letters are offered here so that Candidates may derive a sense of the faculty's concerns and beliefs regarding the form and presentation of screenplays and treatments.

MFA Committee,

As promised, here is what I think should be the process in which we work with students on screenplays. This is not meant to be a bible but an opinion.

First and foremost, the committee needs to know that screenplays are premeditated works that are not considered literature but blue print for screen map of a story telling. It is not meant to work individually but be combined in the multifaceted parts of the filmmaking process. They, as in the whole process of filmmaking, have various steps and platforms to go through prior to completion. You must also realize that no one usually writes a screenplay cold (without having known the story they would like to tell). Much thought and research had already gone into understating the story, the characters, the structure, and the effectiveness of the style in which the story will be told.

So when a student proposes a screenplay, he/she had already done a thorough research and study in order to pitch (called the pitch in Hollywood) the story successfully. How can a pitch occur if the student/writer has not done the prep work? Many writers usually bring evidence and full-on research to show the potential and perhaps the impact for such a story. Evidence differs depending on the nature of the work. Some bring the book that the screenplay will be based on like in the Da Vinci Code, Harry Potter, Blindness, etc. Others try to shed light on a new creative interpretation to old history like in Gladiator or Brave Heart, Mary Antoinette, etc. They can also bring in the purpose for such a story to be told in this time to strengthen the pitch in the minds of listeners. (All these steps must be worked closely with the mentor)

A writer begins the pitch with a written LOG line and a synopsis supported by verbal explanation. After a Q & A the writer adjusts the ideas accordingly then within a week they bring in a new synopsis shortly followed by a treatment of about 25 pages outlining in more details the structure of the story and defining the characters much more vividly. Perhaps more notes and adjustments are needed before writing the first draft. Once all is given the green light then the first draft begins working to maintain focus and consistency with the chosen mentor. The first draft should be completed a month before the next retreat and sent to MFA faculty members for reading/discussion.

Following the outcome of the retreat discussion, the writer would make any applicable changes and cleans the first draft. If all goes well, the second draft should be much easier to tackle. It usually deals with clarifying details about a certain choice a character might have done or perhaps changing the environment of a particular scene giving strength to the moment such as what Rob Riener did in *When Harry Met Sally* by moving a scene from private to public (restaurant) contributed to making that scene a very memorable situation.

By the next retreat, the work should be done in front of the Committee as a staged reading with already rehearsed actors.

If we were to follow such a process, we can assure success of the student's work. I don't mean commercially but a methodology in which the student will be able to continue in their professional endeavor. Their work will no longer be a matter of coincidence but a method of working.

Wishing you warmth,

Ziad

TO: MFA COMMITTEE MEMBERS

FROM: WAYNE BEACH

RE: ASSESSMENT & PRESENTATION OF MFA SCREENPLAYS

September 9, 2009

At the close of the last retreat you invited my thoughts on a way of looking at assessment and presentation of MFA screenplay-related projects. After giving it some thought I offer the following.

I had mentioned that one way to look at the process is the way that the film industry itself regards it. A screenplay's evolution can be distilled as follows:

1) Pitch.

A pitch "sells" the concept and the essential movements (or "beats") of the story and characters. In the film industry, a verbal pitch can last anywhere from five to thirty minutes (or, if written, one to five pages). A log-line is one sentence that distills what's unique about the story and is typically a cornerstone of the pitch.

In the film industry, concept itself is often the most valued and decisive factor in determining whether a film will be made. While there are exceptions, this is also

generally true for most films made independently, assuming that the makers wish to see the film distributed.

For our purposes, a project proposal is an equivalent to the pitch. As a mentor, I hear (or read) what the candidate proposes and before it leaves the proposal stage I ask questions to help them shape and further define what the project can become.

2) Treatment.

A document, typically ten to twenty-five pages, that distills the story and structure for a proposed screenplay in a highly readable format. A good deal of preparatory work goes into the writing of one as it requires the writer to arrive at a viable structure for the film. It compels the writer to plan and think through the story before embarking on the script itself. We currently award three (3) credits for completing a treatment.

3) First screenplay draft.

A first draft screenplay typically takes a minimum of three months of continuous full-time work. A completed screenplay for a feature-length film is in the range of 100-120 pages.

4) Revised draft(s).

A revised draft can take from two weeks to four months of full-time work depending on the sweep of revision being undertaken. Most films involve numerous revised screenplay drafts (I have worked on projects where there were as many as 23 drafts).

In industry parlance, a “page one rewrite” is equivalent to starting over with only the essential story idea being retained. From a credit consideration, this would be the same as a first draft screenplay in terms of time commitment.

5) Polish.

A relatively light revision of a screenplay, tightening and “sweetening” the existing work, sometimes specifically focusing on one aspect (i.e. a ‘character polish’, etc.). A polish will typically take from one to three weeks of continuous work.

PRESENTATION OF THE SCREENPLAY

Unless the film is to be self-financed, the first goal of a screenplay is to convince the reader that this is a film worthy to be made. As it is an expensive medium, the screenplay will have to seduce a studio or investors into believing in the project. It must then compel actors into wanting to act in it, a director in wanting to direct it, etc.

In short, the screenplay must work as a reading experience.

While screenplays are the blueprints for what will ideally become a finished film, they are – in the first instance – documents to be read. It is the screenwriter’s job to make the movie come alive in your head as you read it. A well-written screenplay should be able to be read in no more than the time it should take one to watch the movie. The screenwriter must be economical in descriptive passages so that nothing overly long impedes the flow of your eye down the page. In fact, economy is the operative principle at every level of screenwriting: description, dialogue, and structure.

While writers will occasionally mount a staged reading of a screenplay (the dialogue performed by actors, the descriptive passages read aloud by the writer or another performer), this is not how screenplays are conveyed to the vast majority of people involved in the process. Thus, nothing can supplant the necessity of the document being effective as an entity unto itself.

I know that there has been some discussion of having staged readings for the MFA committee. My only concern: If we are to allow candidates to present the screenplays by way of a staged reading, we must be prepared to accept that our impression may be colored by how good or bad the performer reading the dialogue may be, a factor that doesn’t enter into practical assessment of a screenplay at any other professional level because anyone receiving a screenplay is simply expected to read it, not have it read to them. It is, after all, a good part of the screenwriter’s job to make you “see” the film on paper.

My recommendation:

1) Screenplays and screenplay-related projects (treatments, etc.) should be submitted ten days prior to the MFA retreat. This will allow adequate time for dissemination and reading prior to the MFA committee convening to discuss them.

Screenplays should be in the standard accepted format (including appropriate margins) and delivered by digital means in a pdf file. If we want the burden of copying to be upon the student, then we should indicate the number of hard copies required by the committee. Hard copies should be bound in covers adhered by metal fastener pins, again in the accepted standard. Two-sided page printing is acceptable.

If we are to make a “staged reading” option available, we can add:

2) In addition to submitting the screenplay ten days prior to the retreat, the candidate may opt to supplement their presentation of the screenplay by offering a reading of the script at the retreat – either by means of previously-recorded video – or by having actors read it in person. MFA committee members will have hard copies of the screenplay to follow along and notate.

A variation on this would be to allow students to submit (on dvd) a previously-filmed reading of the script prior to the retreat so that committee members can view it individually at leisure before convening to discuss it.

Either way, nothing supplants their need to deliver a printed screenplay.

I know that there is perhaps some concern that those on the committee without filmmaking experience will know “how” to read a screenplay. A well-written screenplay should not be difficult to read, even for a layperson. This is why so many screenplays are published. It should not require much, if any, technical knowledge to read a script. Camera angles, etc., are not typically included in a screenplay (unless it is a draft prepared in concert with the director immediately prior to shooting).

I hope that all of this helps the conversation.

Wayne