**EVERYTHING YOU'VE EVER WANTED TO KNOW
ABOUT SCREENWRITING
<u>BUT WERE TOO AFRAID TO ASK</u>
Ian Shorr**

SOFTWARE

Q: *"I'm cheap and can't afford Final Draft. What software should I write on?"*

A: If you're writing a rough draft of something, write on whatever you want – Word, Google Doc, pen and paper, the notes app on your phone, the wall of the basement where you've been imprisoned, etc. But if you're writing the version of a script that you're going to send out to people, do whatever it takes to get Final Draft, because that program is the industry standard.

Yes, there are cheap/free screenwriting programs available, but they tend to look just slightly off from what it's supposed to look like, in the same way that those superheroes who hang out on Hollywood and Highland look slightly "off" from the actual Marvel characters and are more likely to fight you in an alley. So treat it as an investment in yourself and do what you gotta do -- save up for a couple months, put it on a credit card, throw a Kickstarter. (And not that I'm advocating piracy, but uh… all software is free software if you know where to look.)

LOGLINES

Q: *"How important is a logline as a way to rise to the top of weekend reading piles, gathering heat, and just plain selling a spec?"*

A: When an executive takes home the pile of scripts they're going to read over the weekend, they'll look for the one with the best logline and read that one first. Which is what you want, because you get them when their brain is still fresh. So creating a logline that stands out is 100% important.

Tone plays a big factor here. If you're writing a comedy, workshop the logline with your comedy writer friends to see if you can make it earn a laugh. If you're writing a horror movie, engineer the logline to give people goosebumps. But no matter what genre you're writing in, the point of a logline is to make the reader go *"Holy shit, I have to know happens."*

Take the logline for, say, THE HANGOVER – *"Waking up after a wild Vegas bachelor party with no memory of the night before, three friends must unravel what happened when they realize they've lost the groom."* That's a logline that's A: funny, and B: makes your brain chew on the possibilities of the story. Compare that to, say, the logline of something a dude on the internet sent me recently: *"An 1880's sawmill town is terrorized by a vengeful Dryad, a tree nymph protecting her forest."* That's a less effective logline because when I hear "tree nymph", I don't think "scary villain", I think I "someone I'd like to bang at a forest rave." And because she's given a heroic attribute – *protecting her forest* – I associate her with heroism instead of fear. Which makes for a confusing logline. (For a deep dive on writing a logline, there are entire classes and online articles dedicated to that; read up and see what techniques work best for you.)

FORMAT/DO'S AND DON'TS

Q: *"Which do you think are the most important rules of format to follow and which ones should you gleefully set on fire?"*

A: You want your format to follow the industry standard as much as possible. You want it to look professional – 12-point courier font, correct margins, one-line paragraph spacing, single space after the period, etc. The more your script looks like it's putting its best foot forward and showing up to the job interview in its sharpest suit, the better your chances are of leveling up. But there are plenty of formatting rules that you can bend, break, disregard. For example, you don't have to include the word "continued" when a character continues talking in a scene, and deleting that extra word helps de-clutter the page.

Q: Best way to format a scene heading. Do you use periods or dashes? Does it matter?

I use a dash between location and time. Most pro writers do. "INT. CLASSROOM – NIGHT"

Q: *What's ok to include in script actions?*

Whatever the hell you want, as long as it helps the read. "Unfilmmables???" Unfuck yourself. Your first, second and third goal is to create an engaging read. Do whatever it takes to create a vivid, clear, emotionally affecting scene and do it in as few words as possible. You can use onomatopoeia. You can use bold, italics, underlines, increased font sizes, different colors of lettering – as long as you treat that stuff like spice, and not the meal.

Q: *Best way to format a montage?*

A: Treat it like a bullet-pointed list of the things we see. If the montage changes locations throughout, start with a bullet pointed location name, and then the description.

--BEDROOM: he gets dressed
--BATHROOM: he brushes his teeth
--KITCHEN: he removes the head from the freezer

Here's an image from one of my scripts, so you can see how I do a one-room montage --
https://imgur.com/a/seIQFlv

Q: *What is a common formatting mistake that annoys you the most*?

A: Massive, fist-sized chunks of description (aka "megaturds.") Putting the "cut to's" on the far right side of the page forcing my eye to move more than it needs to instead of embedding them within the paragraph. Orphans (sentences that end with one word taking up a full line.)

Q: *What is a common storytelling trope that annoys you the most?*
A: When the writer treats the reader as if they're never seen a movie before. Like when a character begins the movie excited about a big promotion they're about to get, and the writer thinks the audience doesn't already know that there ain't no way in *hell* that character is getting that promotion.

Q: *Is it ok to describe what kind of shots I'm picturing for a scene?*

A: Describing camera shots ("Zoom in" "Dolly back from" "Track with" etc) is boring. And if you're not directing the script yourself, the director will be like "Thanks for telling me how to do my job, dickweed." BUT—you can create the visual staging of the scene with the language you use.

Here's the opening of my script THE JULIET. I describe a shot that pulls back to reveal more and more, but <u>I never once explicitly tell the camera where to go.</u>

WE OPEN ON A PAIR OF EYES. There's something mesmerizing about them, a glint normally associated with Viking visionaries and sidewalk schizophrenics. These eyes belong to...

NEWBORN BABY JULIET: taking her first breaths in a white room. Held by a solitary man -- her father, DR. VIRGILLIO TREVISAN -- 50's, fit, sleep-starved eyes, brilliant, driven, and flooded with tenderness at the miracle he's witnessing.

REVEAL: we're in a windowless high-tech lab. Artificial sunlight. Lush greenhouse and garden like an indoor Eden.

Q*: What about music?*

A: Use it, as long as it helps the read. Don't worry about getting the rights to shit, that's production's problem. If it helps create a mood or atmosphere in your story, fair game.

In my movie INFINITE, I was looking for an original way to do a big gunfight in a forest where recently reunited lovers fight off an army of mercenaries. I wrote that the sequence has "At Last" by Etta James playing over it, using song lyrics as dialogue to break up the action, creating a contrast between the serenity of the lyrics and the ferocity of the violence. Here's a link to that page: https://imgur.com/a/SbJyhNU

Q: *Knowing what you know now, what knowledge do you wish you were armed with walking into your first pitch meeting?*

A: It's your meeting, not theirs. You're there because they're trying to get to the top of a mountain and they're looking for a Sherpa to guide them there. I used to take on a lot of pitches that I was unsure about, just because I wanted to make money. Now I only pitch on things that

I'm 100% certain I know how to deliver on, projects where I hear the idea and can see the whole movie in my head.

(PS: real talk? If you're someone who gets nervous pitching, Xanax fucking RULES.)

Q: *What are the top things that will make someone stop reading your screenplay?*

A: Typos/sloppiness in the first few pages. Cliched, on-the-nose dialogue. Boring, un-cinematic scene writing. Confusingly written scenes that require me to go back and figure out the who/what/where.

Q: *What are your top five Do's and Don't's about the writing process?*

1: <u>Don't be pretentious, and don't be boring.</u> Those are the two biggest traps that most maturing writers fall into. You can get away with myriad creative sins as long you don't bore me and you don't make me want to punch you in the face.

2: <u>Don't chase trends</u>. The stuff you're seeing now on screens that's making money, it's been in development for years, and there's more stuff like it coming, and by the time you finish your script, the trend will have most likely moved on. (I tried to cash in on the found footage trend a while back and missed the boat by about 3 months, and that's just embarrassing.)

3: <u>Do embrace vulnerability</u>. The difference between a hack and artist is how much of their own heart they put into their work.

4: <u>Do pursue the concepts that excite you, and only those things</u>. Once you start writing for a living, you'll have your entire career to take on passionless paycheck gigs if you need to make some fast money. But right now, when you're writing on spec and can create whatever the hell you want? Focus only on the stories that raise your pulse and fire up your inspiration. That excitement will translate to the page.

5: <u>Don't make excuses</u>. You are what you do every day, and if you want to be a writer, then you better be writing every day. Even if it's just one hour. Carve out that time and guard it like it's treasure, because that's what it is.

PROCESS

Q: *Describe your ideal writing work flow. (both the practice itself and in what order you develop an outline, characters, plot, etc.) How do you capture the flow state under pressure?*

A: I wake up really early in the morning and start writing before the critical part of my brain wakes up. That way, I have uninterrupted creative flow for a couple hours, without feeling the

need to edit my work while it's being written. Once I've got that momentum going, it's usually enough to push me forward once my critique-mind wakes up.

I also take a lot of walks, cook un-complicated meals, fold laundry… these are things that help your brain focus on a non-creative task, allowing your subconscious to do a lot of the creative work for you. This is why many people get their best ideas in the shower. Their brain is focusing on scrubbing their butt while their subconscious is hard at work coming up with ideas.

Q: Does writing have to feel fun and/or easy to you in order to be a professional writer? It's the thing I most want to do with my life but I am doubtful it will ever feel easy.

First drafts are always painful for me. They're almost never fun. For me, the fun doesn't start until the draft is written and I get to rewrite it. I treat the first draft as raw material, as clay that I get to sculpt into something great. Making sculptures is fun. Making clay sucks.

Q: Can we discuss the process from half-baked idea to first vomit draft? Getting the story out of scene ideas/character ideas?

It starts with one single idea that I find exciting. It usually ties into a sense of wish fulfillment, or a "What if?" question – "What if you could receive messages from yourself in the future?" "What if you could reincarnate upon death and retain all your memories?" Then I figure out who the most interesting character is to plug into that scenario.

Q: Do you write outlines first? If so, could you give a quick take on your process breaking the story?

I outline like a madman on every single project I write. I start by writing a Statement Of Intent for what I want the movie to feel like, look like, sound like, what other movies I can compare it to, what it's going to be about on an emotional and thematic level. Then I write a 10-20 page outline breaking down all three acts.

Q: How often do you lean on traditional outlining wisdom (save the cat, character alignment system, hero's journey, etc) and how often do you find it's better just leave all that behind?

A: I've never read "Save The Cat", and it's been so long since I read any Joseph Campbell that I can't say I've memorized every step of the hero's journey. But every outline that I write is structured like this.

STATEMENT OF INTENT
CHARACTER & WORLD
ACT 1
ACT 2-A

MIDPOINT
ACT 2-B
3RD ACT
CLIMAX/DENOUEMENT

I tend to be very rigid with the structure of my outlines, because I find that makes it easier once I start writing the actual script. Trying to go to script off an outline that's thin or under-developed is like trying to go to Burning Man with no time to pack; you wind up stuck in the desert, helpless and miserable, without 90% of the shit you need, going around to other people's camps like "Sup, bruhs, can I borrow everything?" (*Yes, I am saying that going to script before your outline is ready turns you into a festival wookie.*)

Q: How early in the process do you share/pitch your ideas to others?

A: I have an extremely collaborative process with my inner circle of trust. If I get a cool idea for a movie, I call John Zaozirny (my manager), or Peter Gamble (who I co-write with on some projects), and I pitch them the two-sentence version. If that snowballs into a bigger idea, then I write a five-page outline that I share with them. Then I expand that outline to 10 pages. Workshop it again. Expand it to 20 pages. Workshop it a final time. Then I go to script…

…where I write the first act, workshop it with the circle, and rewrite it. Then I write the second act, workshop it, rewrite it, etc, etc. So I have multiple sets of eyes on my script for every stage of its creation. I find that getting constant feedback helps me stay on track and keeps the story from veering into Shitsville. And it also helps break down the scriptwriting process into bite-sized chunks. It's never "Oh god, I have to write X number of pages by ___ date"; it's "I'm gonna focus on the notes from yesterday's call, and work on getting that section whipped into shape."

Having those multiple layers of quality control ensures that every script I write is built on a solid foundation, so I don't have to go back and blow things up from the ground floor if I run into narrative problems later in the story.

Q: How do you build worlds? Do you have any techniques for building worlds? For both realism and sci-fi/fantasy?

A: World-building is all about creating an imagined reality that feels truthful. So for fantasy and sci-fi, I focus on the mundane, relatable, day-to-day details that happen to exist within a broader imaginary context. A great example is ALIEN, where the characters are on a spaceship in the far future, fighting a monster with acid for blood… but it feels real because the characters are believable, blue-collar trucker types who bitch about the bad food and lousy pay; the ship has pads on the walls, similar to what you find in the cabin of a car; they have a pet cat with them; they have friendships, rivalries, class disparities, flirtations, etc. All those regular-ass details help ground the fantastical world of the movie.

I also start by making a list of all the major facets of life in that imaginary world – work, culture, entertainment, history, food, transportation, architecture, recreation, language, law, family life, sex, drugs, crime, social problems, etc – and I write a little paragraph about each of these things. And out of that, I create an entire functioning civilization that exists only in my brain.

And then <u>I explain as little of it as possible on the page.</u>

To me, the best world-building movie ever made is MAD MAX: FURY ROAD. And in that movie they explain jack shit. They trust the audience to be smart and figure it out on their own. The more you explain your world-building, the more time you're NOT spending on character and story, and that's why so many people don't connect with sci-fi and fantasy. That's why it took something like GAME OF THRONES to make fantasy popular with adults – because all the world-building was rooted in character and conflict.

When it comes to world building within a non-imaginary setting – like, say, LA in the 1940s – I just do tons of research. Because a reader can always tell when a writer has done their homework, and when a writer's faking it (or basing the world off other movies instead of reality.)

Q: ***Can you talk about some of your rituals before starting the day. Do you shut down all technology and turn off phone? Do you write in hour long sprints? I understand this is a personal approach, but i always find it interesting and can stand to learn some better habits.***

A: I try to avoid social media and the internet while writing. I guard my time and space like a Papa Lion. And when I work on multiple projects, I devote blocks of days to each one, instead of trying to work on multiple projects in one day. Write X pages on project 1, turn those in for feedback, write X pages on project 2 while I'm waiting on that feedback, etc.

—Q: *What value do you see for a screenwriter to use their work intended for the screen to make something on a smaller scale-- a live read or play, a podcast, a comic book, etc.?*

A: In my career, I've written movies, TV, animation, a web series, sketch comedy, reality TV, an audio drama for Audible, short stories, and an MMA fighting video game. And it all helped me become a better writer. If I were a writer trying to break in, I would play in all formats.

—*What percentage of your time is spent writing a script compared to the time spent selling that script (with verbal meetings, ancillary materials, pitching, etc.)?*

A: It takes me about a month of pitching my way up the levels to land a feature assignment, and three months to write a draft of that assignment. A spec feature usually takes six months to a year, although sometimes longer (since I have to back-burner that stuff when I get a paying job.) That's why you have to be choosy about what assignments you chase and what specs you write; no matter what, they're costing you time and energy.

--Q: I'm super guilty of going over verbose on dialogue. When you've got to trim the fat, what are some good guidelines you use to stay concise but clear?

A: Read your script aloud to yourself as you go. Or have friends come over and do a live reading of it. Hearing the dialogue aloud tells you what you need to cut. You can also try a challenge where you see how much dialogue can be cut and replaced with visual storytelling or simply a look or gesture. And I always try to start a scene as late as possible and end it as early as possible. I like to jump in mid-conversation, and end on a question, a joke, or a cliffhanger.

My rule is: cut it til it bleeds. And if it's still bleeding the next day, put some of it back.

--Q: *Do you track your writing sessions or do any pre- or post- session note taking? Curious if there's any warm up or cool down rituals you find helpful.*

A: I mostly just pick up where I left off the day before. I read yesterday's pages, get into the flow of the story, and start writing. But when I get stuck on a scene or a story beat, I click out of the script and open up a Word page where I just do a brain dump, starting with the question "OK HOW DO WE SOLVE THIS FUCKING PROBLEM?"

Then I write about what the problem is, and bullet point some possible solutions, just stepping out different scenarios until I land on the useful one. Then I click back into my script document and start implementing the solution.

Q: When you need to remove/change a character or plot point, how do you avoid leaving any 'ghosts' of the former beats? I always end up feeling like there's something I missed.

I edit religiously. I print out the script, onto paper (yes, PAPER), and I read it aloud to myself, marking down notes with a pen. Then I rewrite it.

Q: I am guessing that screenwriting involves teamwork, collaboration, and balancing of other factors and resources. How do these things influence your planning, and writing?

I only pursue projects that I'll still be in love with 3-5 years from now, because that's how long it takes to get a movie made. That's my version of planning ahead. As long as I only write what I'm in love with, everything else sorts itself out.

SCENEWORK

Q: Table setting scenes: when are you giving away too much exposition, slowing the flow of the narrative or just plain spoon feeding your audience? How do you make that feel natural or interesting?

A: Same answer for when you're wondering about when to trim dialogue. Do a live read of the script and see when people's attention starts to drift, or when you notice an actor having a hard time selling the exposition. That's when you know you've got too much exposition. Or just read it aloud to yourself and notice when YOU get bored.

STRUCTURE

Q: Film-wise, do you ever toss 3 act structure in favor of other structural models (5 act, ensemble)?

A: Everything I write has a beginning, a middle, and an end, so everything I write is in 3-act structure.

Q: When dealing with a B story do you have any guidelines for how much page time it warrants, and what do you find the best mix of show vs tell to have in there? (For context... trying to limit the exposition about the history of something that will affect the plot.)

If you're just trying to set something up in the B-story that will affect the A-story (like, say, Charles Foster Kane losing his sled in CITIZEN KANE), I go as minimalist as possible. Let implication and inference do most of the heavy lifting for you. If you need to do a flashback, do it in one strong, concise scene (like how in TRAINWRECK, the movie begins with a flashback to Amy's childhood, where her dad tells her that monogamy is for suckers.)

Now, for your B-story – your subplot – I would try laying it out into acts and beats, the same as you would for your A-story. What are the major turns and incidents in your B-plot? How many scenes do you need to write to tell that story? Once you've got that figured out, it's just a matter of interweaving those beats into your A-plot.

THEME

Q: How do you write a movie with something to say without it seeming like it has "something to say?" Any advice or stories from people who maybe found their movie was saying something deeper or different than they originally thought? Then perhaps reverse engineered it to deepen that message?

I reverse engineer the themes of all my movies. Most of the time, I'm not 100% clear on what my theme is until I'm done with the first draft. But once I figure out what the movie is trying to say on a human level, I go back and subtly gear every scene to connect to that theme.

Every story has something to say about our world; it's just a question of how explicit the writer is about saying it. And I try to get my messages out in subtext rather than text.

Take the movie SPEED. That script was heavily rewritten by Joss Whedon, who wanted to give it a feminist slant. So he wrote Sandra Bullock's character to be three-dimensional, funny, strong, vulnerable, and smart. And with Keanu Reeves' character, he gave him qualities that we normally associate with women – he made him empathetic, sweet, and nurturing; he spends most of the movie trying to help other people process a terrifying experience; when a guy sticks a gun in his face on the bus, he says "Hey man, we're just two cool dudes talking to each other"; he shoots zero people in the entire movie (except his partner, to save his life), and kills exactly one bad guy; 100% of his actions are rooted in his care for other people. Whedon wrote a huge blockbuster about how the best kind of hero carries traits associated with women, and how men and women can be allies to each other under harrowing circumstances… and it was all done in subtext. That's my goal for how to approach my stories' messages.

PHILOSOPHY

Q: What comes first? Characters, or stories?

Character is story, and story is character.

Q: I've heard some writers talk about writing the 'fuck you script' where you just write the thing you always wanted to see and don't care what others think or if it's commercial… and that often gets people work or breaks them through.

Readers respond to confidence in a way that's almost subconscious. They can tell when a writer's script is desperate to be liked, to sell, to be everything to everyone. And they can tell when a writer's script kicks open the door to the party and hits the dance floor like nobody's watching. Nothing exudes more confidence than a script written from a place of not giving a fuck.

Q: What's the one thing you (or maybe your reps or even potential buyers) say is missing from most scripts they read?

A: Emotion. The ability to make the reader feel something. That's something you can't teach, but you <u>can</u> learn how to do – it's just the hardest part of the job.

Q: How do you know when it's time to put a script to the side versus doing another draft?

I finish pretty much everything I write. I don't start things I don't think I can complete. So even when it's painful, I always force myself to get to the finish line.

That said… If I take out a script and it doesn't sell, I stick it in the drawer and I wait. Because scripts are like zombies – you never know when they'll come back to life. As the market demands fluctuate and industry tastes change, I've had dead scripts reanimate more times than

I can count. I've written maybe one script in my entire career that stayed dead (and trust me, looking back on it, that script needed to stay dead.)

NOTES

Q: What's the most fucked-up script note OF ALL TIME that you've ever gotten? (I wanna hear this story!)

A: I was writing a big disaster action spec called LOOTERS. At the time, 3-D was all the rage, and my agent suggested changing the title of the script to… **LOOTERS 3-D**. Even though we hadn't sold it and didn't have a director attached and not a single frame of movie had been shot, in any format, much less 3-D.

That guy works in finance now.

Q: How do you deal with compromising your vision in ways that directors or other film industry professionals do not?

A: A writer's existence centers around compromise. You have to know how to pick your battles. Put up too much of a fight, you get labeled as "difficult." Go along with notes that make the script suck, and they fire you for writing a sucky script. So the best thing you can do is position yourself as a "solution oriented" writer who's not precious about their work and who approaches things from a place of practicality over ego. Almost like you're a third-party consultant who's been hired to fix someone else's script, even if the project is your own baby. You have to divorce yourself from emotion and look at it objectively, always asking the question: "What is it gonna take to get this movie made and keep my name on it?"

INDUSTRY

Q: How important is it for you to sit with an idea before sharing it with your reps?

A: With my manager, I pitch him ideas as soon as they get me excited. With my agents, I don't pitch – I just give them completed specs and say "sell this", or "Put me on the list for that job." Agents don't really give creative feedback -- I'm not 100% sure my agent actually knows how to read (when I give him a script, he gives me a one-word response like "Cool!", "Fun!" or "Spooky!") – but as long as they sell your shit, they're doing their job.

Q: What does a portfolio look like? and what should I have when trying to get representation? sell my wares to the various buyers? What is a healthy bag of gear to have a feature writer in todays atmosphere? A few spec scripts?

Ideally, you want a couple awesome, commercial, UNDENIABLE spec features, a couple awesome, commercial, UNDENIABLE pilots, and the rights to a piece of IP you want to adapt.

But the truth is, if you have ONE SCRIPT that is awesome, commercial, and undeniable, all you really need is strong ideas of what you want to write next. The rest will work itself out if the script is good enough.

Q: What makes good source material? And what's the process of optioning source material?

A: Good source material is anything that fits your brand as a writer and that gets you excited to adapt it. And it can be so many things – novels, comics, games, toys, video games, news articles, biographies, Reddit threads, viral memes – and buyers just inherently trust product that's based on source material more than they do a completely original screenplay. Don't know why, they just do.

As for the process of optioning it… track down the author, either through their reps or through social media, and see if they'll option it to you. If you don't have the money they're looking for, come at them with passion for the material. The worst thing they can do is say "No."

Q: Can you talk about the difference between your experience writing scripts at home in your underwear as compared to having to go to a writers room for a series and deal with writing in a group?

Writing solo is like surfing. It's just you out on the water, paddling along on your own power, swimming out as fast or as slow as you please. And you catch big waves of inspiration and ride them for as long as you possibly can. It can be fast, thrilling, life-changing work. But you can't travel too far on a surfboard.

Writing on the staff of a TV show is more like being on the crew of a sailing ship. It's slower, and more cumbersome – you have to swab the deck and raise the sails and tie down this rope or that rope before you even leave the harbor. BUT -- unlike on a surfboard -- you can cross the entire ocean. And by "cross the ocean" I mean "crank out a season of 12-24 episodes, plus outlines and story arenas." We're talking easily over a thousand pages of material in one season. That's what you can accomplish with an entire roomful of creative brains working together.

It just also means that the days feel like they take forever, because you have 10 different voices all competing to have their ideas heard, and breaking a story that might take you one day as a solo writer can take two weeks with a group.

Q: Has the WGA/Agent war affected you? Any lessons from it?

A: That war has mostly affected TV writers, who need agents to get staffing jobs (the WGA "boost" system is a fucking joke), and who need the agencies to lean on the networks and studios to not completely fuck over their clients as they make their TV shows.

As someone who mostly writes movies, and who's been in the game for a while, the situation doesn't affect me that much. The big lesson for me has been: don't rely on your agent to cultivate your relationships for you. If you have producers and execs who want to work with you because you've kicked ass for them before, they'll reach out to you for more work — no matter what your representation status is.

Q: How to handle the rewrite of another writer? Do you contact/reach out to the writer?

A: Anytime I rewrite someone, I always reach out to tell them I dug their script and that I'll do my best to honor their work. And generally, every writer who's rewritten me has done this. It's the right thing to do.

Q: How did you assemble your legal/management team? How did you get them to give a shit about you and your work?

A: With my agents and lawyer… I don't know that they *do* give a shit about my work, but I make them money and vice-versa, so we're all good.

With my manager, John Zaozirny… he used to be an independent producer who I took a meeting with when I was first starting out. And I immediately liked him, and thought his creative instincts were ingenious. So I wrote my next spec with him as my producer, shepherding the development process. And the next one after that. And the next. And 2 out of 3 times, the stuff I wrote under his guidance would sell.

He was essentially doing the job of my manager without getting any of the credit or money. So I told him that if he started his own management shingle, I'd become his first client. So he did, and it worked out great. His company is now one of the most respected in the game, and every year since I signed with him has been bigger than the last.

So the moral is: choose your manager carefully.

But on a bigger level… how can you get an agent or manager to give a shit about your material?

Write something that is so strong and commercial that they'd be an idiot to NOT get involved with you. Write something that forces everyone who reads it to start thinking selfishly, like *"I could benefit from being involved with this person."*

Q: What do you think reps actual roles are versus what we imagine?

A: A manager is there to make sure you have a long, healthy, well-rounded career. An agent is a bloodhound sniffing out your next paycheck.

Q: How do you vet/decide to work with potential collaborators producers?

A: I read their notes and see if they have good creative instincts. I sit in the room with them and bounce story ideas around, and ask myself: "Can I do this every day for the next year?" And if the answer is yes, then I work with them.

LEARNING/RESOURCES

Q: Any books about screenwriting you recommend or think would be helpful?

"The War Of Art" by Stephen Pressfield. "The Creative Habit" by Twyla Tharp. Neither of which are about screenwriting directly, but are very good for honing your creative work ethic.

Q: What is your advice to an inexperienced writer?
If you're doing this for love, keep going. If you're doing this for money… there's a million easier ways to get rich.

Q: Why did you choose screenwriting?

It was the first thing I ever loved that loved me back.

Q: How do you balance social life with work?

Anytime a friend asks me to read a script, I always say "yes." I may not read all of it, but I'll always read some of it and sit with them to talk about it. So a lot of my social life is me hanging out with other writers and talking about the craft. I don't write on weekends, and I generally don't write at night, once my wife comes home from work. The same way I have blocks of time that are just for writing, I have equally-sacred blocks of time that are just for my nears-and-dears.

Oh, and I have a lot of hobbies that have nothing to do with movies (cooking, DJing, traveling, hiking, running a Burning Man camp, chasing a laser pointer around my living room, etc.)

ONE LAST THING

Something an old compatriot once told me is this: the only people who make it in this town are the ones who bet on themselves.

Stop thinking about the business as something to "break into" and start thinking of yourself as a business to be acquired.

The secret to success is doing what you love, whether or not you're being paid. The secret to a rewarding career in film (and many other fields) is focusing entirely on execution and not on result.

Air and Light and Time and Space
Charles Bukowski

"– you know, I've either had a family, a job,
something has always been in the
way
but now
I've sold my house, I've found this
place, a large studio, you should see the space and
the light.
for the first time in my life I'm going to have
a place and the time to
create."
no baby, if you're going to create
you're going to create whether you work 16 hours a day in a coal mine
or
you're going to create in a small room with 3 children
while you're on
welfare,
you're going to create with part of your mind and your
body blown
away,
you're going to create blind
crippled
demented,
you're going to create with a cat crawling up your
back while
the whole city trembles in earthquake, bombardment,
flood and fire.
baby, air and light and time and space
have nothing to do with it
and don't create anything
except maybe a longer life to find
new excuses
for.