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# THE FIRST DRAFT DONE

BY DAVID SHUTE

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### About The Book

This book is intended for any screenwriter who finds they have issues completing an entire draft of anything. This ranges from thorough procrastinator who will get things done eventually to the master of the incomplete who has the first 40 pages of any number of unfinished screenplays. If you are that person then you are who I originally began collecting this material together for.

In my own writing it took well over a decade to identify the habits and tools that allow me to get through to a finished first draft consistently. As those habits and tools have become further ingrained the process has become increasingly easier. My hope in this book is to assist others in skipping the discovery curve by sharing all the things I wish someone had told me fifteen years ago.

If you are not that person then it may still be worth the time to read through this book. It is geared toward struggling screenwriters, however, it is not exclusive to them. Many of the tips within could be applied to any creative project that requires significant organization and invested time. I personally find that reading articles or listening to discussions on organization and task management are useful to me if I can find and adopt even a single solid tip. If I can find something that inspires a method of organizing my work better that is my time well spent. Even the act of critically panning

another's ideas is an exercise in affirming your own practices and ideas.

This book is not about finding your story or your characters. I don't touch on industry formatting or how to find an agent. Selling a script is the last thing in the entire process I truly care about. Instead this book is a collection of guidelines on how to finish that first draft with a few asides thrown in occasionally where I consider them beneficial.

In the end this is a short book that happens to be free. If nothing here applies to you then all you have lost is the time to read it. That's it. That is the worst case scenario. If it does help you, if you do find the material beneficial, then I have reached my goal in documenting my own processes.

## About Guidelines

Guideline is the key word to take out of here. It is very important to keep in mind while reading that these are guidelines that work well for me and nothing more. Your mileage may vary.

This collection exists to help make writing easier for you. Getting bogged down in rote procedure, someone else's procedure at that, which fails to serve your needs and interests is pointless and self-defeating. The largest frustration I have reading many other books about screenwriting is how didactic they can be. To that end I suggest that you use what works and discard the rest. I offer that advice in reference to all sources of information you encounter in life.

In retrospect nearly everything contained in this book seems like obvious, common sense concepts. I find it funny how they weren't common sense for me until I stumbled into them. As soon as a habit or tool would sink in I would be shocked that it took so long for me to reach that realization. Sometimes common sense is so obvious that we ignore it as too pedestrian to possibly work.

## About Me

The writing is everything for me. I derive a significant amount of pleasure from writing and that drives me forward. The actual process is just as important to me as the original idea and the end result. I enjoy the work involved. The work bridges the two and is self evident to me considering how much of my life I've spent putting words down to page. I am a better and more balanced person when I write.

The contents of this book were collected for two very basic reasons.

The first was to document the tools and habits I have acquired over time that have had a significant impact on the efficiency of my writing. They almost all fall under the categories, "I wish someone had told me this fifteen years ago," or, "Why didn't this exist fifteen years ago?" As noted above, my hope is that through documenting I will have relieved others of having to figure it all out for themselves. This is the driving reason for releasing this book under a Creative Commons license. Free access for everyone.

The secondary reason was very likely out of pure ego. As much as I like helping others I also like having my name attached to things. Childish behaviour, I'm aware, but behaviour I'm happy to indulge none the less. This is especially true when something useful comes out of my ego.

I also did this because I write from a place of joy. This is partially an admission masquerading as a warning that I am not a professional writer. As of the writing of this book my only production credit is for a one act play through a local community theatre group. Not the most auspicious credit listing. Indeed, it doesn't get me invitations to lavish Hollywood parties. More importantly it says something about my personal view point on the audience for this book.

If you do not find joy in writing then this may not be the right book for you.

That is not to suggest you must be in a heady nirvana as you write. Each character typed further pressing you upwards through greater heights of rapture. Far from it. I am just as everyone else is behind a keyboard. I often find myself very frustrated while writing. Conversely I also get extremely excited about new ideas. I enjoy wrestling with possibilities and mulling them over until something falls into place that just feels right. I love creating

worlds on the page. I love the challenge. I have an overwhelming sense of satisfaction when I type the final words in a screenplay. This is my joy in writing.

I say this book is better suited to those who find joy in writing as I believe your best available tool is time. I can sit down at the computer with an entire screenplay from start to finish in my head and it will still take me three months to finish the first draft. The reason is all because of time. Writing a screenplay already requires an investment of time. There is no reason, if you intend to spend that time writing to begin with, not to use it to your best advantage.

I wrote my very first screenplay 15 years ago at the age of 16. I had no idea how to write a screenplay, no real concept of what I was writing, and a painful case of Tarantino fanboy syndrome. I ripped through that script in a matter of five days from start to finish. I thought it was genius. Youthful hubris.

What I didn't realize was that I had a laundry list of issues.

- conflicting character actions
- a sagging second act
- ambiguous relationships
- uninspired senseless violence
- a conclusion that sounded like the most amazing thing ever in my head that fell flat on the page

Even worse, I kept writing in this manner.

Once an idea grabbed a hold of me I simply started typing. I was working off my own example, having been successful in completing a script previously, by simply sitting down and writing. I assumed the writing was in the moment. It was best to let it take me where ever it wanted to go.

It's little wonder that I failed to complete another script for over eight years. I'd start working through it, hit a rough spot, and quit. I wasn't sure where to go in some cases. In others it just wasn't as good on the page as it was in my head. The worst part was that I was always struggling to find

new ideas. I had massive dry spells between when the last project fizzled out and finding something new that I felt I could plunge into.

I went from 1993 until 2001 without finishing another script. It took writing with a partner and roughly outlining the story we were trying to tell for me to get any traction on it. Even then it was thin on story and big on violence. What we were excited talking about was flat on the page and I simply couldn't figure out why. Any time I would attempt going back to edit I would completely lose my drive ten pages in and stop. It was completely disheartening to love doing something so much and yet feel so utterly defeated by it.

I waned for another year. False starts everywhere. It wasn't until I was too lazy to get off my bed and sit at the computer that I discovered my first real tool in writing, the outline.

I had done some limited outlining on the previous project with my writing partner but it was very basic and more akin to the stream of consciousness writing I was failing at with my other scripts. We were talking about screenwriting and he had mentioned an idea he had been mulling over. We bounced some ideas off each other in passing and threw it down on the page. From there we assumed that was all we needed. Ready to go.

This time around I started jotting my ideas down in a notebook. Some of the ideas were full scenes and others were simple sentences. As I wrote new ideas came up forcing me to revise earlier ideas. I would take some time to realign older scenes with newer ones. Add some foreshadowing or set up a later pay off.

Once I was done with the basic outline I realized that balance was missing. Some scenes moved around while others were completely repurposed. When I sat down to write the script it was so clear in my head from start to finish that it went down to first draft almost as quickly as my first script did. It also read significantly better than anything else I'd written up to that moment.

At the end of the day it was still flawed. I still rushed. I still didn't have all my tools. To be honest, I'm still not done looking for all my tools just yet. But it's getting better each step.

# Chapter 2

## My Process

### Rationale

This book has been entirely patterned after my own processes and practises. How I find my way from initial idea along to a finished first draft. I'm going to repeat those two sentences again. My processes and practises. My way from initial idea along to a finished first draft. It's very important to keep in mind as you read that these are my successful tools. The entire package may not be right for you so pick and choose as needed.

I'm a big fan of breaking down problems into smaller pieces and tackling them one at a time. I assume it's the tiny computer programmer in my head that I mostly keep locked tightly away. I let him come out and play every so often. He gets tiny samplings of freedom before he's supplanted by the overbearing, mace wielding writer that dominates my conscious mind. That poor little programmer just doesn't have a chance.

If all you're doing is sitting down and writing you're essentially just transcribing down the first thing that comes to mind. You're missing all of the options and opportunities that come with outlining while aiming directly for any number of easily avoidable pitfalls. Ever been writing a draft and written yourself into a boring dead end? I've been there. More times that I'd like to admit. Completely unsure of where to go next and intimidated by having to go back and edit 60 pages. Completely crippled by the editing work to support the changes required for the next scene that I don't even have yet.

Writing a draft should be about revising ideas. It should not be putting them down to paper to begin with. My structure is very rigidly set up in three one month segments for that very reason. No matter how comfortable I am with the material there's always room to grow.

By dedicating an amount of time to a project I have the ability to go over it again and again as many times as I need to. I liken it to the concept of *esprit d'escalier*. You always think of the perfect witty comeback after you've walked away from the argument and are half way up the stairs. It's simply not reasonable to assume that all your perfect and witty dialogue, settings, and plot points are going to come out fully formed. The only way to beat the staircase comeback is to stretch the argument out for as long as required. For me, that's three months.

## Three Smaller Problems

The first month is dedicated to pure note taking. I take an entire month and just let things run free to allow time for free form possibilities. Very often I find the story I started with and the story the notes have given me are very different beasts. The notes generally tell something much more provocative than what I'd originally conceived. Options I wasn't even conscious of tend to form. Things I never would have seen in a script are abundantly obvious in the roughly connected random details. Everything from character notes and scenes to broad themes and tones.

The great part about this period is you're just generating material. The more material you have to pick through the more choices you have. It's a month long game of "what if?"

The second month is taking these notes and making sense of them in the refined context of a story. Organizing the individual bits into scenes and then organizing the scenes so they make sense one after the other in an outline. Determining and clarifying the core emotional quality, the basic plot progression, and overarching themes. Question everything to ensure nothing has been missed, including checking for things that don't belong, and that everything is behaving well with it's neighbour.

By the time I get to the third month I'm very anxious to begin writing. I've been living with this story for two months so I get right down to it.

Guided by a clear and refined outline I start putting words down and keep doing so until it's complete. By the end of the third month I have a complete first draft that typically reads like a polished second.

# Chapter 3

## Tools

The following are just some basic tools. Most of these should be easily available to virtually anyone reading this document in some form or another. Everything listed here is something I use at some point throughout the process. I've added a list of software and speciality tools that I'm using currently toward the end of the book.

You'll build your own list of tools over time, hopefully adding to the ones you've already got. These are just ones that have worked well for me previously and continue to do so now.

### Pen and Paper

This one seems so painfully obvious that I shouldn't have to write it down but I do. The widespread availability and ease of use of computers has removed a real need for this for many people. I had a couple of years pass where I didn't have to physically write a single thing down to paper. There just wasn't a need. When you remove that ritual from your life it stops being common place. It's good to be consciously aware of this option and the freedom it allows.

## **Journal**

A journal is very important for me. I don't care if it's a flowery diary with a cheesy brass lock on it or a blog so long as it gets the job done. There are things that you write down in a journal that would never make it into your notes. Tone, events, personal tidbits, everything that happens in your life. It's a fantastic resource to glance through when you're looking for ideas. It's also constant writing practice. I don't care what you write but writing every day is good for you, even if it's just to write down what you're thinking about and how you're feeling.

## **Index Cards (cork board optional)**

Index cards, or a hand cut facsimile, are an excellent tool for outlining virtually anything. Incredibly flexible and very cheap. There's a reason writers have been using them for a long time now.

There are software products that have index card functionality available. If they work for you that's great. I find that having physical objects you can lay out in front of you and reorganize to your hearts content has many benefits. I also use a cork board that will support 56 3"x5" cards. It has served my every need so far. If you've got the extra \$30 and the space for it I recommend it.

## **White Board and Dry Erase Markers**

Keeping all your notes on your computer is good. It's flexible, convenient, and compact. Having to turn on your computer and open a document to jot down a five word sentence is pointless. Wasting a piece of paper is equally pointless. A simple, easy to reach and reusable space like a white board is ideal for short notes and reminders.

## **Voice Recorder**

There are a lot of options here. I use a small digital voice recorder. It was cheap and effective when I bought it and I can line out the headphone jack

to the computer. From there I can record my notes on to my computer for later use. Some voice recorders will record directly to .wav or .mp3 format that you can transfer to your computer over USB.

Tape based options are available. Most cell phones have a voice notes option. Failing all the above, as long as you have an answering machine at home you can always call and leave yourself messages. I use my voice recorder for dictating notes when it would be inconvenient for me to stop and write a note down otherwise.

## **Digital Assistant**

I'm fairly ambiguous on this since you can use whatever you would like. My current solution happens to be a BlackBerry. Before that it was a Palm. Before that was a \$20 combination calculator/address book/notepad. Whatever is in the budget and will get the job done is what I mean in this case.

This is useful for me in situations when I can't whip out a voice recorder, writing notes out long hand would be awkward, or it's three in the morning and my wife is trying to sleep in bed beside me. Digital options are good because they are compact, (generally) expedient, and able to function in dark places.

## **Subcompact Laptop (Netbook)**

Anything that is super small and reasonably cheap. I'm using an Asus EeePC. It is very small and fits in my hand just like a regular paper notebook would. I once carried my EeePC around a museum for six hours. I barely even recognized I was carrying it around. It's that light and comfortable. When I had thoughts I sat down, popped it open, and started writing. There's something very liberating about being able to write in the middle of a museum as efficiently as sitting at your desk. If you've never done so give it a try. You'll find yourself bombarded with ideas.

A netbook is brilliant for me because it means I don't have to be tied to my desk. If I want to sit in a coffee shop or a park and write I can do so very easily. On nice days I take my EeePC in to my backyard and spend the afternoon writing outside while my dog runs around. The built in WiFi all

these systems have means you can connect to the Internet anywhere there is wireless access.

## **Software**

Comfort and functionality are key here. I use Celtx for screenwriting for several reasons. It's free, has a project orientation, and is very intuitive. You don't have to fight with the program to get it to do what you'd like in many cases. I have also used TiddlyWiki to organize my notes since it allows web browser based interaction and note tagging.

I have additional software and web sites toward the end of the book.

## **Access to the Internet**

By reading this book I can only assume that you have said access but really stop and think about what you have access to. You can safely replace your dictionary and thesaurus with a web search. Screenplays, stageplays, literature, random sentence generators, industry interviews, formatting tutorials, research materials, and virtually any piece of information that you want. It's all out there. You just need to go get it.

Even if you can't find it directly there are always people out there who have first hand knowledge and experience. The Internet allows you to seek them out and ask questions directly. Sometimes a five minute conversation can be more effective than months of research.

The Internet also opens up a world of possibilities for receiving and providing criticism. A major hurdle for many writers is finding individuals willing to read their work and honestly critique them. You've got some fantastic writing and critiquing circles openly available through a search and a little dedication.

## **A Programming Language**

I recommend this for anyone that uses computers for more than just reading their email, gaming, or checking a couple sites regularly. That's not to say

you need to be a master programmer. Understanding the basic concepts of computer programming and having enough skill to hack together small helper applications in any programming language is enough. Several of the tools that I use for my own writing are small, single purpose applications I designed myself.

For example, I coded up a small Ruby application that retrieves random names from a list of names scraped from U.S. Census data. At the click of a button I have random names generated for me to choose from. Even if I only get temporary names until I come up with something better it's time saved to focus on the more important aspects of writing.

# Chapter 4

## Collecting

As mentioned, my typical process takes me three months to write the first draft of any feature length screenplay. It helps me to break up the tasks into distinct units that I can tackle in order. The entire first month is collecting notes and information from wherever I can. My time is spent generating content that will later be organized and built up in to the framework of my story.

### The Initial Idea

This all starts whenever my brain latches on to an idea. If you're at all like me you constantly have little ideas that flit in and out of your thoughts. Most of these are fairly transparent. They come in, you recognize them, and then they go back out again. Chances are you've forgotten them within a couple minutes. Occasionally something will float through, something I may not even be directly conscious of, and my brain starts pulling it apart. Adding pieces here and there, mulling over possibilities, and refining points. Typically I find myself a couple days later, either while I'm trying to go to sleep or just waking up, and realize it's the only thing on my mind.

The unfortunate part for me is that this is usually while I'm working on other projects. I have had many projects tossed to the wayside because they weren't turning out quite how I'd expected and something shiny happened to pass through my field of view. One of the hardest things I've had to learn

is to just to get those shiny new ideas down to page and forget about them until later. Do as much as I need to that I feel sated and can focus back on the current project as the task at hand.

As an example, while I was working on polishing the outline for another project I had this concept of magic and an underground culture based around magic pop into my head. That was it. No real context to it or storyline. I wasn't even really sure if it was a screenplay or what format it would be best suited to. Just something that popped into my head. I assumed it would dissolve into nothingness and join the rest of the partially formed ideas.

As the day progressed this basic concept became a focal point for coalescing ideas. Suddenly I had a central character, some snippets of dialogue, and a general tone. There were some ideas that could take it in a film direction and others that promoted a more serial comic book platform.

Once I realized these ideas were a point of distraction I pulled out one of my notebooks and got to work. I put down all the notes I had rambling around my head, put my notebook back on a shelf, and let them be. I was already working on a project. These notes would need to wait.

## Exploration

When I was finished with my active project I came back to the magic concept. Out of the ideas that I had laying around it was the one that interested me the most. During the five weeks until I was able to pick it back up I'd jotted down another dozen or so notes and had some very basic workings of a story line coming together.

- the detective
- the impending apocalypse
- the woman he needs to save in the middle of it all
- some scene thoughts
- some dialogue thoughts
- some general thoughts and clarifications

This brings to me one of my favourite points in writing. The collection phase. This is where I literally do nothing and let my mind do all the work for me. I'm not working on any other projects so my mind is free to wander and I love the places that it goes. I don't force anything. It's very much like a kid playing with toys, moving them around in different configurations and trying to get the most fun out of them. All I need to do is make sure that when the bits and pieces come along I have a place to get them down.

It's a fantastic place to be as you're completely unbound. Nothing is fixed and everything is open for speculation. Even the notes that I already have are up to be scrapped if something better comes along. It's all about exploring the notions that you already have and seeing how they interact and coincide. Letting them suggest possibilities to you.

Writing is like any other problem. Sometimes you just need to step back and let your brain work it out while you're on vacation doing other things. The best way to help it along at this point is to do things that leave your mind relatively unoccupied. TV (aka the chattering insane-o box), video games, and the Internet are poison in this phase. While you may not be doing a whole lot of thinking you are being told a whole lot. It doesn't allow your mind to wander.

I find that the best time for ideas are while performing simple manual tasks that don't require any direct thought. Mowing the lawn or going out for a walk are good for me. One of my most productive times is when I'm laying in bed before going to sleep. Other things that help me are taking baths or cooking. Anything that separates me from attention grabbers, especially the chattering insane-o box.

At this point of the process I tend to write on paper a lot. For every project I have a notebook. I use these notebooks the most during this phase of writing. All my little ideas and inklings can be found in these pages. I take those notes and transfer them over to a digital medium at some point for later use.

I physically write everything down at least once. It gives me time to think about it. I don't know about you but I can type nearly as fast as my brain comes up with the appropriate words. When I'm typing I'm not thinking about what I'm writing. I'm writing what I'm thinking. That's not necessarily a good thing. The more time it takes me to write something down the more time I have to think about it and question it which almost

always leads to new ideas. The act of transcribing from page to computer adds another section of time to think it through further. The more time you spend on something the more you're going to get out of it.

## Interrogation

Periodically, around every five days on average, I subject my existing material to a conscious light interrogation. I'll go back and take some time to go through what I've already written and start asking myself questions about the material. As I'm working through my notes I write these questions down to actively work through later. This is a huge part of my collecting process. Even if I don't necessarily have the answer I can at least explore options.

This time around I have a detective to work with. He's saving a girl so he's clearly the protagonist. There's a relationship there but it's not well defined. These are two of the questions from my notes during a very early interrogation phase.

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By detective do I mean a private investigator or a police detective?

Being a cop would get him in to some places with a bit more ease. He'd also have some support if things got out of control. Being a P.I. he might get better street level support. Adds a bit more tension if he's in trouble since he's pretty much on his own.

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Which ever direction I go will make a huge difference in how my story is going to progress. My lead character's actions are informed by his identity. The earlier I can define his identity the sooner I know how he will react to situations. Once I have that it becomes easier to determine the appropriate road blocks to throw in front of him.

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She walked away and only bothered to come back in the form of needing help. Just as he was unable to stop himself from being drawn into her to begin with he couldn't help himself from trying to find her and protect her. How does that sit with him?

He hates how he feels when he's with her. He's submissive and bent to her will which is completely different than his assertive real life.

Even after he realizes he's under her control and breaks it he continues after her. The submissive lapdog may have been her doing but he still cares for her through it all. Do you save the person you love or the rest of the world?

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Notice that right at the end I've created a new line of questioning in the process of filling in character gaps. By exploring my character I've found a potential theme to lay over the project. I likely would have never asked that question if all I'd done was dive directly in to the writing.

## Research

The truth is our scripts should be getting better and not worse. One of the ways that we can flesh out our work and spur on new ideas is to do research. It's not as tedious as it sounds.

So far we're talking about a private investigator, magic, and the apocalypse. All the information we need is right in front of us. The Internet is a beautiful thing and just off the top of my head I've got a half dozen search terms that I can seek out to help myself through.

- private investigators
- apocalypse stories
- apocalypse predictions
- demonology

- paranormal magic
- mythological creatures

The amount of information I can pull up on any of these is staggering. Not only that, but I can reference religion on the apocalypse stories and predictions. There are entire organizations dedicated to the paranormal. Private investigators are easy to get in contact with. Search any news site with the words 'private investigator' and you'll pull up a huge list of articles. Some relevant and some not but who knows what ideas you'll get from those.

However, there are better tricks than just passively reading web pages. The best piece of advice anyone can give about research is this; people love talking about things they are passionate about. This book is a prime example of that. Private investigator forums would be a great place to lurk in this instance. You can read entire conversations that are just out in the open. Get a feeling for how they talk and think. Some of the tricks of the trade. If you want to take the next step post a general question. If you mention that you are a writer and are striving for accuracy people will spill their guts to you.

An example from my own life on how this worked for me.

I was writing a scene where paramedics were coming to take a man to the hospital who'd been severely beaten by a half dozen other people. The man was nearly dead. For me it was just a matter of them showing up, putting him on a gurney, asking what happened, and leaving the scene. In fact it's a fairly minor scene to get my character from point A to point B. I didn't really give it much thought.

I posed the question to a former paramedic on what the actual protocol would be in this case and got back some interesting information I wasn't expecting.

- the scoop and run days are over
- much can be done in the field
- severe trauma would require stabilization and possible airlift

How fantastic is that? I hadn't even considered needing an airlift. A couple sentences in an email and now I've got additional drama and power

behind the idea that this was a very savage beating. It also spins the action out of the expectations of the characters involved. I think most people who aren't somehow involved in injury and illness care would have a similar "scoop and run" idea to the one that I had. How many movies and TV shows have trained us to think just that? It might confuse bystanders that the paramedics just don't peel him off the ground and toss him in the back of an ambulance.

Even better than email is having someone you can sit down with and talk to them about what they do. Try and get an understanding of their motivations as to why they do what they do. Anecdotes they can relate. Insights into the processes, procedures, and protocols. Virtually anything they say can be useful even if it's just to help your understanding of the subject. Someone who has dedicated the last decade or more to a trade or practice is going to be more useful than your independent research over a couple weeks.

Here's another quick example.

I had a character in a short film script I was working on that I wanted to have a cue for their stress level and how they dealt with stress. I thought it would be interesting and against 'common practice' to have him sing a song in his head through voice over. I was thinking something folksy but had no clue what I was looking for. A song I've always known as 'Irish Lullaby' was stuck in my head but it was the wrong tone for this script.

I lucked in to a situation where one of the guys I was already chatting with is Irish. He gave me a couple of different songs that the son of Irish immigrants would very likely know. Folk songs that would have accompanied his childhood. Looking through his suggestions I found "The Fields of Athenry". The song was brilliant for the project I was working on. The tune and lyrics both had the tone that I was looking for and gave the character a sense of heritage, family, and childhood. A fifteen minute conversation saved me days of research and uncertainty. Very likely he gave me a better answer than I would have found on my own.

## Wrapping It Up

By the time I've hit my fourth or fifth interrogation of the material I start to realize that I'm actually piecing together a scene by scene outline in my head. In some cases I've actually started doing the work on the page without even being aware of it. As soon as I recognize that I'm doing this I stop myself and take a step back. I'm not in a hurry.

I generally have anywhere from two days to a week before my expected date is reached as to when I'm to start properly outlining. I've been doing nothing but thinking about this project for almost a month now. It's time to take a break. I don't actively try to forget about what I'm working on but I also don't seek anything out either. If notes come I jot them down but I consciously separate myself from the project so I don't start diving into additional work. I've already got time allotted for it in the future.

## Useful Tools

Gmail has a couple of very fantastic functions that make it an awesome note taking tool.

- **Accessibility:** If you have an Internet connection you have access to Gmail. There's support for everything from the most basic phone WAP service to full standard browser support.
- **Storage:** You can keep every note you've ever written in there, although I would suggest using a mail client like Thunderbird to download your mail locally just to have a second copy in case the worst happens.
- **Searching:** Google search engine right at the top of the page to search through your own email. You can use tags in your notes to help distinguish them from each other. Then use the search feature offered to individually grab the ones that you want. For example, my magic story could have @magic in them at the end of each note. I search for @magic and all my notes for that project are listed.
- **Labels:** Create custom labels and assign them to emails. Click the label and it will show you all email associated to that particular label.

A little note maintenance early can save you a huge amount of time later when you start putting together an outline.

To this end there are also some fantastic note taking sites like UberNote and Evernote which I'll touch on later.

## **Final Notes**

Even if you think you know what's going in what will become your screenplay think about other things. When you're collecting notes just let it go anywhere. You may have your beginning and ending. That's no reason to avoid thinking about what happens outside of the middle. You may find that your ending is now the middle plot point when the events that happen afterwards spin things off in a different direction and you now have a new ending that happens much later. Be willing to accept change and expect to be surprised.

# Chapter 5

## Outlining

### Organizing

How you did your initial note taking is going to directly dictate how effectively you can organize once you get to the outlining phase. In a lot of ways I do the majority of my organization while taking notes. The more organized you are the easier it is to collect all your material together making cohesive connections. No matter well organized you are there will always be a bit of work to do in the outlining phase.

The pieces are already there just waiting to be discovered, connected, and put in the right order. At this point I'm generally using two tools; Celtx for it's project management abilities and index cards on a corkboard for organizing segments.

I try to split my materials up into a few basic groups to make the process of retrieving what I need when I need it easier. The groups (typically) are:

- character notes
- dialogue
- settings
- scenes
- themes

All of this is added to my project in Celtx. Use whatever software is comfortable for you. I recommend software with a project orientation or a wiki style that allows you to easily organize and link related information. It will go a long way in helping you maintain control over all your notes.

Each of my scenes are grouped logically to form segments. If three scenes span a couple locations but are all tied by a theme or time frame then I merge them together as a segment and write it down on an index card.

I'm looking for brevity in this case. A simple title that helps remind me what the segment is about and two to seven sentences outlining what the general details are. That's it. I don't need more because all my specifics are in my notes elsewhere. I can always retrieve that information when it's required.

Out of context my notes doesn't make much sense if you're not as familiar with the content as I am. Even in context it's a little rough but it's enough that I know what the segment is about and the key points I wanted to hit.

Once I've got all my segments written down I move the cards to my corkboard roughly in sequence from start to finish. I should be able to stand back, look at the corkboard, and be able to read over my entire story from start to finish in a few minutes. It helps me to visualize the whole script.

If you've got a couple different plot lines running through your story it also helps to colour code the cards. A couple different coloured markers go a long way. Different coloured cards may be the way to go if you've got access to enough different colours. I think I would get frustrated taking this approach when wanting to reassign cards or possibly assign them to multiple plot lines. I also tend to use red when a segment is completely rewritten or new to help me identify them at a glance.

## **Interrogation**

This is really the best part of the outlining process for me. It can also be the longest. The entire point is to squeeze as much information out of your story as possible with one simple question: What am I missing?

I read each segment card individually. At this point my concern is only with that segment.

- Are there characters missing from the segment?
- Would the segment benefit from having additional characters to interact with?
- Am I hitting some character or plot point that moves the story forward?
- Am I missing a plot point that should be mentioned here?
- Are the characters acting appropriately to type, for the scene, and in regards to other characters?
- Is this segment relevant to the emotional core that ties the entire story together?

Next is to read segments by two in sequence.

- Do the segments logically go together?
- Is there action going on between these segments that I missed that needs to be inserted?
- Even if there isn't a scene worth adding in do I know what's happening between them?
- Are the off screen events worth referencing during on screen segments?

Then I try to look at it over all.

- Is everything balanced? (colour coding helps here)
- Is all the action or drama lumped into the second half of the second act?
- Can I move any of the material elsewhere to balance the action or drama and still have it work/make sense?
- Are there any segments I'm not looking forward to writing? These need to be replaced. If I'm not looking forward to writing them I doubt anyone is going to enjoy reading them.

- Am I missing preparatory information for a scene or plot point earlier in the script?
- Am I missing opportunities to add foreshadowing or recurring themes?

During all this time I'm still continuing to take new notes and evolve the story. It's much easier to rewrite ideas at this point than it is to rewrite scenes later when you've got 120 pages of script to sort through.

## Outlining

Once I've done all the organizing and interrogating I start to work on a scene by scene point form in one long document. Functionally, all the hard work has been done and now it's just a matter of making note of key settings, props, actions, and dialogue. It can be as simple as dialogue flow and key actions.

Depending on how in depth I get my first outline is generally six to ten pages. My goal is really to get the essence of the script down to page. Getting down the things I'm fairly confident aren't going to change. Once that's done I interrogate again, make any required changes, and expand.

As I make another pass I'll block out a bit more of the conversations as opposed to key dialogue. Attempt to find some witty responses or driving statements to keep the momentum between characters. I also try to get the overall feel of the entire scene down rather than just the key points.

I'll keep repeating this process until the end of month. My outline will continue to progressively expand as I go. I generally get three outlines. My final outline before I start scripting ends up around 45 pages in point form. At this point the script is almost entirely on the page. It's just missing the appropriate format for the most part.

# Chapter 6

## Writing

Everything up until this point has been fairly fun. It's been about creating and exploring. Keeping in mind that I generally have a 45 page point form outline at this point I pretty much have the entire script from start to finish already written down. It's just not in the right format. All that's left is a little effort to convert in to a proper screenplay and filling in whatever gaps exist. I should be able to work through a first draft very quickly.

In truth I can. There's no reason not to be able to write ten easy pages in a sitting. The majority of it is just copying over from point form to the proper format. When I'm under pressure I can generate quite a lot of material relatively quickly. Still, when I sit down to actually start writing the first draft something inside me shuts down. It takes a significant amount of effort to get me working through it. When I step away from the computer I feel exhausted afterwards. I don't know why the scripting process is so taxing on me. It just is.

The worst part is that there's really no trick to getting the writing done other than ass in seat. That's what this entire section is about. Ass in seat. You can't write if you're never there. If you put in the time in the chair and maintain focus while you're there you'll get where you're trying to end up.

## **Maintaining Focus**

A lot of the tips in this section can apply over the entire project structure and not just writing a draft. I've collected them here for two reasons. The first is ease of use; a bunch of different tips scattered all over the place really does nothing to help you. The second is that writing the first draft is the place where I really need the most assistance in keeping my attention directed at my project.

## **Touch The Project Daily**

There's a lot to be gained from staying fresh with the project you're working on. Even if it's just a matter of taking a quick look over your notes and then stepping away it's better than letting it go cold. I've had a couple instances in the past where I've let a project go cold by as little as three days and struggled significantly when I returned to it. Attempting to reacquaint yourself with the material and ramp back up is an easy issue to avoid.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that you simply can't keep the project in its entirety in your head all at once. That's the reason for breaking the project down into smaller pieces in the first place. To make it manageable. When you let the project go cold you may forget small details or changes you have made in the script that aren't reflected in the notes. Even in writing you should be rewriting after all.

Even if you don't intend to do much work keep in mind that small efforts over time can net huge results. A good way to think about this is if you wrote nothing but a single page each day. You could reasonably have a 90 page script every three months. Four feature screenplays, albeit on the slightly shorter scale, a year just by committing to writing a single page every day. You'd still have five, sometimes six, days a year to take off with this schedule.

## **Time Off**

Although in direct conflict with my above advice you need time off as well. If you're reading this it is reasonable to assume you are not a full time writer which means you have family, work, friends, school, and a whole other slew

of things taking up chunks of your time. We all get days where we get home and just want to do nothing. This is a perfectly reasonable desire as long as it's not winning out frequently. If you're spending more time in front of the TV than your writing program you need to recognize the issue exists and fix it. You also need to step away from writing occasionally and relax in whatever manner suits you best. If you burn out you're not going to want to come back any time soon, if at all.

Even consciously choosing a day off is beneficial. At the point in the writing process that this comes around I've been doing nothing but thinking about this project for two and a half months. I deserve some down time to just relax and unwind.

Step away from the computer. It'll still be there when you come back.

## **Ideas Not Related To The Project**

It's bound to happen. You're in the middle of your project, perhaps even in the middle of a sentence and some genius idea strikes. This was previously the bane of my existence. I'd spent all this time on a script and then this little idea comes along and it's clearly way better than what I'm working on.

Something shiny passed by my peripheral and, damn it, I have to chase it.

Resist this temptation. The best resolution for this is to stop what you're doing, transcribe all your thoughts in a safe place, and then forget about it. It will still be there when you come back. Your focus needs to be the project you're currently working on.

## **Time Spent**

Four hours of time spent sitting in front of the computer for three pages of script is pointless. Unless those three pages are genius you are wasting your time. The best way to get the most out of your time is to find out when you get the most writing done.

I was the perennial night hawk for close to fifteen years. I was always up until at least two in the morning. For quite a few years my cue to go to bed

was the sun coming up and the birds singing. I'd do my typical day to day, spend some time with my wife, and then when the rest of the world went to bed I'd start writing. I did all my writing work at night. I would get things done but it was still largely an empty exercise.

I'd be tired from having already gone through an entire day and I'd have all the little things built up on my mind. I'd sit up much later every night that I should have since I wasn't getting enough writing done. This, in turn, meant I wasn't getting enough sleep at night. It was really difficult to pull my focus away from simple, mindless distractions because my brain was trying to unwind and rest. Once I had switched my focus and started getting work done I'd have a very hard time keeping my attention on writing. It was a perpetual spiral of exhaustion and self defeat.

It was entirely by accident that I found my resolution. I am at my most alert and attentive within five hours of waking. That is when I get the absolute most work done. If it hadn't been for my poor sleep schedule functionally knocking me out at seven o'clock one night I would have never known.

I woke up at five in the morning feeling completely rested and a little guilty that I hadn't done the work I'd intended to do the previous night. I sat down and started writing. I got more work done in an hour then I had in the entire previous week. By the time I needed to get ready for work I'd done a staggering amount of writing and I still felt fresh and ready to go.

I got up the next day at six to test the repeatability of this and was pleasantly surprised. I'd always been the night hawk, the guy who slept in, and now I regularly get up every morning two or three hours before I have to. I get so much more work done now.

This isn't to say that you need to start waking up three hours earlier. As much as I get done it's still hard for me. I really like my bed. I am good friends with sleeping. What I suggest here is that you try writing at different times of the day, before and after meals, whenever you can, and find out what works best for you. You may find that nights work just fine or that small bursts of writing spread out across the day is better suited to you.

## **Leaving Ragged Edges**

In the past I've avoided doing this. My marker for the end of the day would generally be the end of a previously chosen scene. I'd pick up a couple scenes for the day and work my way through them. Once I got to the end then I could keep writing if I chose to do so but I could walk away knowing my requirements were satisfied.

From a completion of goals point of view this is a great idea. It gives something definitive to work toward. The basic thesis of this book is breaking the process up in to smaller tasks makes the over all project easier. This is no exception. Having that marker to cross is a great motivator for getting through each day's writing. It's fault is that it doesn't really give you a lot to work with when you return the next day.

Leaving a ragged edge is something I've started doing recently. Instead of working through that final scene stop somewhere toward the end. Stop in the middle of a sentence. Picking up in the middle of something gives early momentum. Rather than having to readjust to writing, check what you last did, and approaching what's next you just start writing. This is doubly effective for me in dialogue. If I leave a characters dialogue hanging part way through it's very easy for me to sits down and start working. From the time I stopped writing until I picked it up again that little bit of unfinished dialogue has been nagging at me to be completed.

## **The Fear of Finishing**

This can manifest in a lot of different ways. It's a hard one for a lot of people and I'm a little bit guilty of it myself, especially when I'm ahead of schedule. If I have six days left to go and one scene left to write I will wait until the absolute last minute to do it. In some cases I'll start revising the scene outline instead of doing it on the page while I'm writing. It's odd. I've spoken to other writers who will go back through their script and start editing instead of finishing the draft.

I wish I understood why I do this. I think it has something to do with letting go of the project. At this point I've been completely immersed in it for nearly three months but it could be something else entirely. What do you want? I'm a writer not an psychoanalyst.

The real trick for this is recognizing what you're doing. As soon as the thought creeps through your head that you are procrastinating rather than finishing that's your cue to adjust your focus and get back to work.

## Expectation Dates

I don't have deadlines because I am not a professional writer. The dates I set for myself I consider my expectation dates.

- I expect to complete note gathering by a particular date.
- I expect to have my outline complete a month later.
- I expect to have my first draft finished one month after that.

As you start to work with your own dates you'll refine what works for you. Regardless of whether your dates are shorter or longer the most important part is trying to stay within the boundaries you've created. Discipline with your dates is a habit beneficial in the long term. It's a habit that's indispensable if you intend to write professionally.

Endless note taking and outlining is just another form of procrastination.

"These are supposed to be the phases where the broad strokes are polished and the small details are massaged into shape. A first draft should be birthed from these notes fully formed, shouldn't it?"

No. I'm sorry. It just doesn't work that way.

Even when writing your first draft you should be interrogating your material and yourself as an audience. Nothing is permanent and everything can be changed. You've created the idea of where it is intended to go and how to get there. Where it actually ends up is entirely your choice.

At some point you need to step back and realize that no amount of work will make your script perfect. There is no such thing as perfection. Put the appropriate amount of work into your project. Meet your standards of quality and then move on to the next step.

## Tenacity

Sometimes tenacity just doesn't cut it. Writing a complete script is always a good exercise on its own. It's practice writing. As writers we should be writing constantly. Sometimes you just need to get the bad ideas out so you can start to make room for the good ones. Writing is a way of training yourself to make better use of the next idea. Sometimes you need to rethink what you're doing and approach it from a different angle. Sometimes it's best to walk away.

Good reasons to walk away.

- You don't have enough materials despite note collecting and outlining.
- Your materials are so massive you could never cram it all in to one project. Time to step back and think about medium and possible serialization.
- You have all the materials but it's so terrible that you will struggle through every single word you have to put down to page.
- Concurrent development bites you in the ass and that project you've been lovingly slaving over has just been released by a studio under a different title.

We don't always make it to the end of the first draft. No matter what tools and habits we form it's occasionally not worth the journey. For me, the best time to walk away is right before starting the first draft. You should really know before writing that first scene if this is going to work or not. If it's not going to work in any way, shape, or form then this is the time to put the project to rest for now and start on something new. Part of the desire to tell the story should be purged by the outlining process enough that it won't constantly be in the back of your mind.

If I have already started writing I push through for several reasons.

- My instincts could be wrong. Although it may seem like a train wreck where I'm at I may be too close to it. It could turn out better than I expect and I am a fairly harsh critic of my own work.

- Writing a full length script takes a certain amount of dedication. There's nothing wrong with working on that dedication. Practice writing. Always practice writing.
- It gives me material ready to be cannibalized in the future. Over all the project may be lacking but there may be good characters, dialogue, or scenes that could work elsewhere.

## **Distractions**

Time dedicated to writing is fantastic and ultimately useless if it's not utilized. If you're anything like me you write primarily on the same computer you surf, play games, and chat on. The reason for the ubiquity of computers is their broad usefulness. That's a killer when you're having a hard time focusing in the first place.

I know when I'm writing at the computer I'm constantly getting new instant messages or emails, I remember about that website that I wanted to check out, or there's a forum conversation that I've been meaning to follow.

"I'll be back to writing in five minutes."

That's the point right there. Five minutes of writing can feel like an hour sometimes. An hour of web surfing almost always feels like five minutes.

It's not just the obvious distractions either. I can't tell you how many times I've sat down and then left my chair five minutes later to go grab a drink. Get settled back in and I'm up in five minutes again to go to the bathroom. Another five minutes to get something to eat, put on a sweater, change into shorts, whatever. It's hard to stay focused but if you're going through the trouble of dedicating time it's a good idea to think ahead about limiting your distractions.

- Create a new user on your computer strictly for writing and install only the required programs.
- Bring food and drink with you.
- If you're writing for extended periods set reasonable break times where you've already planned to step away for five minutes.

- Make sure you are dressed appropriately and comfortably.

When I'm sitting down for a long writing session I have a couple different things that I do.

- Always bring something to drink.
- My desk chair gets replaced with my slingback chair.
- A foot stool is put under my desk so I can put my feet up.
- My keyboard comes down into my lap.
- My monitor is pulled forward to make it easier to read when I'm leaning back in my chair.
- All unessential applications are minimized or closed.
- The theme is set to a high contrast white text on black background to minimize eye strain.
- Music that won't distract me is playing to help drown out background noise.

Some programs have possibilities to help you stay focused as well. Com-piz, a desktop effects application under Linux, has an ADD Helper mode that brings down the brightness, contrast, and opacity of all inactive windows. I use this feature a lot.

Sometimes the distractions are family. I don't have a whole lot of advice there. I'm lucky in that I say that I'm going to write and I'm left alone barring anything that needs my immediate attention. If you are dedicating time to writing you are clearly serious about your writing. Perhaps it's time to make sure that your family understands how much it means to you and how they can help.

## **Time**

These are all habits. Like any other habit it gets easier with time. If you're having problems with any aspect of writing just keep at it. It becomes second nature in time.

Steal habits from wherever you can. There are productivity books, magazines, and blogs. Talk to other writers about their process and the things that work for them. Some may not have a lot to say about it because it's mostly automatic for them. Others may drop amazing insights down in front of you to study from.

## **Dealing With Humps**

A lot of people call it writer's block. I call them humps because there's nothing stopping me other than the effort taken to get over the hump and willingness to put said effort forth. I'm never truly blocked. Nothing frustrates me more than a writer who needs a rainy, grey Sunday afternoon with their favourite cup of tea and the planets aligning for the inspiration fairy to flit through their window so they can write. It's an excuse. It is procrastination.

The advice here could apply to working through any problem regardless of whether it's about writing. It's all about problem solving.

## **Sleep On It**

I find my most abstract thinking happens right before I fall asleep and right after I wake up. I'm amazed by the things that come to me when I'm not actively pursuing them. Since your subconscious, and by extension your dreams, are a reworking of the experiences of the day all it does is work out the problems on your mind.

This is essentially where this phrase comes from. If the answer isn't readily apparent keep the problem at the front of your thoughts. When at rest let your subconscious do the work for you.

## **Repetitive Tasks**

This is similar to sleeping on it but in a different context. Simple tasks like washing dishes, mowing the lawn, or even taking a walk tend to be accompanied by a different thought process than when I'm going to sleep

or waking up. I find my thoughts are a bit more coherent while retaining a lateral capability missing when I'm focused on a problem. I tend to think in relations rather than in problems and solutions when in this mode. This is where a lot of possibilities comes from for me. "Wouldn't it be cool if..."

## **Interrogation**

Question everything. The answer already exists. If you haven't found it yet it's because your brain simply hasn't made the appropriate connection. The more questions you ask the more answers you get. Just a matter of asking the right question. Even these come with time.

## **Divide and Conquer**

Break the issue up into smaller, more manageable chunks. Seven small solutions are generally easier to come up with than one larger solution. This has a special relevance to writing since seven small solutions that benefit a story arc in seven small ways can be more interesting and more elegant than one solution.

## **Working Backwards**

Here's a quick exercise. You've got a guy sitting at a bus stop. He needs to end up in a bare basement strapped to a chair in his boxers with a ball gag in his mouth. How did he get from the bus stop to the basement? You know where he's going to end up so why not start from there and work backward.

- Who put him in the chair?
- Why doesn't he have any clothes on?
- Was he conscious when he was put in the chair?
- If not, was he beaten or drugged?
- How did he get there?

- Did his attacker(s) get him when he got off the bus?
- While he was on the bus?
- Did he even make it on to the bus in the first place?

Asking questions starting from the destination and working backward can give you all kinds of different options. An even better form of this exercise is to come up with several different answers for the overall premise. From there you can pull out the threads that strike you the most and massage a progression together.

When in doubt about a problem change your thinking.

# Chapter 7

## So, What Next?

Assuming you've got a completed first draft of a script you might be wondering what to do next. The answer is, truthfully, whatever you want.

Really think about it. Why did you write your screenplay in the first place? Was it a desire to write and screenplays are what called out to you? Was it because you wanted to film and needed a screenplay to have something to shoot? Are you looking at being a professional writer and this is just a step on the longer journey? When you've got that pegged down you'll be able to figure out what the next steps to take are.

Regardless there are a couple things you should very likely do.

### Step Away From The Computer

This is a big one for me when I've completed a first draft. I have a definite problem with what is on the page and what my brain knows should be there. If I read something I just wrote I have a tendency to overlook missing words, misspelled words, and clunky sentence structure. I know what it's supposed to say and that's what I read, whether it's there or not.

The only way I can fix this is with time. It needs to be fresh for me to be able to fix some of the rough spots. As soon as I'm done a first draft the first thing I do is forget about it. Whether it's moving on to another project, playing video games, or just getting drunk and unruly I need to step away

for a minimum of three weeks. This way, when I come back to it I can take it in from a new point of view.

## Quick Polish Edits

No one is perfect and no program checks for everything. I typically only do the single pass while writing and a lot of little things can creep in to the pages. My fingers like certain patterns of keys and will do them automatically if I'm not paying attention. Due to a couple years providing technical support my fingers still automatically type customer when I'm trying to type custom, for example. I don't always pick those things up when I do them.

There are also things that no automatic checking tools currently exist for. A big one for screenplays is the voice of the scene. Is it active or passive or does it switch between them at random? It should always be active but that doesn't mean a couple lines or words didn't slip in there unnoticed. I always find at least two or three lines that I've written in the past tense instead of the present.

This isn't another draft or even a real edit. This is just a quick polish over the surface to make sure that it's marginally presentable to other sentient life forms. Nothing makes me cringe more when reading a screenplay than to find terrible spelling, grammar, and tense issues. It's distracting and makes it more difficult for the reader. It's generally a good idea to give your readers as few reasons as possible to stop reading.

## Close Feedback

My first line of feedback is always those closest to me. They typically aren't writers but are willing to sit down, read my work, and give me some honest feedback.

I tend to stick with people close to me for a couple of reasons.

- They've all shown interest in my work at some point and supported me. The least I can do in return is share with them what I've been doing.

- Since they're not writers they'll ignore small technical details and give me more general feedback on the overall story line and characters.
- They're free proof readers. I'll generally get back a couple different pieces of spelling and grammar errors that I missed in my polish edits.
- A buffer of honest feedback between me and the outside world. Sometimes we get too wrapped up with what we're doing and can't see how good or bad it may be. It's useful to have reliable feedback to tell you when things are really wrong before they go out to the world. It's also a nice confidence boost when they're going right.

My close feedback circle, for the most part, consists of family or individuals that might as well be family. I do have a couple people in there that I really don't know that well but trust they have enough interest in my work to spend their time reading it. You can really use whoever you want. Could be a spouse, parent, sibling, friend, class mate, or random Internet person on the other side of the world so long as they are willing to read what you give them and be honest about their responses.

Try to use people that give you more than, "I liked it." Chances are that means they didn't bother to read the whole thing. They very likely got a quarter of the way in, got bored, and quit. If they read the whole thing they should have at least one piece of critique to provide. Something that didn't sit right for them. Don't be afraid to let them know what kind of feedback you're looking at receiving. Ask them questions about the things you're concerned about. Ask questions on what they really like or what really didn't sit well with them.

What you do with that feedback is really up to you. I am always grateful for the critiques I get. I'm careful to make sure that I always thank everyone. I try to take it all in objectively and figure out where the criticisms are based. The truth ends up that I treat all criticism like I do new information; I pull it apart and decide what is useful to me. The rest gets discarded.

## Peer Review

Do a search for writing websites and you'll find a lot. Many of these have forums or dedicated review sections where you can seek feedback. The real

trick is finding a place where the reviews are plentiful and useful. Soliciting feedback on a website that has a high percentage of requests and a low return of feedback is pointless. The chances of anyone following up on your work in this environment is low.

Some sites use a reviewing ratio process. You must submit a certain amount of reviews before you can submit your own work to be critiqued. These can work if you have a reputation as an honest and in depth reviewer. People will be eager to return the favour. If you gain a reputation as having interesting writing people will be more likely to review your work above others as well.

Having other writers review your work, especially writers you don't know, is helpful to get technical feedback. Hopefully you'll get some good responses on your characters, story arc, and dialogue. Purely technical points can also be very beneficial for the mostly rigid screenwriting standard. If you're getting nothing but technical notes then you may need to work on your form a little bit. It's likely causing a stumbling block for your readers.

The previous advice stands; keep what's useful to you and discard what isn't.

## **Interrogation To A New Draft**

Is this getting repetitive yet? The only way to improve your material is to question it relentlessly. Armed with the materials from your close feedback and peer review it's time to dive in and disassemble the screenplay. Be merciless. Read your script out loud, especially the dialogue. You'll be surprised by how unnatural some of the things you've written sound.

After you've completely devastated your material it's time to start rebuilding, working toward another draft. Feel free to repeat this process as many times as you need to before you're happy with the material. Keep in mind it is entirely possible to over edit and remove value from your screenplay. Balance comes in finding the right point to walk away.

Personally I enjoy the thrill of the new and tend to move to another project after the second draft is completed. I do have a couple floating around that have hit sixth and seventh drafts too.

# Chapter 8

## Dog and Pony Show

Not the most appropriate title but I found myself lacking in that field so this one will have to suffice. These are mostly general thoughts about some issues surrounding writing that I felt important enough to address but couldn't quite fit elsewhere.

### Writing With A Partner

Ask anyone who has tried this and they'll tell you it's typically very difficult. Ask anyone who's done this successfully and they'll tell you it's fantastic. It can be either or both at any given time. To get the most out of it you need to figure out a few things ahead of time.

Conflict resolution is the number one problem in writing partnerships.

When the writers don't know each other personally it's difficult to resolve disagreements. Both have an idea for where the project should be headed and vehemently disagree with the others direction. Since they really don't know each other neither wants to back down. There's no pre-existing power dynamics to draw from so each is vying for control. It becomes a situation of polite stubbornness.

On the other hand, writers who know each other but have never worked together can be terrified of bringing up issues. The personal affects the professional because neither wants to upset the other. On one hand you have

a screenplay that may be suffering due to a lack of drive to point out issues. On the other hand is a close relationship worth risking over a screenplay?

You need to deal with conflict resolution up front and honestly. Nobody benefits from an abandoned, half completed project.

## **Project Owner**

One person needs to be the project owner or lead. This has nothing to do with actual rights to the project, just who is in the position of making decisions.

It doesn't matter how this choice is made. The important part is that one person has control. This is the first thing you need to determine above anything else. This is especially true if you're working with people you've never worked with before or a group of writers. That person needs to have final say and everyone else needs to be able to continue working on from that point whether they agree or not. Projects can fall apart remarkably quickly if people disagree or can't move past a disagreement when an action is finalized.

## **Offering Reasons**

Nothing is more frustrating than having someone critique your work with little more than, "I dunno. I just didn't like it." You need to have a better reason than that if you want to change something. It's very easy to make your voice count in writing partnerships. Make sure you can back up your critiques with solid reasoning.

"I really don't like this scene. It seems awkward and, honestly, it doesn't tie in properly later in the script. If we change a few things it works better with the story arc and gives us room to do some other things later on."

This is a difficult thing to provide an abstract example of. Think in details. The more details you can provide the better your reasoning will be.

If you have a good reason it's hard to just dismiss outright. The people you're working with may not agree with your reasoning but if you have a reason to begin with you're significantly more persuasive. Expect to be

required to explain why you want to make a change. When critiques come in for your work expect explanations from others.

## **Find Some Distance**

There's a certain protective nature that many writers have about their work. We spend so much time with our writing that it can be difficult to separate ourselves from the words on the page. We're protective about our ideas and, in partnerships, our contribution. The sooner one can start to distance themselves from their work the better they'll get at writing and writing in partnerships.

I'm sure you've seen it as much as anyone else. A new writer posts their work requesting criticism. When the critiques come in they immediately go on the defensive. They can't separate criticism of their writing with personal attacks against them. The critics, who are generously offering their time to help that writer improve, clearly don't understand and/or are just being mean.

You can love your work without being in love with it. That's the goal. Criticism is there to help you improve. Take what you can use and incorporate it. Discard what you can't. Writing, for the most part, isn't competitive. The only person you should be competing with is yourself. Make sure each successive work is better than the last and you'll succeed.

This distance from the writing will make it easier to work in partnerships. You'll be able to let go of things when over ruled by the project owner or willing to change your point of view when a compelling argument comes along.

## **Compromise**

Even if you have been overruled and your ideas have been rejected they may still fit elsewhere in smaller pieces. Don't treat it as an all or nothing game. Your ideas could be used to enhance a particular scene or could be broken up and used through the script instead of at a specific moment.

## Choosing A Writer

It's not reasonable to expect that everyone is going to contribute pages to a draft. While this can happen and can work it usually ends up in an uneven mess. The tone changes through out, as does the writing style.

I personally think there's two major ways to deal with this. The first is to have each writer work on specific scenes, merge all the writing, and then have a single writer go over and compile a rewrite of all the material. This is not my preferred method.

You've already done all the note taking and outlining. There's no reason that a single person shouldn't be able to do the entire first draft (mostly) alone. Editing after the fact, or iterative edits as pages come in, will help fill in whatever benefits may have been gained by merging scenes while avoiding conflicting writing and having to entirely rewrite sections.

## Why You Should Collaborate

All of the above sets out some fairly clear guidelines but also seems like a lot of care for something that should be very simple. Better to think of these guidelines as warning signs gently guiding one away from the precipice. It's not always easy or rewarding but writers should be seeking out collaboration by default regardless, especially those working on screenplays.

Film by it's very nature is collaborative. So many different hands end up going in to even the simplest of projects. The screenwriter is the odd man out in this scenario as they tend to sit at home or in an office and just write. Functionally isolated in most cases with very little access or information past the writing phase.

A writer who works with other writers or directors or actors or anyone involved in the process has a far wider understanding of many things than those that continue operating in a darkened corner alone.

It's very easy to find your path through a story line. Regardless of whether it's the best path, and it may very well be, it's beneficial to be open to how other writers think. Understanding through how they got from point A to point B can help your creative thinking processes on future problems. Just because you have the perfect answer this time doesn't mean that you will

next time.

Your dialogue will very likely never make it to screen without being modified in some respect. Certain things come out of my mind and my mouth fairly fluidly, fairly easy. That's not true for everyone and working with actors can help you tweak your dialogue. Running lines with another person, preferably an actor or two, will help identify awkward patterns you may miss reading, stumbling blocks you may not have hit, and possible options to refine characters through their words.

Discussing visuals with a director, audio with a composer, or progression with an editor. It's all there and they all have a lot of information to share. Exploit it.

## **Maintaining Copies of your Work**

Nothing is more devastating than losing something you've invested time in. Accidents happen. Software isn't perfect. Storage isn't perfect. Fires happen. Things can go wrong. The only thing you can do is be prepared for it and hope that you never need the backups.

There are a lot of different ways that you can keep copies of your work around. I've used all of these methods and continue to use a good number of them.

### **Online Storage**

Whether you have your own website or use a site offered by others this is a great way to keep a back up copy of your work materials. There are a couple of different ways that you could go about this ranging from easy to hard and from free to expensive. It's more about your comfort level.

On the cheap but less flexible end you could just dump your writing folders in an archive and email them to a web based email account as an attachment. You could do this once a week and have full back ups for every week and still likely never approach their storage limitations. Any web based mail service should work for this.

If you have your own website and can change directory permissions a

dedicated directory would work well. Change the permissions so only the owner, namely you, can read and write to the directory. Periodically back up your writing directory to this space on your web server.

There's also a number of free and paid storage sites online. A quick web search should give you a whole slew of them. They all basically work the same way. You can either upload files directly or, some of the better ones, allow you to synchronize with a directory to automatically update only what is new.

Software can also offer online storage. Celtx, which this book was originally written in, offers its users two different online storage methods for all projects created using their software. One is for public presentation of works to be viewed and is free while the other is a paid service meant for online storage, collaboration, and maintaining iterative copies.

## Removable Storage

Removable hard drives, flash drives, or even burning to CD/DVD are a great way to get a back up. It's a simple process. Copy the directories over to another piece of media. Done.

If you'd prefer to be a bit more subtle software can assist you with the process. Any decent merge/diff application that can support directories would help you with ensuring your removable storage is up to date. This removes the need to copy over the entire directory each time.

Merge/diff applications work on a basic principle of choosing two files or directories and comparing them to see what's different. Instead of copying over your entire writing directory you can have it check what's changed and then only update those files.

I have a 500 GB removable hard drive that I do my backups to. I use a diff application to copy over new files once a week. This way if the hard drive in my system has any serious errors I still have all my writing. I don't need to spend money for data retrieval off the broken drive.

I also have a 4 GB flash drive that I keep on my key chain. On that drive I have a 1 GB virtual encrypted disk using TrueCrypt. Periodically I sync up the files on my flash drive with those on my computer. I use the flash drive

that I keep on my keys because they always leave with me. If something bad were to happen to my house, like a fire, I would only lose the work after my most recent sync.

I keep that portion encrypted just for personal privacy. In case I ever lose the flash drive there's a lot of stuff I don't care if someone has access to. I'd prefer they didn't have access my entire writing history.

Burning to CD/DVD could get expensive. There are backup software options that will keep using the same disc until it's full. You could also use rewritable discs. I can't comment on the reliability of rewritable discs since my experiences with them have been fairly limited.

## Hard Copy

Printing out your work and keeping it in a safe place is an option. You can always retype it if necessary. I really don't like this for a couple reasons.

- I don't like to spend the money on paper and toner.
- I don't like to waste the paper and toner.
- I have enough things clogging up my bookshelves.
- The chances of my retyping something just to have a copy of it on my computer are somewhere between zero and none.
- The amount of pages I would have to print to have a copy of all my supporting documents, to fully encompass a project, would be unreasonable.

I'm better finding digital means. Choose a method that works for you.

## Protecting Your Work

If you want to protect your work in the traditional sense then you really need to register it depending on your location. Your work is copyright by creation subject to your country's laws. As the creator you own the copyright.

Without proper registration good luck defending that copyright. There's no proof that you indeed are the copyright holder. As of yet I have not talked to a single person that has needed to prove they own their work however.

A lot of options exist depending on what you're looking for. Traditional copyright isn't the only route. Considering easy access and ability to copy materials provided by the Internet you may wish to choose to license your work under Creative Commons or even give it up as Public Domain. Make that ability to copy work for you in spreading your creations into as many hands as possible.

This book is Creative Commons licensed for that very reason and others. I'm not very concerned about making money off of it myself. That doesn't mean I wish to relinquish my rights so that someone else can profit off of it instead. The wider goal is to get this book in as many hands, or computers as it were, as possible. The Creative Commons license I've chosen allows me to do that.

## Competitions

I'm a big fan of friendly, independent competitions. Not so much with organized, fee-based ones.

The friendly, independent competitions are fantastic for what they are. Generally found through forums or loose knits associations on websites they can be great learning resources. They typically run based off a common criteria that everyone needs to adhere to. They're good in the sense that you get a lot of exposure to different writing styles by reading others entries.

You also get a fair bit of feedback even if all you get is the verification whether you won or lost. It's good to be able to have your work measured against others you can study from. There's also the requirement of writing on a schedule. A great habit to encourage. These competitions are generally based around short works as well. Having a collection of short works to draw from as samples or to merge in to other works is hugely beneficial.

Fee-based competitions I'm a bit more cautious of. There are enough out there that the odds are favourable some of them are just in it for the money. Then there are the ones that come with coverage services which always come

at an additional cost. If you don't get the coverage all you get for your entry free, provided you don't win, is your name on a list of those that have been cut from the competition. That really doesn't seem worth \$75 to me.

If you're looking for coverage then pay a professional coverage service. If you need the coverage you're not ready to win a major competition anyway. It'd be better to have professional coverage done first, tweak the script, and then submit to a competition if that's the route you'd rather go.

Even the professional competitions that are clearly above board are still money makers. The required amount of people to do a single read on 1000 scripts just to pull out a small percent to move to the finals would be a huge financial undertaking. No one would run these if they weren't making money off them and that's something every writer should keep in mind before entering.

I'm not going to say that people shouldn't enter fee-based competitions. There are a lot of reasons for doing so. To me the potential rewards are far out weighed by the wasted cost. It feels a lot like an industry created to make money off the lottery ticket six figure spec script mentality that has replaced the great American novel dream. I would rather take that \$75 and sink it back into my writing tools where it's going to be immediately useful.

# Chapter 9

## Software and Websites

This chapter exists mostly as an assumption. I assume that if you are reading this you have both a computer and access to the Internet. If you have a printed copy of this book and lack regular computer access then this chapter is functionally useless until such a possession becomes available. I suggest doing it soon since organizing on a computer is a far easier task than organizing on paper.

The links provided are accurate at the time of writing. Considering how nebulous the Internet can be if these links don't work try plugging the application name into a search engine. It may have simply moved as some of these programs had since I originally downloaded them.

### Software

I try to stay cross platform because I do my work fundamentally cross platform. I don't really want to have different solutions for each machine that I work on. My desktop dual-boots with Ubuntu and Windows XP, my laptop runs Xandros, and my wife's laptop runs Vista. The less work I have to do moving through these systems the better.

It's also important in that I can't choose my audience. I can make certain assumptions about you as the reader of this book. What operating system you use on your computer is not one that I can make with wild certainty. The odds are fairly good I'd be wrong. In that spirit I've limited software

entirely to cross platform applications.

The other side is that this is a free book. It seems somewhat contradictory for me to suggest commercial software. There are a great number of very effective commercial applications out there. I've avoided them all together. Partially because there is fantastic free software out there and because I don't use commercial software. I haven't needed to for quite a few years and wouldn't be able to do them proper justice.

## **Celtx - Integrated Media Pre-Production Suite**

In my estimation this is the single most important piece of software that I use. I wrote this book and managed the entire project within Celtx. All of my screenwriting is done in Celtx. I have also used Celtx to manage all the writing and production elements for a one act stage play. In most cases it performs admirably to my requirements.

I find it makes the process measurably easier to manage by allowing you to combine multiple elements in the same program. Add to that the bonuses of optional online storage for projects and a support community on the Celtx forum and it's a hard solution to beat.

For Windows users you can copy the installed version of Celtx to a flash drive and it's now a (mostly) portable application you can use on any Windows machine without having to install.

<http://www.celtx.com>

## **OpenOffice - Office and Productivity Suite**

Fantastic free replacement for the Microsoft Office suite. Even better is that it's completely cross platform and will support Microsoft file formats as well. Sometimes the right tool for the job is a fully featured word processor. The one included with OpenOffice is top quality and was initially planned for the layout and PDF output of this book.

<http://www.openoffice.org>

## **Firefox - Internet Browser**

I shouldn't have to note this but I will anyway. People really underestimate the amount of information available to them on the Internet. Having a good browser will take you a long way through navigating, finding, and indexing it.

<http://www.firefox.com>

## **Thunderbird - Email Client**

Like Firefox this shouldn't need to be pointed out but, a good email client is nice to have around as well. If you're using an email based solution to keep track of your notes downloading them into a mail client is good for redundancy. I do and it's nice to know everything is available in multiple places.

<http://ww.mozilla.com/thunderbird/>

## **Sunbird - Calendar**

The ignored step child of the Mozilla based products. A very solid calendar application with all the basic functionality one would expect. I typically use Sunbird to keep track of my expectation dates on my projects. It's always nice to have a visible reminder.

<http://www.mozilla.org/projects/calendar/sunbird>

## **Rainlendar - Calendar**

Fantastic desktop calendar application that supports skinning. I mention both Sunbird and Rainlendar because they can share the same .ics calendar file. Rainlendar is always on my desktop so I can see what's happening at a glance. Sunbird is there so I can get a little bit more in depth as required.

<http://www.rainlendar.net>

## **DirSync Pro - Directory Synchronizer**

This is something I just recently stumbled upon. It's a Java based application so it requires that the Java runtime is installed on your system. It's a very basic application that allows you to synchronize the contents of two directories. It makes the process of backing up your materials to another directory much easier as I discussed previously.

<http://directorysync.sourceforge.net>

## **TrueCrypt - Encryption Application**

Free, open source disc encryption package. If you're worried about losing your portable storage media with your materials on it this is a very solid option. I use it for a 1 GB encrypted partition on my flash drive.

This is, of course, at your discretion as to whether you want to encrypt your materials. It's always worth keeping in mind that if you lose/forget your password there is no way to recover encrypted materials.

<http://www.truecrypt.org>

## **wikiPad - Wiki Notepad**

A wiki style notebook. If you're comfortable with wiki style editing you can create and link your notes in a very similar fashion. It helps to be able to organize and link your documents logically in the same manner as web pages.

<http://groups.google.com/group/wikipad/web/home>

## **TiddlyWiki - Wiki**

This is in a unique class all it's own. This isn't a standalone application but a single HTML file that contains all the features of a wiki. It uses your web browser as a platform for the program. Fairly customizable and reusable. Since it runs in a browser you can keep it on a web site or a flash drive and have full access to all your notes anywhere. There are some useful

organization and search options built directly in. There's also the possibility for extended functionality with plugins.

<http://www.tiddlywiki.com>

## **Dropbox - Online Storage**

Fantastic application that allows you to automatically synchronize the content of a directory to an online storage space. The free version supports 2 GB with the option of upgrading to a paid service for more space. I'm currently using around 30% of that space. This becomes more beneficial when you work on several different computers. Dropbox will automatically sync across multiple computers. If I've been working on my desktop and then switch to my laptop, as long as Dropbox is running, the version I just saved on desktop will be available on my laptop as well. It also keeps a revision history allowing you to roll back to earlier version or retrieve deleted versions.

<http://www.getdropbox.com>

## **Ruby - Scripting Language**

I'm not going to push this much since the whole following section will do that for me. Learn a programming language. It will be beneficial in the future.

<http://www.ruby-lang.org>

## **Custom Software**

Learning and becoming useful in a programming language is beneficial for any computer user. This is more relevant to computer users with niche requirements. There's a lot of material out there geared toward writing as a general form. Fiction writing there's less. Screenwriting even less. The more you work with software and it's limitations the more you're likely to find functionality that you wish it had or wish it could do better.

There are all kinds of tiny, single purpose applications that you can make tailored to your needs. You'll likely never find these types of applications

just searching the web. When you've got a collection of tools that you like you can merge them into a single unified tool. The entire point is to make things easier for you and learning a programming language can do that for you.

To that end my poison is Ruby. It's light and easy to pick up, there's a large library of pre-existing functionality, and there's no need to compile. The same could be said for Perl or Python but Ruby has worked very well for me over time and is continuing to grow and develop. Working through multiple programming languages would take time away from writing. I'd prefer not to do that.

## **Persistence**

This program has gone through several iterations. Originally my concern was to have persistent notepads to be able to take around on a flash drive. Since I can find myself working all over the place having custom software made the working process easier than fidgeting with multiple documents.

The current incarnation was coded because I just wanted persistent notepads that were sitting side by side. I like being able to have two documents side by side to work on. I can have my basic notes on one side while I work on a more substantial edit in the other. It's only real requirement was to load the files on start up. It doesn't save automatically just in case I do anything monumentally stupid. I can always just close and start fresh again.

## **Name Generator**

A very simple application I put together using scraped U.S. Census data. It reads names from three text files; mens\_names.txt, womens\_names.txt, and last\_names.txt. When I click a button it grabs ten random names and displays them for me. Useful when I'm having a hard time picking names or when i just need temporary names as filler to keep me writing.

I have designs on merging Name Generator into Persistence since they tend to work together quite a bit.

## **NoteScrote4000**

Wildly mature title. I'm aware. Basically this is just my note retrieval and sorting application. It retrieves mail from an email account that I have set aside. It saves each message as it's own plain text file and strips out any tags I've added to the email. It then indexes all the tags and what files they are associated to. All I need to do to get specific notes is to click on a tag.

## **Websites**

Websites are good because they are -mostly- cross platform. There are of course exceptions, especially with sites written specifically for Internet Explorer, but generally speaking they can be used from any system. I've collected a list of website resources here that I tend to use or have used in the past.

## **Helipad**

Fantastic little tool that I just happened to stumble upon one day by accident. Completely online notepad with support for multiple files and storage up to 1 MB. That doesn't seem like a lot of storage but for plain text it's plenty.

There's a lot of these types of sites out there that will store your notes for you online. Evernote, UberNote, and Yahoo! Notepad are just few. A search for online notepad should pull up a bunch of results. Take some time and check them out. You want something that's going to work well for you. I used Helipad for a long time because it also has a mobile site that I could access from my BlackBerry with very little overhead. Some of the sites I mentioned will allow you to email notes in.

`http://pad.helicoid.net`

## **Gmail**

As I mentioned before, an easy way to keep track of notes is to just use an email address. Considering the storage size provided by Gmail with the

ability to search using Google's search engine and it's a natural choice for this type of application. Being able to label messages is just another bonus.

<http://www.gmail.com>

## **Lifehacker**

Software and personal productivity site. This is mentioned as a generally useful site. A lot of fantastic software is reviewed here along with tips to help you get focused on what needs to be done.

<http://www.lifehacker.com>

## **Zen Habits**

Exactly what it sounds like. A site dedicated to personal productivity habits. Some fantastic articles on here about how to approach changing personal habits and maintaining focus.

<http://www.zenhabits.net>

## **Netvibes**

One of my favourite research tricks is to search news sites and then make RSS feeds out of the search. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and is used to syndicate website content. This can be used to run feeds into another website or to be used by a stand alone application.

I use Netvibes as my RSS aggregator. It's web based allowing me the ability to reach my feeds through any web browser on any computer. Simple and easy. Both Yahoo! News and Google News automatically create RSS feeds when you use their search function.

<http://www.netvibes.com>

## Creative Commons

If you're looking at writing as your eventual meal ticket then Creative Commons licensing may not be for you. You may wish to take the traditional copyright and register approach. For those out there who don't mind giving away certain portions of their work then Creative Commons is something worth being familiar with.

This book is licensed under Creative Commons with a non-commercial, no derivatives license. What that basically means is that you can download it, copy it, and share it for free. So long as you don't sell it or make derivative works from it you're welcome to do what you'd like.

Even better is that I can modify the terms of the agreement if I'd like. Under the license it's been provided with you can't sell this material. If anyone did wish to sell this book I could easily negotiate a special deal that circumvents this license for that purpose.

<http://www.creativecommons.org>

# Chapter 10

## Closing Thoughts

There's a mindset that I've come across a few times and I'm sure you've heard it parroted around. You need talent to be a good writer. There are those few uniquely blessed with an innate ability to simply tell stories better than others. I couldn't disagree more.

There are two types of good writers that I have come across. The first are the ones who grew up with story telling. Perhaps they read a lot of books while they were young or even a serious comic book addiction. They were being continually fed a steady stream of story telling at their own pace. Likely they wrote a lot while they were doing so. The second group just worked really hard at writing.

The first group are typically the ones who are considered the "natural talents". Don't be discouraged by this group. They put in the hard work too. They just did it over a large period of time when they were most receptive to learning new things. If you spend your childhood learning anything you'll be quite good at it as an adult. It will seem natural.

You can learn to be a good story teller if you're willing to put in the work. I firmly believe that. Finding solid writing habits is just one part of that journey. Accepting criticism, providing criticism, and taking in as much outside material as you can are others. The last piece is time. There is no reason barring mental defect or willful ignorance why you won't get better at something just by doing it regularly over an extended period of time. No writer emerges from the womb fully formed.

It's always a good idea to question your techniques and methods. The easier and more transparent the manual aspects are the easier the entire process is. Although trite it's true, there's always room for improvement. It's just a matter of whether effort taken to implement the improvement is worth the gains received.

I don't know when I'll be a "good" writer but I keep refining my own techniques. I share them with you as part of my journey. I know that I've already said it but this book is for you. Take what works for you and discard the rest. Set your own timetables and use your own tools. In the end the most important thing is that you write as often as possible with the goal of completion in mind. Half finished work benefits no one.

Disagree with me on any of this? Have a better way to do something? Fantastic! I'd like to know. I'm always looking for new ways to refine my writing habits or approach the writing process. I love writing and love talking about it. Feel free to email me about it at the address listed in the license.

Thanks for you time.