

@johnzaozirny
selected threads compilation
(09/01/2020 version)

n.b.

All of this information is simply my opinion, based on my experiences and those of my clients.

None of it is to be taken as canon or rules that must be followed.

This advice is freely given and may be freely ignored.

WORKING WITH PRODUCERS

Written 5/29/2020

I mentioned in my client signing thread that the topic of writers working on a spec with producers deserved its own thread on another day. Figured that today could be that day. In this thread, I'm going to talk about the advice I give my clients about this subject. 1/

Before I do so, I wanted to put a few notes in advance of the advice. The first is that these are my thoughts, based on my experiences and those of my clients. I'm simply trying to be helpful. Make your own decisions based on what is best for you, your script, and your career 2/

Next is that this advice is focused on up & coming writers, who don't have sales or credits yet. Established writers are in a different situation and have different options. Those writers also have lots of people they pay on commission to advise them on these situations. 3/

Finally, if you disagree with my thoughts, please don't invoke the Gods of Twitter by tagging them in to tell me how wrong I am. Simply reply with your thoughts and I'll reply back, so we can have a discussion. That's the best way Twitter works, I think. 4/

Why all the notes? Well, talking about things like these is more controversial than talking about happy things like signing writers. But I really do enjoy discussing this stuff, so I'm doing it anyway... 5

/So here are my thoughts. To begin with, what I'm talking about here is **STARTING** to write a spec script from scratch. **NOT** rewriting an existing spec or attaching a producer to package with actors, directors, etc. This thread is about writing a brand new spec screenplay. 6/

That out of the way, my philosophy is quite simple: if the producers bring an original idea, article, book, short story, or piece of IP to the table and you love it, then it's worth doing. If it's your original idea, then there's no need to involve a producer at inception. 7

/If it's your original idea, best to develop it yourself and keep it clean of any attachments. A "clean" script is always easier to sell. There are producers who are great at developing, but it can be hard to tell until you're far down the road. Always best to keep it clean 8/

Producers, to my mind, bring one of three things to a project: 1) The Money 2) The Talent (actors or directors) 3) The Material (book/article/short story/etc.) If not, then what is their value add to the project? 9/

If a producer does bring a piece of material to you that you love and want to spec, then it's imperative that you make sure they control it before you start working on it. That doesn't mean a "good relationship with the author" or even a shopping agreement... 10/

It means a signed option/purchase agreement on the underlying material. Not in negotiations or conversations. Signed. Option length should ideally be 18 months (enough time for you to write the script) with an optional extension for another 18 months (to shop the script) 11/

The responsibility for negotiating that, paying for a lawyer to draft the agreement, and paying the option fee is on the producer, not you. They're bringing the underlying material to the table and those costs are part of it. 12/

On a recent short story adaptation, the producer's negotiations with the author fell apart, despite a prior relationship. The client hadn't started working on the script, at our insistence, and was very glad they hadn't, since the rights were now unavailable. 13/

Writing a script based on underlying material without the underlying material being under option is like building a house on land that you don't own. Not advisable whatsoever. 14/

On @infitemov, @IanShorr didn't start working on the script until @EricMaikranz and myself (as I was producing) had completed an option agreement for Eric's book "The Reincarnationist Papers," which Ian adapted into INFINITE. 15/

I should also note that this philosophy also applies to myself producing projects written by my clients. Simply put, if it's my idea (as in, an idea I bring to the table), then I produce. If not, I don't. 16/

In the case of INFINITE, I optioned and brought the underlying book to @IanShorr . @xosophialo and I are working on her next feature, which is based on an amazing true story I found and brought to Sophia to write. And so on, so forth. 17/

COBWEB was Chris Devlin's original idea and though @Jeff_Portnoy and I gave notes as it was developed into the spec screenplay that sold to Lionsgate, we're not producing. Those notes were simply part of our job as his manager. 18/

Every manager and management company has their own philosophy, but I find this is the one that best fits myself and my company. When someone asks me how I got involved in a project I'm producing, the answer is an easy one. I know very clearly how I added value to the project. 19/

That's the simplest way to sum up this thread. Before getting involved with a producer on writing a spec script, ask yourself "How do they add value?" If you don't know or the answer is a convoluted one, then it may be worth re-assessing. END

TONY GILROY'S ADVICE

Written 7/11/2020

Back when I was in film school, I was fortunate enough to take a class where legendary screenwriter Tony Gilroy came to speak and a few of the things that he said have stuck with me ever since. Wanted to share those with everyone, as they're simple and very true. 1/

It was the fall of 2001 and I was in my senior year at NYU. I was fortunate enough to take a class taught by famed writer E. Max Frye. Max had already written the incredible SOMETHING WILD (which he wrote in college!!!!) and has since written, amongst other things, FOXCATCHER. 2/

Max was a fantastic teacher and would also bring guests to talk to the class. Tony Gilroy was one of them. I personally believe Tony is one of the great living screenwriters. If you don't know Tony's writing, I highly recommend you read one of his scripts ASAP. 3/

His style is insanely evocative and readable -- he prioritizes the read and emotion above all else. He developed his technique from William Goldman, my personal vote for the most iconic screenwriter, and became a collaborator of his. Gilroy's scripts are a delight to read. 4/

He's since gone on to become an amazing director, directing one of my favorite films of all time, MICHAEL CLAYTON, as well as the very underrated BOURNE LEGACY and working in a writer/producer capacity on ROGUE ONE 5/

At the time of the class, Gilroy was best known for having written DEVIL'S ADVOCATE and DOLORES CLAIBORNE. He'd written THE BOURNE IDENTITY, but it was in post, had been a tortuous shoot (as has been extensively documented) and Tony didn't seem to know if it would work. 6/

Tony was kind enough to talk about his process and to take questions from us students. The first thing that he said that made an impression on me was that he was always trying to "have as much white space on the page as possible." 7/

As in, to have as little superfluous description, scene headings, and so on. As much as possible to have dialogue convey the emotion, direction, tension, and action of the scene. If you read a Tony Gilroy script, you'll notice this immediately. 8/

When there are description or action lines, they're sparse and as terse and as evocative as possible. The dialogue bounces back and forth between each character like they're in a tennis match, drawing you in, getting you to turn the page to get to the next line... 9/

Which brings me to the next point he made. Tony noted that he viewed his job, as a screenwriter, as "to get them to keep turning the page." Which is as succinct a description of successful writing as I've ever seen. 10/

He was also speaking about that regarding any sort of screenwriting "rules" -- as in, there are NONE. Whatever gets them to turn the page, do it. Whether it's pre-laps, voice-over, "describing something that can't be shot," song cues, or whatever people say NOT to do. 11/

When my father, who's not in the entertainment industry, read @ElyseHollander's BLONDE AMBITION script, he told me afterward that he was amazed how easy it was to read. "I just kept turning the page!" That was really incredible to hear -- that's the ideal response! 12/

And the final thing that Tony Gilroy said that stuck with me? Well, I asked him how he dealt with nerves while he was waiting to hear back about what others thought of his latest script. He just smiled and said, "I don't - I'm busy writing the next one." 13/

Which, y'know, is a bit of a glib response and maybe he's as tortured as the rest of us. But I truly believed him and it's certainly an attitude to aspire to! My takeaway was: don't put all your emotions and hopes on one project. Always be working on something new. 14/

Which doesn't mean to always be writing blindly ahead, but certainly means to always be thinking of new ideas and what you might write next. As a manager and producer, I've certainly seen the benefit in developing a broad range of projects and a broad roster of clients. 15/

Sometimes the thing you think is 100% guaranteed doesn't work out. Something the one you thought was a lost cause becomes triumphant. You just never know! 16/

Few final notes: 1) If you want to learn more about Tony Gilroy, I highly recommend this New Yorker profile on him from 2009. It's a spectacular read: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/16/twister-2>

2) After the passing of William Goldman, @briankoppelman did an episode of his excellent podcast with Scott Frank and Tony Gilroy where all three spoke about him. Absolutely worth listening -- so many amazing stories and pieces of screenwriting gold: <https://bit.ly/2CrUYte>

3) When THE BOURNE IDENTITY finally came out in the summer of 2002, I went to see it the day it came out at a theatre up in Santa Clarita (where I'd moved to start working in the industry.)

As we all know now, despite Tony's reservations, the movie WORKED. It's an incredible film I knew it would be a hit because...

at the end, when Jason Bourne jumps down a stairwell, shoots a guy in mid-fall, and uses another guy's body as a cushion to break his fall, the audience erupted in applause and someone yelled out: "JAMES BOND NEVER DID THAT!"

Thus... a franchise was born.

And in the next James Bond movie, CASINO ROYALE, suddenly James Bond DID do stuff like that. BOURNE 1 -a movie that its creators weren't sure would work had become iconic and massively influential. You just never know! END

**DO I NEED TO GO TO FILM SCHOOL TO
BE A SCREENWRITER?**

Written 07/16/2020

I've seen people express on twitter and otherwise that because they didn't go to film school and/or have no "formal training" that they feel unqualified to be a screenwriter. I understand why people could feel that way but they shouldn't. 1/

When reps and execs read your script, there's no notation on the cover page about where you went to college. Or even if you did. Your GPA doesn't appear. Just the title of your script and your name. The only thing you're judged on is what comes after that cover page. 2/

/It makes sense that people might feel that if they didn't go to school for screenwriting, that they're not qualified to write. But becoming a great screenwriter comes from reading, from watching, and, most of all, from writing. The more of each, the better 3/

Whether you do that at a film school or on your own - the end result of your script is all that matters. And attending film school is absolutely no guarantee of success in the entertainment industry - something to be acutely aware of, due to how expensive it is. 4/

There's a larger thread to be written about film schools at another time, but I just wanted to say not to let an illusory barrier ("I'm not worthy/good/experienced because I didn't go to film school") stand in the way of becoming a screenwriter. 5/

It's never been easier to read scripts, due to PDFs online of great screenplays. It's never been easier to watch films, due to all the various streaming platforms. And it's never been easier to write scripts, due to screenwriting software. 6/

It is most certainly NOT easy to become a working screenwriter. But film school is not a requirement for being one. The only requirement is talent and drive. END

QUERY LETTER TIPS

Written 07/22/2020

This is the topic I get asked about the most, so I wanted to put all the various advice I have about it into a singular thread for your ease of reading. (And for mine, so when I'm asked about it next, I can point back to here.) 1/

First off, be sure to check out Bellevue client @Balance510's article on query letters linked below, as Saeed says succinctly in his article what's going to take me a whole tweet thread to lay out. So check his article out first! 2/ <https://bit.ly/3hunytc>

To start off, here are a few things that are NOT queries and should not be sent: Asking if we accept query letters (this happens 5 times a day); asking if I can give general career advice; asking if we can grab a coffee and chat; demanding to schedule a meeting ASAP. 3/

Someone asked about hard "Don't Do Its." Those would be showing up in person to pitch your script (has happened a few times and was a bit scary), calling my office or personal line to pitch it (annoying), or physically mailing your query/script (automatically trashed.) 4/

One more hard "Don't Do It" and this is the one that happens hourly to me -- DO NOT ATTACH FILES TO YOUR QUERY. If there is a file attached, I automatically delete the email. Just like you would, if you got an email from someone you didn't know with a file attached. 5/

Next question is: WHO should you be querying? This is where it's important to focus on querying individuals whom you'll have the highest rate of success in getting a response from. This requires a fair amount of research on your part, but is worth it. 6/

Focus on reps who have represented writers who have written similar scripts to yours. The annual Black List lists reps, so do trade articles about scripts that are sold. There's also IMDBPro, etc. Find reps that have had success with scripts similar to yours. 7/

Personally, I would recommend NOT focusing on high-level reps who only rep A-List writers. They're unlikely to read a query or want to rep up & coming writers. It's possible, but unlikely. And this is about focusing on the best rate of success. 8/

A lot of reps (particularly managers) guest on podcasts, are on twitter, or do interviews. Usually, we indicate if we're open to queries, and so on. So do your research and find someone who seems a good fit for you AND is open to queries. 9/

On to the query letter. What should be in the subject line? Do a description of the project AND, if you have a unique or relevant backstory, a description of you. As in, "Sci Fi Thriller written by Former Navy Sniper" or "90s Music Biopic written by a former pop star." 10/

Address the email to the person whom you think is the best fit at a company. Even if it's sent to a general email box for the company. That shows you did some research (which is a sign of drive/seriousness, which reps like) and makes the rep feel targeted 11/

Then put in a line about why you think they're right for this project. Have they sold or had on the Black List a project similar to your script? Tell them. Again, this shows you did your research on them, which is a nice sign of someone taking their craft seriously. 12/

Then it's a line or two about who you are. Where you're from, what you do, and if you have a unique life experience, especially if it's relevant to the script. That's not a requirement, but it's always intriguing to hear about and can help sell the script (and you.) 13/

Then, the logline for the project. This is **THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE QUERY**. People always ask what made me request a script. It is **ALWAYS** the logline. Not contest wins, not a cool backstory. None of that matters if the script sounds boring or derivative. 14/

Contest wins (esp. prominent contests) and/or cool backstory may tip the balance if a logline sounds somewhat interesting but not undeniable. But I've never seen a boring logline and then requested the script because they won a contest. 15/

For better or worse, execs at studio & prodcos **DO NOT CARE** about contest wins. They only care about the concept for a script -- can they get it made? They get a dozen scripts a week, so they have to **WANT** to read this one above those others. Hence, concept is king. 16/

As well, **ONLY SEND ONE LOGLINE**. That's it. Focus on your most relevant project for this rep. But your best foot forward. We don't want to read five different loglines. Just the one that you really want us to consider. Sending more makes you look unprofessional and indecisive. 17/

After the logline, you can put any relevant contests wins or attachments (if any.) But if you don't have any, it's not a big issue whatsoever. Again, the logline is the largest determining factor in whether I want to request to read a script. 18/

Overall, I would focus on brevity and clarity. Don't put in any info that isn't necessary. Don't put in your entire life story or paragraphs of plot description. And close it with a polite thank you for consideration and your name. You're good to send. 19/

Now, a question that comes up a lot is how and when to follow up on queries you've sent to reps that weren't responded to. And, honestly, the answer is... don't. 20/

Please don't email weekly, monthly, etc. with the same query. Don't 'check in' over and over. I have a producer friend who's been emailed **THE SAME QUERY LETTER** every Wednesday for two years. If you didn't get a response, you already have your answer, unfortunately. 21/

If you do get a response requesting your script, it's standard to have you sign a release form before we can read the script. That's the legal norm and something you should be prepared for. 22/

After it's been sent, feel free to check-in respectfully after 2 weeks. I try to read requested material within that time frame. That said, we all have lots going on and need to focus on our existing clients, so don't be discouraged or insulted if it takes longer than that. 23/

If there is a situation that creates a time crunch, say another rep wants to sign you, feel free to email and note that, so the rep can prioritize the read. But unless it's a situation like that, I'd err on the side of letting them take their time (within reason.) 24/

I'm sure I must have inadvertently left out some aspect of queries, so feel free to ask on the thread below. Otherwise, hopefully, this info is helpful and now I can just reply back with this thread when I next get asked for query advice... END

WHAT DO LITERARY MANAGERS DO?

Written 07/25/2020

As a literary manager, one of the questions I get asked most often is: what do literary managers do? So I wanted to lay out, in my opinion, what I do. Because one of the questions I ask potential clients is: Do you NEED a manager. And sometimes, the answer is no. 1/

I wanted to take the time to walk through all this because, honestly, there is NO industry standard for what literary managers do. Every manager does the job uniquely. All I can tell you is how I operate and how I look to add value to my clients' careers. 2/

I am particularly aware that there are some prominent writers who are dismissive of managers. And it makes total sense that for successful, established writers, they wouldn't see the value in us. Because when they were breaking in, literary managers didn't really exist. 3/

See, literary managers are a relatively new phenomenon in the film/tv industry and, to my understanding, only became widespread from the late 90s on. So, if you became successful in the 90s (and remained successful), then they were likely never something you had or needed. 4/

But, obviously, the industry landscape has changed a GREAT deal since the 90s. For a clear depiction of this, check out this tweet from earlier this week about the genre breakdown from 2000 vs. today. 5/

As you can tell, there's a clear lack of genre diversity nowadays. As well, there are simply fewer movies being made. And what does get made is likely based on existing IP, rather than original material. Comic book movies, TV and movie remakes, maybe a best-selling book. 6/

As a result, far fewer specs are being sold because far fewer original films are being made (and, again, far fewer movies are being made, PERIOD.) And when specs do sell, they're rarely for the kind of money that writers were paid in the 90s and early 2000s. 7/

That said, TV opportunities have expanded significantly. But a great deal of those feature writers who came up in the 90s/2000s moved into it, as film jobs declined. So while there are more opportunities than ever before in TV, it's still a challenging place to break into. 8/

As a result, the film/tv writing landscape is a highly competitive one and the agencies have placed more and more of their focus on chasing IP & formats, as well as packaging & internal production entities, as the WGA-ATA conflict showcases. 9/

There's still a real need for reps to identify talented up & coming writers and bring them to the marketplace. Hence the rise in the ranks of literary managers to fill that void. Especially as agencies cut staff and those agents decide to transition to management. 10/

There's also the key difference between agents and managers -- manager can produce, while agents (who must be licensed by the state) cannot. This is also the area most ripe for abuse by managers, which I'll address later on in the thread. 11/

So now, we finally arrive at what do literary managers do? Or at least, what do I do? The simplest answer is that managers are consiglieres for their clients. We're the ones who are walking you through strategy, micro & macro. We handle the day to day. 12/

When writers are trying to decide between managers, I ask them: "Who's the person you'd be most comfortable calling at 9 PM on a Saturday night? Who's the person you wouldn't feel embarrassed to ask a 'stupid question?' Because that's most likely who's right for you." 13/

We're also, more often than not, the ones who bring talented up & coming writers to the attention of the town. Whether that's selling their spec, helping get them on the annual Black List, getting them staffed on a show, or any other way we can get execs to read their work. 14/

The way that I, and my colleagues at Bellevue, operate is to be there every step of the way with our clients. To discuss what they want to write next and to go through all the development stages on it. From idea to outline to final draft. 15/

To get the script out to the town and if/when producers want to come on board, discuss who might be the best fit and why. To discuss when to go to talent, directors, and buyers. And in what order. 16/

To discuss what assignments you should pitch a take on. Which is the best fit for you and the next step in your career? Which one do you have the best shot at and which has the best chance of getting made? Should you take the job that just came in or write your next spec? 17/

To discuss what shows they want to staff on and what the best sample is for those shows. And if there isn't an appropriate sample, to help develop one from the ground up that showcases their voice in the best possible way. To get execs and showrunners that sample. 18/

Now as to producing... As a manager, I have a straightforward, simple rule about producing my client's work. If it's my original idea, or an idea (book, article, true story) that I find and bring to a client, then I produce. If not, then I don't. That's it. 19/

I know other companies have different policies, but that's what has made sense to me. And has worked well so far. There's obviously, as has been made clear before, a high potential for abuse by managers in attaching themselves to produce. Hence why I keep it very simple. 20/

When you're sitting down with a manager, it's important to get as clear as possible a sense of how they operate. What's their process with clients? When do they produce their client's work? Get as much clarity as you can. Because every manager is unique in their process. 21/

My process, and the hands-on approach that I take, is also why some people I meet with don't need a manager. Or at least the kind of management style that I offer. And that's really about the writer knowing themselves and knowing what they're looking for in a manager. 22/

Because some people don't want another voice in their development and decision process. They may think they do... but they'll come to find they don't. Maybe they have an agent for the macro and don't feel they need someone for the micro. 23/

I often try to ask that question early on. Because if you have a differing vision for what your roles are, then it's a matter of when, not if, things end. But if you're both on the same page? Then it can be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. 24/

As always, please feel free to ask any questions in the thread below. And if you still don't fully understand what literary managers do, don't feel bad. I've been a manager for almost six years and my Dad STILL doesn't understand what I do. END

WHAT MY CAREER PATH TAUGHT ME

Written 07/26/2020

Before I was manager, before I was a producer, I wanted to be a writer. And while that didn't end up being the right path for me, I learned a lot from it that I use today. And there's one lesson that I discovered near the end, that I wish I'd learned a lot earlier. 1/

I'd initially wanted to be a director, but directing shorts at NYU cured me of that ambition. Kenneth Lonergan has said that while he was directing *YOU CAN COUNT ON ME*, he woke up every morning and threw up. I didn't vomit, but I understood what he meant, even on a short. 2/

So I segued to writing, which was far more my speed. The first feature script I wrote won the Sloan Foundation's screenplay competition at NYU, which awards cash prizes to outstanding scripts that focus on science or scientists. I was (and still am) very proud of that! 3/

After graduation, I worked as an assistant at Appian Way, Leonardo DiCaprio's production company. I worked alongside @franklinleonard, who was an exec there, before he created the Black List. Hollywood is a very small town! 4/

Eventually, I left Appian to take a job as an assistant to @AndrewWMarlowe and @TerriEdda, and that led to a job working as a Writer's Assistant on *CASTLE*. 5/

The entire time I was working on my own writing. Coming up with ideas, writing pilots and screenplays. But, honestly, I ended up with a lot of ideas, half-done outlines and first acts. Not many completed scripts. I had a real problem making myself sit down to write. 6/

Ever since high school, I'd scoured interviews with screenwriters, looking for what I considered "The Secret." That is... the Secret Writing Process that would unlock me writing great scripts in a timely manner. 7/

I'd read @CreativeScreen religiously and they'd always ask writers about their process. I remember Robert Rodriguez talking about waking up at 5 AM and writing for hours before anyone else was up. I tried that and, as the least morning person ever, it did NOT work for me. 8/

There was never finishing a scene and picking it up next time. There was ALWAYS finishing a scene and stopping. So on, so forth. I tried them all, but still hadn't found THE SECRET. I was convinced that once I found it, everything would click for me. Like a key turns a lock. 9/

Then I started working on *CASTLE*. I was there for 3 seasons surrounded by so many talented writers -- some starting their careers, some already well into theirs. I had a chance to sit in the room with them, see them break story. To spellcheck their outlines and drafts. 10/

And I finally had a realization. There was no SECRET PROCESS. All these successful writers wrote incredibly differently. At different times of the day. At different speeds. They all had their idiosyncrasies. There was no one uniform process they'd figured out. 11/

Maybe that realization was one of the reasons I transitioned from writing into producing. Because I couldn't make the excuse of searching for The Secret anymore. It was clear that whatever issues held me back were mine and mine alone. 12/

But I also found that realization so incredibly freeing. There were no secrets here. It was absolutely up to the writer. Whatever worked best for them, that was the best way to do things. They just had to figure out a process that worked for them. 13/

I say all this so that up & coming writers don't feel artificially shut out or that more successful writers have figured out some Secret. The only thing they've figured out is the process that works for them. And that's all YOU need to figure out as well. 14/

This all may seem counter-intuitive since I give a lot of writing and process tips here on Twitter. But take the tips that work for you and ignore the ones that don't. It's all about learning what works and discarding what doesn't. Don't try to force anything. 15/

At a macro level, that's what I've done with my career. I've taken what I learnt working in feature development, on a TV show, as a producer, and as a writer -- and put it all towards the role that works best for me, being a literary manager. 16/

Every day I use knowledge from the various paths of my career to help push my clients' careers forward. I didn't become a producer until I was 30. And I didn't become a manager until I was 35. I don't view that as a late start, I view it as happening when I was ready. 17/

It's rare that any career is a linear path. Mine certainly wasn't. But how you get there isn't dependent on figuring out some secret that everyone but you knows. It's about taking what you've learned along the way, from success and failures, and using it. 18/

I learned I wasn't meant to be a writer. But I did learn that I had a gift for spotting great movie ideas. Today I use that for my clients instead. END

SPECIFICITY

Written 07/26/2020

Was going to do a quick thread on misc. writing tips when I realized that a number of them shared the same overall theme: SPECIFICITY. And, honestly, that's often a key aspect that separates a good script from being a great one. 1/

Specificity can be as simple as avoiding generic names like COP 1 & COP 2 and instead making them CHUBBY COP & NOSY CHOP. Those descriptions tell us something about their character. They also (and this is just as crucial) are more memorable and easier for a reader to track. 2/

One thing I'm obsessed with is location and prop specificity. A character shouldn't fire a gun, they should fire a Glock 17. A character shouldn't drink a beer, they should drink an Amstel Light. A character shouldn't drive a car, they should drive a red 1989 Ford Mustang. 3/

Ideally, these details TELL us about who a character is. What the tone and vibe of the scene is. Who they are in the world and how they view it. For example, if they go to dinner in LA, there's a big difference between going to Musso & Franks and Night+Market Song. 4/

A perfect example of this is the scene in TRAINING DAY where Alonzo meets up with LAPD brass at the Pacific Dining Car. Those LAPD captains being there told you exactly who they were and how they operated. 5/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJqSJ2jXEU0>

That's a brilliant detail by @DavidAyerMovies, who's the king of specificity. When people read TRAINING DAY, they felt assured that the events were realistic and true because of the accumulation of authentic detail Ayer put in. From the car Alonzo drove to where Jake lived. 6/

Good news is -- the internet is your friend here! You can do all the research you need online and put it in your script. Ideally, if you write a script set in rural Montana, readers should 100% think that you grew up there. Even if you've never even been to Montana. 7/

When @ElyseHollander wrote BLONDE AMBITION, she was incredibly scrupulous about trying to get all the details of 1983 New York City right. From what clubs they went to, to their clothing and the music they listened to. She did an immense amount of research and notes. 8/

After her script was #1 on the annual Black List, Elyse went on her "water bottle tour" of general meetings with executives around town and a lot of execs were shocked that she was only 26. They expected someone much older because of how much authentic detail there was. 9/

And specificity should be a rule even beyond those details. One of the first things I ask clients to do in the development process is a backstory document for all the major characters. A page for each of the leads, half a page or so for the supporting cast. 10/

All the information in these may not make it into the feature or pilot, but it'll be SO helpful down the road. Did the lead go to Harvard or not graduate high school? How do they feel about that? When they're in a scene with a bragging Ivy Leaguer, you know how they'll react. 11/

I can tell you, from experience, it can be painful to have to "retcon" a character's backstory late in the process. Because it can affect every single scene, every single relationship. Better to work it out as early as possible. Or at least try to. 12/

It makes your job easier down the road to do the work upfront. And it's also a great sign that you're invested in the world of your script. Readers can always tell when someone is rushing through writing a script and when someone has thought through every beat. 13/

Like the tortoise and the hare, it's often the more meditative writers who end up winning the race. Because a script built on a solid, specific foundation will almost always outpace something that feels generic and churned out. 14/

And who knows? Sometimes when you're going down an internet rabbit hole on the most popular nightclubs in 1930s Chicago, you'll discover the true story that'll be the inspiration for your next project! END

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Written 07/28/2020

Thought I'd do up a series of threads on different recommendations. This one will focus on books that were helpful to me in understanding the entertainment industry and that I've recommended to others when asked. 1/

The book I've recommended the most is probably **WRITING FOR FUN & PROFIT** by @thomaslennon and Robert Ben Garant. This is not purely about screenwriting (though there is some of that), it's more about tips for having a screenwriting career.

2/ <https://amzn.to/2P5NM8W>

The chapters about taking notes, as well as how you'll probably get kicked off the script you just sold have been incredibly helpful for people. Plus it's absolutely hilarious, as you'd expect from the creators (and stars) of **RENO 911**. An absolute must-read. I'm on my 3rd copy 3/

Next is a classic of the genre from an icon: **ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE** by William Goldman. Goldman (as you hopefully know) wrote **ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN**, **BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID**, **MISERY**, **THE PRINCESS BRIDE** (and the novel), **MARATHON MAN**. 4/ <https://amzn.to/308u7eM>

Some of the references are a bit dated (Burt Reynolds as the biggest movie star...) but the stories are elegantly told and still as instructive (and funny) as ever. Goldman's insights are as top-shelf as you'd expect from one of the greatest screenwriters of all time. 5/

Goldman wrote a "sequel," **WHICH LIE DID I TELL** (title taken from what an agent once asked him after a phone call), as well as a compilation of his *Premiere* magazine essays called **THE BIG PICTURE**. And his look at a season on Broadway, **THE SEASON**, is worth a read too. 6/

THE DEVIL'S CANDY by Julie Salamon is probably the most underappreciated book on this list. It's about the making of the film of **BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES**, directed by Brian DePalma. Salamon got access to every step of the process and it's riveting.

7/ <https://amzn.to/3f5vr6r>

It's a lesson in how big studio movies are made, as well as the fact that people rarely know they're making something that will turn out disastrously. No one is **TRYING** to make a bad movie. I've never quite read anything like it and it's incredibly instructive. 8/

SAVE THE CAT by Blake Snyder. I suspect this will be a controversial (or obvious) choice and I hesitated putting it on here. But if I'm being honest, this was a big influence on me and I'm all about honesty. So I'm recommending it, but with a caveat. 9/ <https://amzn.to/333Rt7e>

This was the first screenwriting book I read that made sense to me. The others (Robert McKee, etc.) had always seemed opaque and highly technical. This was readable, easy to put to use, and straightforward. It broke down 3 Act structure and was really helpful to me. 10/

Now the caveat I'd add would be the same for all screenwriting books (or advice in general.) Take what's useful to you and forget what's not. Sometimes a client will tell me "Save the Cat says we have to do X by this page!" And I'll have no idea what they're referring to. 11/

Nor do I really care about doing EXACTLY what the book prescribes. 15 years from when I read it, what I recall is finally understanding 3 act structure, the importance of loglines (and working on them over & over), and how that book made me feel like I actually could do it. 12/

THE KID STAYS IN THE PICTURE by Robert Evans. You may have seen the documentary adapted from this memoir by actor/studio head/producer Bob Evans. But you have to get the audio version of his book so you can hear it read in his dulcet tones

13/ <https://amzn.to/2CVJ1fN>

The next book I'm going to recommend is unfortunately out of print, so it's going to be tricky to find a reasonably priced copy, but you do get two legendary writer/directors for the price of once book... 14/

CONVERSATIONS WITH WILDER by Cameron Crowe. This is a book I first read in college (thanks to @strandbookstore and their fantastic film/tv collection) and returned to every year since. It's delightful, illuminating and thoughtful, as you might expect.

15/ <https://amzn.to/2CYOulX>

Billy Wilder is a tricky interview subject to pin down, but Cameron Crowe does his best and it certainly helps that before becoming a writer/director, Crowe was one of the best journalists around. (One day I'll find a way to read his book of FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH...) 16/

That book led to me exploring the films and directors that are mentioned throughout by Wilder and Crowe, as well as the less well-known chapters of Wilder's filmography. There are also a few fun stories about ALMOST FAMOUS and JERRY MAGUIRE scattered throughout. 17/

Finally... THE WRITER GOT SCREWED (BUT DIDN'T HAVE TO) by Brooke Wharton. This look at the legal and business aspects screenwriters need to understand is over 20 years old at this point, but I think the essential points still stand. 18/ <https://amzn.to/39HYOLi>

It was a vital introduction in helping me comprehend legal concepts that are commonplace and you owe it to your future self to read this book. A great lawyer is an essential advocate for any working writer, but this book will at least help set up what to watch out for. 19/

Those are what made the biggest impact on me, but here's an extra credit roundup of other books you might enjoy: THE STUDIO; EASY RIDERS, RAGING BULLS; THE BIG GOODBYE; PICTURE; DOWN & DIRTY PICTURES; HELLO, HE LIED; SHOOTING TO KILL; KILLER INSTINCT; THE BIG PICTURE. 20/

Hope this has been helpful! Would love to hear what books have been useful to you in navigating the film & TV world, for screenwriting and otherwise. Aiming to put up recommendation threads on movies, TV shows, podcasts, websites, articles, and other media in the near future. END

COMMUNICATING EMOTION

Written 7/29/2020

Was thinking about some of the techniques that I do with clients as we're finalizing their script to be taken out to the town. The three techniques I want to talk about differ in their focus, but they all aim at one thing: Communicating EMOTION to the reader. 1/

If you've read my threads, you know how obsessed I am with readability. As Tony Gilroy told my class back at NYU, the job of the writer is to get the reader to turn the page. I believe the best way to do that is to get the reader emotionally involved in the script. 2/

AND SO here's my standard warning: This advice may not be right for you. Feel free to ignore it. Some might view some of these techniques as hand-holding the reader. But personally, I have no problem with scripts that do that -- it means they're guiding me on a journey. 3/

The first technique I want to discuss is doing an Emotional Check-In Pass. I bring this up first because it has the biggest writing impact of the three. This is making sure that roughly every 15 pages, you're checking in with where your lead character(s) are at emotionally. 4/

Sometimes this is linked to their narrative goal (which I think should also be "checked in" with every 15 or so pages.) Sometimes, it's completely separate. Basically, this is about clarifying where your lead character is at emotionally and how they feel about what's going on. 5/

DIE HARD is a pretty fantastic example of this and it's mostly accomplished through the relationship between McClane and Al Powell. "How are you doing" can be a powerful tool. Sometimes, early on though, it's just McClane talking to himself. 6/

You always have a clear sense of how he's feeling about his chances, what his options are, and so on. A lot of the time, all this is naturally in place in the script. But doing a pass focusing on it can help you notice that there's a section where it got forgotten or deleted. 7/

I've found that when readers lose track of how a lead is feeling or cares about, then it can feel like a series of empty plot mechanics to them. These "check-ins" can help remind readers that this isn't just plot, these are meaningful events for the hero that impact them. 8/

The next technique is similar in aim, but where Emotional Check-Ins are focused on the Macro, this is focused on the Micro. This technique is called an Emotional Temperature Pass and it focuses on scene work, particularly description, as well as transitions between scenes. 9/

By Emotional Temperature, what I'm referring to is what the characters in the scene (particularly the lead) are feeling throughout the scene. And especially, how they leave the scene feeling. What their emotional takeaway from the events of the scene was. 10/

What I'm about to suggest is something that a lot of people, especially Film School Professors, tell you NEVER TO DO. They'll say if it can't be conveyed via dialogue or explicit action, never write it. But... it's worked well for me and my clients throughout my career. 11/

I've had clients write long scenes where it's just dialogue, ping-ponging back and forth between 2-3 characters. And as enjoyable as good dialogue can be, it can sometimes be hard to pick up the exact emotional nuance of what's going on in the scene. 12/

This is especially true if you're reading quickly because you have 12 other scripts to read that Sunday night. Which is often the case for execs and agents. It's not heartening to hear this, but it's a reality of the industry that work is rarely read in ideal circumstances. 13/

/We can't lighten the reading load for readers, but we can make it easier to read and understand what's going on. An emotional temperature line that conveys what's going on in the scene is an immense help towards doing that. They serve as an emotion-focused TLDR, if you will. 14/

In a scene where 2 people are arguing, it can be as simple as adding: "He glares at her -- he can't believe they're having this argument." Do you 100% need that? No. Does it help convey the mood and tone of the scene? Absolutely. Little lines like that can be very effective. 15/

I'm particularly obsessed with transitions, where you can summarize what happened in the scene. This is done by describing the takeaway emotion that the lead is feeling as the scene ends. @IanShorr is a master of this and I learnt much of how to do this from him. 16/

Here a few examples from @IanShorr's script CAPSULE:

"Prescott walks off. Elliot, sucking it up, turns to his work."

"It's awkward enough to make Elliot want to commit seppuku."

"Pushing in on Elliot's fear-frozen face, we SMASH TO:"17/

All quite simple, but very effective in conveying the mood and tone of the scene. Even a reader who was on script 8 of 12 that Sunday night would understand what just happened in the scene. That's the job of the Emotional Temperature Pass. Keeping them involved and reading. 18/

The last one is the most straightforward, but also the one that can cause the most issues if not done. That's the Emotional Continuity Pass. This is re-reading your script multiple times, but each time focusing on a major character and their emotional throughline. 19/

For example, if your lead ends Scene 25 mad at their best friend Bill, make sure that in Scene 29, when they see Bill again, that they're still mad (if nothing between them has changed.) 20/

This may seem like a very OBVIOUS thing to do but often in the rewrite process, scenes get changed and moved around. So there may be "orphans" -- things that made sense in a previous draft and no longer do in the current draft, but were forgotten about. 21/

You may have deleted the old Scene 27 where Bill apologized to your lead, but forgotten to address it in the new version of Scene 29. This is true not just of inter-character conflicts, but character emotions. 22/

If a lead has a bad day at work, make sure they're still annoyed when they get home (in case you deleted the scene where they got good news on the ride home and it brightened their mood.) It's basically about making sure all the emotional logic tracks throughout the script. 23/

Though they're different in execution, all these passes have the same goal -- to bring a reader into the emotional world of the script and keep them there throughout. (Even if it makes Film Professors mad at you!) END

MOVIE RECOMMENDATIONS
(FICTION)

Written 07/30/2020

So this one will focus on (fiction) movies that were helpful to me in understanding the entertainment industry, its historical context, and the strange rituals of how we all interact within it. (FYI - I'll do a separate documentary thread later on.) 1/

I like to start these threads off with a classic and this time is no exception. When I was 14, I turned on PBS and a black & white movie was playing, a ways in already. The scene was of a monkey being buried in a backyard, as a caustic VO noted. What the hell was this? 2/

It was, of course, SUNSET BOULEVARD, written by Charles Brackett, D.M. Marshman & Billy Wilder & directed by Wilder. The greatest of all films about Hollywood. There should be a requirement that anyone working in the industry watch it upon arrival. 3/

The whole movie is iconic, from start to finish, but the opening sprint down Sunset Boulevard and the wry, self-deprecating VO should be enough to draw any stragglers in. Plus, the screenwriter gets the pool he always wanted! 4/ <https://bit.ly/2XdNmlw>

Next one is my underrated pick & it's one that I insist people see when they first arrive in town. SWIMMING WITH SHARKS is written & directed by George Huang, who drew from his experiences working in the studio system for monstrous bosses to paint a sadly accurate picture. 5/

Frank Whaley is perfect as the beleaguered, idealistic assistant, Kevin Spacey is perfect as the monstrous yet seductive studio EVP boss, and, after watching this perfect scene, you'll never forget the difference between Equal and Sweet & Low 6/ <https://bit.ly/30e31DI>

Now here's a movie that I didn't truly understand until I worked in the industry. It's brilliant, deliberately obtuse and one of the most insightful works about art, creativity & the demands of the studio system 7/

BARTON FINK, written and directed by the Coen Bros, is rarely explicit, never handholds, and is (especially on the first watch) a somewhat bewildering experience. But that also pretty much sums up working in the entertainment industry! Hence its true and utter genius. 8/

If you want to understand what it is to be a working screenwriter, I implore you to watch two clips. One from the beginning of the film... "The important thing is we all want it to have that Barton Fink feeling." 9/ <https://bit.ly/3jXUP1V>

And one from the end... "You think you're the only writer who can give me that Barton Fink feeling? I've got twenty writers under contract I can ask for a Fink-type thing from!"

10/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeBM3nwwmIE>

Next is decidedly lighter in tone, even though it opens with a death and has several murders in it. And yet the mobsters aren't the craziest people in it. Plus, it's directed by the Coen's former DP and written by one of the greatest living screenwriters. 11/

GET SHORTY, written by Scott Frank and directed by @BarrySonnenfeld, is a sheer delight. Perfectly cast, written, scored (by @JohnLurieArt), and directed. It's a movie that people who DON'T care about Hollywood can love just as much as those who do. 12/

I've found there's never a bad time to watch GET SHORTY. There are only good times. And this scene showcases the attitude that almost everyone in the world, whether they work in the industry or not, has about screenwriting. (Until they actually try it) 13/ <https://bit.ly/30ecRFh>

ADAPTATION., written by Charlie Kaufman and directed by Spike Jonze. I find it impossible to believe anyone who follows me hasn't seen this, but if you're that rare person, get off Twitter and watch it right away. And you'll likely feel seen in some dark and secret way. 13/

This is another one that only gets better (and more accurate) over time. The relationship between Charlie and his brother, for whom everything is easy, including screenwriting, is so perfect. And the next time you have a meeting, remember this scene: 14/ <https://bit.ly/2DmFve8>

ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD, written & directed by Quentin Tarantino, is one of the most recent films on this list, but it's quickly become one of my favorites. As much for its love of Los Angeles as for its love of the entertainment industry. 15/

So many incredible scenes to choose from, but the most iconic industry scene for me is Rick Dalton's conversation with young Trudi Fraser and his inadvertent recognizance of his own potential career trajectory. So good and so painfully accurate... 16/ <https://bit.ly/30bKM1i>

Finally, here are a few films about filmmakers trying to get their dream films made in an industry that couldn't be less interested in what they have to say. And yet, somehow... 17/

BOWFINGER, written by @SteveMartinToGo and directed by @TheFrankOzJam, feels underappreciated to me, as it's as savvy, ruthless, and funny as they come. It's able to showcase what people love about movies while also savaging the industry and those who work in it. 18/

And as someone who's been pitched (although never physically handed) screenplays by people who listened in on my lunchtime conversation while sitting one booth over, this scene feels way too accurate for comfort. 17/ <https://bit.ly/30dgpY5>

Finally, ED WOOD, written by Scott Alexander and @Karaszewski, and directed by Tim Burton. This gorgeous, heartfelt, and funny film takes the unlikeliest of heroes (the director of the "worst film ever") and makes him a glorious dream we desperately want to win. 18/

The ending is a beautiful triumph and has stuck with me ever since, but I don't want to spoil that, so instead here's another phenomenal scene... 19/ <https://bit.ly/3hWqSxn>

Also, DOLEMITE IS MY NAME, also written by Scott Alexander & @Karaszewski, makes for a perfect double-bill with ED WOOD and didn't get nearly the attention it deserved. The ending, with Rudy in the limo reading reviews and then arriving at his premiere, choked me up deeply. 20/

I could go on, so instead I'll just list all the other great Hollywood films that I've learned from: SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS, THE PLAYER, A STAR IS BORN (1937), HOLLYWOOD SHUFFLE, THE BAD & THE BEAUTIFUL, DAY FOR NIGHT... 21/

LIVING IN OBLIVION, THE BIG PICTURE, STATE & MAIN, HAIL CAESAR, THE DISASTER ARTIST, and TROPIC THUNDER. Let me know if there are any I've missed and what made an impact on you! END

FORMAT TIPS FOR WRITERS
WORKING WITH REPS & PRODUCERS

Written 08/01/2020

Some quick formatting tips for writers who are working with managers, agents, and producers! These are tips that I typically have to walk through with clients early in our relationship and they're simple stuff that makes life easier for all of us. 1/

All these tips are geared towards making it easier for us to find and organize the relevant documents for your work. Reps and producers have multiple clients/projects (sometimes with the same writer), so this makes it easier for us to file the docs and locate them quickly, 2/

The first one is, when you're sending us a document, please **TITLE** it, either with the name of the project or, if it's not related to one project in particular, with your name. I.e. **YOUR NAME** Brainstorm document. Aim for clarity and specificity in the file title. 3/

Please **ALWAYS DATE YOUR FILES**. This saves us from having to do it. Date them with the date you sent them, not with "1st Draft" or "Draft IV" or "New version" or "Final Draft." As well, if it's an outline, put the date and title on the first page. This is **SO** helpful. 4/

Please always put in page numbers for outlines and other docs (with scripts, it's done automatically.) This allows us to easily communicate notes ("Top of page 4.") I know PDF programs display them sometimes, but it's easier to track the page number this way. Trust me. 5/

Please always send your documents to us as PDF files. Not Doc files or FDX files. (Unless specified for a particular purpose.) PDFs are easiest for us to annotate and read. 6/

Now we arrive at the **BIGGEST** one: Revision mode. Please, please, please, if you're revising your script, **DO SO IN REVISION MODE**. If you don't know how to do this, it's easy enough to google it and find out. This is a skill that you **MUST** learn. There's no way around it. 7/

That way, it's easy for you to send us a **STARRED** draft, where all the revisions are marked with **STARS**. This is key, because we get so many drafts of different scripts and it may have been a while since your last draft, so we need to be able to easily track what was changed. 8/

I know some writers **HATE** starred drafts because they want us to re-read it in full from the start. To really understand the new work in full and take it in the context of the entire script. But here's something I've noticed... 9/

The brain, once it believes it has read something before, skims that material. We pay **LESS** attention, not more. As a result, the starred draft allows us to focus on the new work and contextualize it. 10/

Also, when you're doing rewrites for studios, they'll require **STARRED** drafts. And when you're heading into production, at a certain point the script will be **LOCKED** and you'll be required to do draft sets, etc. Learn revision mode now, so you're already familiar with it. 11/

I've had to ask clients to go back and mark their revisions after the work was done, and inevitably, it's hard for them to remember and they forgot to mark something, so on & so forth. So just learn it now and use it. Trust me, for working writers, it's second nature. 12/

For outlines and other non-script docs, while there is a bizarre, awkward revision mode in Word, I've found it easier just to have clients **BOLD** the new work as they go. That way I can tell what's been added or changed easily. 13/

On behalf of all reps/producers who've gotten "clean" drafts and documents with no page numbers, vague file names and no dates in a non-PDF format, THANK YOU for reading this thread. Hopefully, it's helpful! END

HOW THE BLACK LIST WEBSITE
WORKS FOR REPS

Written 08/02/2020

Wanted to write about my experience using @theblcklst and how I've found a number of clients from it. It feels to me like there's a lack of clarity out there as to how the site operates, at least from the representative side, so I wanted to walk through that. 1/

A point of clarity: this thread is about @theblcklst website where writers can pay to have their scripts hosted and get feedback on them. This is NOT about the annual Black List, which is voted on by industry executives and lists "the best liked" scripts of the year. 2/

There is a GREAT deal of confusion on this, which I understand, since @theblcklst website sprang from the success @franklinleonard had with the annual list and, to my knowledge, Franklin wanting to use that to create a resource for all writers to have access to the industry 3/

Furthermore, I have NEVER uploaded a script I've written to @theblcklst, so I've never had that experience. The clients I've found via @theblcklst have, so they can speak to that. I can only speak to my experience on the other end of the site, as a representative. 4/

For a representative (or producer), our experience of @theblcklst is that of a database we can log into. When we do, it shows us a dashboard of trending scripts and recommended scripts, based on the preferences we inputted when we registered. 5/

It also lists scripts by genres, so you can pick one and slide through, with the title, logline, and writer name displayed in each dashboard. There's a thorough search function, where we can search to find a script that fits any possible prerequisite(s) we're looking for. 6/

Once we've found the script that we want to check out, we just click on it and we're taken to the script's dedicated page... 7/

On that page, there's the logline again, as well as info about if they have reps, if there's a director, if it's based on anything, etc.. There are many, many tags for a lot of million things, from budget level to surprise endings to female protagonists, etc. 8/

Up top, there are multiple options, allowing us to read the script on the site, have it sent to our email, to contact the reader, etc. If there are public evaluation(s), we can read them, if we scroll down below the logline. 9/

My colleagues at @bellevueprods will often log on to the website multiple times a week and search for scripts that sound intriguing. Personally, I don't do that as much so I've come to rely on the weekly email that we get from @theblcklst 10/

This is a weekly email (one for pilots and one for features) that lists the scripts that the Black List's readers have recommended that week. It's my understanding that any scripts that score an 8 or higher are included on this email. 11/

Whenever I get this email, I try to look at it ASAP. It lists the recommended scripts: title, writer, and logline. I read those loglines carefully. If anything seems intriguing, I click on the title, am then taken to the script page, and read the first 15 pages of the script. 12/

If I like those first 15 pages, I download the script so I can read it later in the week in full. Often, I'll read the first 15 pages of 2-4 scripts, but only download 1 or 2 of them. Sometimes none. Sometimes all 4. You never know! 13/

I do try to move fast because people pay close attention to those emails and tend to move quickly on things that they love. I don't want to read something I love a week late and find out another manager has already signed that writer! 14/

If I like the entire script, I reach out to the writer via their email, which is usually on the cover page, and set a meeting. I've only had to use the Black List "contact writer" function once, on @SheridanKevin's script, because he had ZERO contact info! SO MYSTERIOUS! 15/

I'll set a meeting, if they live in Los Angeles (and there's no pandemic going on.) Otherwise, we set a call (or a Zoom nowadays.) Then it's about us each getting a sense of whether this is the right match of manager and client! 16/

I really do pay close attention to @theblcklst because, as @franklinleonard mentioned earlier today, I've found SO MANY clients via it. It's simply the easiest and most high-quality source for writers that I know of. At least as a representative, it makes everything SO easy. 17/

Of my personal clients, I've found @S_Malhot, @SheridanKevin, @ChrisParizo and, most recently, @JDeladriere via @theblcklst. They're not on twitter, but I also found clients Leigh Dunlap & Tom Cartier (whose THE BUILDER was on the annual Black List) via it as well. 18/

I also found my client Kathy Charles via @theblcklst after reading her script THE KINGS OF MAINE. Later that year, I took that script out, with it being so well-received that it landed on the annual Black List, as she discusses here: 19/ <https://bit.ly/3hY8IR5>

My colleagues at @bellevueprods have also found many of their clients via @theblcklst, including one whose movie they just produced with the client writing and directing. From the script they found on the Black List website! 20/

My goal with Twitter has been to make what I do as transparent as possible. Because I've found so many amazing clients via @theblcklst, I wanted to let everyone how the process worked on my end. 21/

I've found so many amazing writer clients via @theblcklst who changed my life. And I believe working together has changed their lives as well. It's made many of them into my great friends, as well. If just for that alone, I really appreciate @franklinleonard for creating it. END

WRITING WITH INTENTION

Written 08/02/2020

I think one of the aspects that separate casual "writing for fun" screenwriters from professionally-minded writers is INTENTION. As in, how is what you're currently writing/about to write a step towards your goals as a working writer? So I wanted to walk through that. 1/

I was having a conversation with a friend who's a fellow manager. He and his writer client were discussing her potentially writing a biopic script about a famous musician. Since I've done a few of those, he wanted to discuss how to go about it. 2/

/The pertinent question I asked was, if that script is successful in gaining attention (as it was unlikely to sell, due to the music rights being controlled by the musician), then will it lead to the sort of opportunities that the writer wants? 3/

This may seem obvious, but if you write a music biopic that gets attention, those are typically what you'll be offered a shot at being paid to write next. Hollywood is very big on hiring people who've done one thing well to do that same thing again and again. 4/

That doesn't mean that it'll be the ONLY thing out there, but it'll probably make up the MAJORITY of opportunities coming your way. Just as, if you wrote a horror film that was a success, you'll likely be brought horror projects to write and rewrite going forward. 5/

Writers often chafe at being put in this "box," but the reality is that we put actors and directors in those boxes constantly. Hence the shock when a comedic star does a dramatic role. And it's unlikely that people are bringing David Fincher romantic comedy scripts. 6/

My general rule of thumb is, it's better to be on a list for a specific genre (especially if you're high up on that list) than not on any lists at all. And if you can always spec a new script to break out of the box. 7/

Matthew Weiner was on BECKER until he specced the pilot to MAD MEN. John August was best known for a great, unmade adaptation of HOW TO EAT FRIED WORMS, so he was brought kids projects. I believe he wrote GO on spec to break out of that box. And so on. 8/

Those writers (though already successful) wanted to move their careers in a different direction. So they wrote a script that reflected the direction they wanted to work in. 9/

They were clear in their intention -- this script is going to open me up to these new opportunities. But there would have been no point in them writing those scripts if it didn't reflect their intended direction for their career. 10/

To circle back to my manager friend's client, she didn't particularly want to be known as a writer of music movies. And so, even though the script idea was the type that could get attention if done well, there really wasn't a point in her writing it. 11/

If you get attention for doing something well, but it's not something you want to do again, then that attention is somewhat wasted. Especially given the amount of work you need to put in to make anything truly great to the point where it gets attention (and can't sell.) 12/

Beyond the simple fact of writing the sort of scripts that you want to write MORE of, I want to also talk about intention in terms of a simpler goal. What sort of career opportunities am I intending for this script to bring to me? 13/

Sometimes, I'll start working with a client whose script I liked, but didn't feel was commercial or unique enough to take out to show the town. Often, I really like their voice and I really like them, but I don't think the script is the best reflection of them. 14/

That script interested me, but it's not what I think will interest the town. But, as a result of that script, we start working on something new that I feel WILL be a great way to introduce them to the town. 15/

My bar is different than that of an executive or an agent. I'm looking for someone with a great voice, even if they need polishing or help developing the right script to showcase their voice. Agents are, generally, looking for someone they can start making money from ASAP. 16/

Executives are either looking for 1) something they can get made ASAP (this is ideal) 2) an incredibly unique voice that they, their bosses, and buyers will IMMEDIATELY respond to and want to meet (those are rare.) 17/

So a lot of the time, the script that introduces the writer to me is not necessarily what I think should introduce the writer to the town. As we all know... 18/

But that doesn't mean the script was a "failure" -- it introduced them to me. And if their intention was to find a manager who works closely with them and believes in them, then the script was actually a great success! 19/

So, when you're figuring out what you want to write next, really ask yourself -- what do I want to come from this script? What's the clearest, most realistic goal for this script to accomplish that will push my professional screenwriting career forward? 20/

I'm not talking: "It'll get made, make me rich, and win me an Oscar." I'm talking "It's going to be a great example of X-type of film. It'll hopefully get me a lot of meetings at producers that make X-type of film because I love those films and I want to write more of them." 21/

It's about figuring out what that goal is, and therefore what's the right script to accomplish that goal? And being ruthless in determining that. @IanShorr had a cool idea for a movie years ago, but realized it wasn't the right project for him to write at that moment. 22/

To me, that's the difference between a pro and an amateur. They might both find the same "cool" idea -- but the pro writer realizes, as cool as it is, it's unlikely to sell or get made or even be a useful sample. Whereas an amateur writer simply writes the cool idea. 23/

If I had to simplify my advice about intention down to a single line, it's this: How will this script set up the next script I write after it? That's the question you need to ask yourself and be rigorous in thinking through it. 24/

Starting to think this way about the scripts you write and how you're laying down the path for your screenwriting future is something I honestly believe can be the difference between being a professional writer and merely hoping to be one. END

WHEN WRITER/REP RELATIONSHIPS
GO WRONG

Written 08/06/2020

Lately, I've been approached by a number of writers with questions about their managers. The circumstances are different but the question is always the same: is what their manager doing normal? Is this just how things go? And the answer is almost always No. 1/

In work, and in life generally, if you feel like you're not being treated properly, you're probably right. You aren't. And I've found giving advice in those situations is usually just confirming what the person already knows. But may not want to acknowledge yet. 2/

Some writers are so happy to have a manager that they'll excuse their poor behavior or find reasons to justify it. Until it gets so bad that they ask people they know: is this normal? Is this just how it goes? 3/

When I talk to those writers, I confirm that No, that isn't normal. No, that's not professional. And then I ask them what they want to do about it. And often they're still not sure. 4/

And I understand that, I do. They worked so hard to get a manager, that not having one feels like a step backward. It's oddly scarier to have no manager than one who isn't responsive or whom you don't trust. It's the devil they know. 5/

But I always say - right now, you essentially don't have a manager. If they're not adding anything, then what do you have to lose? What would really change in your life for the worse? 6/

So many conversations about professional relationships end up sounding like dating advice and this one is no different. The bad manager they have is standing in the way of them having a good one. 7/

Until they take the brave but sometimes terrifying step of letting them go, they'll never be able to see if there's a better one out there. Or if they even needed a manager in the first place. Might sound like heresy coming from me, but they very well may not need one at all. 8/

Doing the right thing can be terrifying. But the truth is, you probably already know what you need to do. And you'll never know how good things could be if you're stuck with the bad you know. Trust yourself and you'll rarely go wrong. END

CUTTING THROUGH THE NOISE

Written 08/07/2020

I recently passed on something using a phrase that's probably the one I use most often to pass: "Doesn't feel unique enough for the marketplace." I wanted to talk about what that expression means and why that's my most-used reason for passing. 1/

I use that exact expression (or a variation of it) when passing on queries or when I'm discussing a client's potential ideas for their next project. I'd say it's probably 50-75% of the reason I pass on things. 2/

The simple fact is that the marketplace for film and TV content is as crowded as it's ever been. There are more outlets putting out content than ever before. There are so many shows, movies, and so on. And more pilots & scripts out there than ever before. 3/

I was fortunate to have a meeting with legendary producer Dan Lin early in my career. I asked Dan what material I should bring him and his answer was simple: "Things that cut through the noise."4/

Material whose concept was so unique and intriguing that it could cut through all the noise and chatter of the information overload world that we live in. Material that immediately made itself known. Whose concept alone marketed it. 5/

That's obviously a tall order. But it's what buyers are looking for from original material. Because all that original material is competing with the latest reboot, remake, sequel, and adaptation. 6/

Why is Hollywood so obsessed with IP? Because it's been pre-approved, it has a fan base. It has already been successful in cutting through the noise before -- they're hoping it can do so again. 7/

Your original material doesn't come with that pre-approval. There's no guarantee there's a waiting and eager audience for it. Think of the difference between the first Matrix and the sequel that's currently in production. 8/

The first one wasn't buzzed about at all when it was starting production. The writer/directors were talented, but not household names. Its marketing was mysterious and vague. It seemed cool, but no one quite sure what to make of it. 9/

Whereas, the latest sequel has everyone clamoring to know what might happen, full of theories and rumors. There is absolutely an audience for the new Matrix film and everyone involved knows this. 10/

But the first Matrix? The reason it got made was that it didn't FEEL like anything else out there. It felt unique. Yes, it had aspects of many existing films, books, comics... but they'd never been combined in quite this way. It was absolutely its own thing. 11/

I would say 90% of the ideas that come into me, whether they're queries or my client's brainstorm ideas, feel too similar to existing material. Especially the queries. They often feel EXACTLY like a film that already exists. 12/

They feel generic, like only a location was changed from another film. It's a masked killer hunting teens or it's a cabin with a spooky spirit or it's a family road trip to spread grandma's ashes. So on, so forth. Lots of people returning home to run the family business. 13/

No one wants to read those. No one wants to make those. And DEFINITELY no one wants to figure out how to market those. Which, honestly, is a huge driver of what studios decide to make -- can we market and sell this to the audience? 14/

The question you'll often confront in making something is WHY. Why do people need to see this? Why is this different from what's been made before? Why now? Why this way? Why? 15/

And the answer can't be, because there have already been movies exactly like it! Or at least, that's not where you want to start out at. Studios can obviously grind down the unique edges of material to make them feel generic as hell. But they rarely start off as generic. 16/

What I often advise my clients is: look at your favorite movies. Look at your DVD/Blu-ray collection (if you still have one.) Is there a way to approach that genre/type of story from a different angle? Is there a POV that we haven't paid attention to before? 17/

This is what @LWhannell's INVISIBLE MAN did so incredibly well. Your standard "invisible man" film focuses on the Invisible Man and his struggles. I mean, he is the titular role! 18/

Instead, Leigh focused in on Elisabeth Moss' character -- told the story from her POV. It was able to explore how abused women are often not believed and all the societal advantages a rich, white male abuser would have. And how Elisabeth must figure out how to fight back. 19/

By shifting the POV, Leigh was able to give the film a WHY. It's very different from what came before and it has now set the tone for what those types of films can and should be. 20/

It's a tall order, but that's what the marketplace is looking for from your original material. It needs to have a reason to exist -- a why should we make this film? Why do people want to see it? Why should it exist? 21/

And the answer is, because you may have seen this type of film before, but you've never seen it this way. And doing it this way makes it compelling, intriguing, and compulsively watchable. 22/

That said, figuring out concepts that can thread that needle is one of the hardest things in the world. There's a reason those who can do it well repeatedly (Shonda Rhimes, Ryan Murphy, JJ Abrams...) are so richly rewarded. But nobody ever said it would be easy! END

USING TIME OF DAY CORRECTLY IN
YOUR SLUGLINES

Written on 08/08/2020

Was commenting on @nevslin's thread (Follow him! He does great twitter!) and somehow wound up talking up small things (fonts, etc.) that execs/reps fixate on. What's my fixation? Time of Day in slug lines. Wanted to do a quick thread on what is often done wrong. 1/

For the purposes of clarity, when I say Time of Day in slug lines, I mean the DAY part in:

INT. JOHN'S HOUSE – DAY 2/

I would say the ones I see used badly most often are:

MOMENTS LATER

LATER

CONTINUOUS

SAME

These are almost always used incorrectly. And you really don't need to use them that much. They're for specific occasions only. What are those occasions? 3/

Let's start off with MOMENTS LATER. I've seen some people use this for ALMOST EVERY SCENE IN THEIR SCRIPT! Please don't be that person! 4/

MOMENTS LATER should only be used when you cut into THE SAME LOCATION as the previous scene, but it's a few moments later. It's to showcase that there has been a brief jump in time. THAT'S IT 5/

To clarify, if a character goes from INT. RESTAURANT to EXT. RESTAURANT, it's not MOMENTS LATER! They've gone from DAY to DAY (or whatever the time of day is.) But, you say, it IS moments later. Yes, but we ASSUME that. Because time moves (normally) linearly in scripts. 6/

This is even truer with LATER. Which I also see used ALL THE TIME in scripts. To which I'd say, yes, in a linear script, every scene is LATER. That is how time works. The moment that I'm writing this tweet is later than when I wrote the previous tweet. That's a given. 7/

For LATER, the proper use is the same as MOMENTS LATER -- it's to show the passage of time in the same location in back-to-back scenes. Often, a larger time jump than "moments later." i.e. John works on his tweets >> LATER John is reading the responses to those tweets. 8/

It doesn't work in this version: John works on his tweets >>> Ian is writing his script >>>> John is reading the responses to his tweets. Because when we come back to me, it's ASSUMED to be later. That's how the passage of time (and cutting from locations) normally works. 9/

LATER is used to clarify that there has been a jump in time (which you'll probably also indicate in the description.) You can use HOURS LATER or MINUTES if you want to be more precise. That is the only time you need to use it. 10/

I had a client use LATER for almost every scene in their script. Reading it, I had no idea what time of day (or even what day) any scene was in the script. Was super confusing.

You don't need to use it very much! 11/

Besides when/if your script goes into pre-production, first question the line producer will ask is - what time of day are all these scenes? Because they need to know what time of day to shoot them (or make it appear to be.) 12/

CONTINUOUS. Whoa boy. Here is a link to one of the most iconic shots in cinema history. This is one of the only times that you should use CONTINUOUS as the TIME OF DAY. 13/

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPiSB8fSviE>

It's all one continuous shot, right? That's when you use it. When a character is moving from one scene to another in a CONTINUOUS shot -- hence the descriptor. That's it! And unless you're writing BIRDMAN, you're probably not doing that very much. 14/

SAME. Ookay. So SAME is used correctly more rarely than anything else here. First, here's what SAME is not. SAME isn't the same time of day as the last scene. That's silly. It requires me to go back and figure out what time of day the last scene was. Way too much work. 15/

You know on the TV show 24, when they break into separate boxes and show different characters doing things at the same time? There's also a movie from 2000 called TIMECODE that's like that the whole film. 16/ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY4hf-wePs4>

Those are the ONLY times that you need to use SAME. When it is the EXACT SAME MOMENT. I don't think I've ever actually seen a script where it was used properly. Maybe once or twice, but it didn't stick in my mind. 17/

So what should you do for Time of Day? Honestly, NIGHT or DAY works perfectly fine. You can get fancier with MORNING, MIDNIGHT, DUSK, DAWN, and so on. But unless the scene requires it specifically, you really don't need to do so very often. The simpler the better! 18/

Hope that's helpful for everyone and, as with my thread about revision mode/PDFS/etc., hopefully, it results in fewer scripts sent my way that are riddled with SAME and CONTINUOUS! END

GENERAL MEETING TIPS

Written on 09/01/2020

I had a couple of calls last week with recent USC grads as part of their General Meeting program. They got me thinking about how underrated general meetings are, as well as what's worked best for my clients going on them. So wanted to do a thread discussing them. 1/

So as to avoid the Sturm und Drang of the last thread, I'm gonna post up a Parental Advisory going forward: These are simply my opinions; Your Mileage May Vary; This advice is freely given and may be freely ignored; As @jelenawoehr puts it: "if it don't apply let it fly." 2/

First, want to clarify what a general meeting for a writer is. It's a meeting with someone (usually an exec at a studio, network, or production company) after they've read your material. The exec liked your material and now wants to get to know you. 3/

Sometimes showrunners will do generals with writers, as will actors or directors. But those are rarer as showrunners tend to read for staffing their show, and actors and directors tend to read for potential projects. They're simply too busy to do generals very often. 4/

So the good news about a general is you're coming into a "warm" room. They're already a fan of your writing. You don't need to spend your time selling them on your talent. They already like your writing, that's why they're meeting you. 5/

One of the questions a student had for me was about how to "sell yourself." And honestly, the best way to sell yourself is to BE yourself. That said, it should be the best version of yourself. The version of yourself that you present on first dates. 6/

The exec is already a fan of your writing. Now they're trying to decide if they're a fan of you. To figure out if you're someone they can see themselves working with on a project for years. And if so, what sort of projects those might be. 7/

Execs probably take at least half a dozen writer generals a week. So it's about them finding the writer they really connect with, the person they HAVE to find a project with. The writer they truly sync up with and want to work with over and over. 8/

And to be clear, the opposite is also true. For writers, generals are a great way to find out who you want to work with. Before I was a manager, I met @IanShorr and @acidinyourmouth via generals and started working with them as a producer. Now I work with them as a manager. 9/

Generals are also an excellent way to find out who you do NOT want to work with. Who is the person that you don't click with, the person you don't share a vision with? The next time you have a spec script, it'll be good to know who would NOT be the right partner on it. 10/

In terms of the actual meeting, as I mentioned, you're looking to be yourself, albeit the most presentable version of yourself. Be clear about what you're passionate about, what got you excited about being a writer, and what sort of projects you'd like to write in the future. 11/

I advise clients to prep a list of 10 films and 10 TV shows from the last decade that they feel they could have written (as opposed to simply being a fan of.) You're looking to give execs a baseline for the kind of projects that excite you. Specifically, ones that get made. 12/

Ideally, the next time that exec reads a book or article that's up your alley, they say, "This would be perfect for that writer I met with!" And they then bring it to you to adapt. 13/

It's better to be more targeted (ie. "I love conspiracy thrillers!") than generic (ie. "I love thrillers!") That way, there's a clear guideline for what excites you and what you could do a great job at. Obviously, this should be in sync with what you've written. 14/

All that said, I've often told clients that the best general meetings are ones where no work was directly discussed at all. Where you talk about your favorite restaurants or dating or board games. At the end of the day, it's about making a connection with the exec. 15/

You shouldn't feel the need to pitch a dozen projects or list your favorite films. Prep all that, but take your cues from the tone of the meeting. If you're having a fun time talking about CLASS ACTION PARK, there's no need to awkwardly pivot to pitching your next script. 16/

Ideally, they come away a big fan of yours. "We could have kept talking for hours!" is what reps love to hear. And then, when your next script or idea is ready, those execs are excited to read it. Because they like you and want to work with you. 17/

A quick word about answering "What are you working on next?" I've advised clients that the less you say, the better. Don't launch into a full-blown pitch. Simply say, "It's a supernatural twist on THE USUAL SUSPECTS" or so on. Be mysterious! 18/

I know this sounds absurd, but the fewer details you give, the more intrigued they'll be! They'll try to get more info, but just say something a la "I'm still working on it." If you have reps, blame your reps. "They want me to keep it quiet." 19/

See, the goal of a general meeting for an exec is 1) Get to know the writer; 2) Find out what they're working on next and try to get dibs on it as early as possible. But that second goal may not be what's best for your project. So you want to proceed carefully here. 20/

If you have reps, the execs will follow up with them and ask to see your new project ASAP. Preferably before anyone else. If you don't have reps, they'll probably email you directly about it. And they may follow up constantly in the weeks and months to come. 21/

That passion is great, but make sure that 1) You only show material when it's ready. Don't get rushed. 2) You operate in terms of what's best for your project. You don't owe that exec anything for taking a meeting. If they're the right fit, great. If not, that's okay too. 22/

Just because execs are super excited to read your new script doesn't necessarily mean they'll engage on it. They may just want to get a first look before anyone else, so they can tell their boss "Yeah, I saw it early, but it was a pass." Proceed carefully. 23/

You want to allow yourself all the options by not committing to anything in the room or afterward. Take your time. It's your project, your hard work, and your shot. Do it in consultation with reps, if you have them. Work out a strategy that makes sense for the project. 24/

Sometimes amazing relationships and projects can arise from generals. I've had that happen for me and seen it happen for clients. Most often, they don't result in anything tangible. At least, initially. 25/

But the more you do them, the better you'll get. And that IS something tangible. You may take 10 generals that result in nothing, but they'll make you better at number 11, which does turn out to be incredibly useful. And it might not have gone that way if it was your first. 26/

And a general that seemed pointless at the time may lead to a great opportunity years later when the exec is at a new company that's a better fit for what you write. Or tells a studio exec friend who's looking for a writer on their project about you. You'll never quite know. 27/

As always, hope all that information is helpful. Let me know if you have any questions or there are areas that I neglected to cover in this thread! END