

Proverb Contest General Feedback

I read nearly all of the scripts for this contest and while I did write individual feedback for about twelve of the scripts, I hate that I couldn't write something for everyone that participated and was brave enough to share their scripts. So I came up with this idea: basically a kind of general one-size-fits-all feedback for all the scripts.

Why? Simply this: I saw a lot of scripts that made the same kind of missteps. Over and over. For this judge, it made it simple to award higher marks to scripts that could avoid these fl

aws. And, of course, even the top placing scripts might be guilty of some of these as well. No script is perfect.

And before I go on, let me be clear, I loved a lot of ideas in these scripts. There was stuff that I was really impressed by: u/edithdrod's 'Flame' story, that seemed like some sort of Black Mirror style short; and /u/F-O's 'Device Memory' script, which covered the life of user, in a sense, through their camera. There were a bunch of others, too. And almost all would've performed better with a little more attention to the following items.

Shorter Action Lines

In plenty of scripts, the action lines extended to four or five lines. And that's fine. But, you don't want a whole page of four line paragraphs. Unless you can really create sublime prose, you're going to tax your reader before they've even finished the page.

Take a look at your script. Did you fall into this trap? One of the things I saw readers do repeatedly is add too many unfilmable sentences. This can really bloat your action lines, which will make it harder for your reader to keep track of what's important. You really don't want your reader confused.

Now, an unfilmable sentence or two is okay. But you should try to make them convey something to the reader. They have to work hard.

One other thing I saw repeatedly was using action lines to convey a whole lot of stuff. If, in an action line, you convey that the camera goes through the entire apartment room by room before returning to the main character as he decides to sit down with a bowl of soup, you're going to lose your reader.

The more effective scripts used shorter action lines to keep the reader moving. Frequent paragraph returns can also help. Take a look at 'A Grave Error' and see how effectively the author uses short action lines to move the reader's eyes and attention from: a moonlight night, to a graveyard, to a trio of teenage boys up to no good.

One quick fix: Use mini slug lines to break up all those action lines. If you've already established your character is in their groovy apartment, instead of describing how they move through their apartment, use mini slugs to call out where they are. THE GROOVY LIVING ROOM. THE GROOVY BATHROOM. THE NOT-VERY-GROOVY TORTURE CHAMBER.

Dialogue

I could probably write a million words on the dialogue in the Proverb Contest and we probably wouldn't get any closer to finding a general solution. There was some good bits of dialogue from a script about servers in a restaurant that totally engaged me because it brought me into a new world. As a reader, I love reading dialogue that seems accurate to the world or the characters in it. It's a bit like your first time watching CSI. You're not sure exactly what's happening but it seems compelling and you want to know more.

Generally the Proverb Contest scripts that scored lower featured dialogue that missed the mark. Here's what I saw a lot of: dialogue that was totally free of real conflict. There's an assumption that it's easy to write dialogue, because after all it's just people talking. But dialogue that engages a reader isn't just people talking.

Here's an example from the contest that I've rewritten to protect the source. The scene, two characters at a golf club observing a new member who's walking onto the course. Character A: "Why would a teacher join the golf club?" Character B: "Well he is a golfer."

This is okay. But not the kind of okay that keeps a reader reading. There are no stakes in this exchange, no conflict and no mystery. It's one character saying something and then another character, perfectly tracking the other person, saying something in response.

Go through your own script right now and see how many exchanges feature two characters who a) perfectly listen to each other; b) don't conflict with each other; and c) don't say anything mysterious. And I mean "mysterious" doesn't have to be actually mysterious. It just has to be something that intrigues the reader.

So let's take that earlier example and see if we can fix it a little bit. Same scene. Character A says "Why would a public school teacher join our club?" Character B: "I tried to talk the board out of it. Threatened to pull my sponsorship. Former pro golfer or not, because of him and Pebble Beach? No way I want him here."

That's a bit better. Character A now expresses an opinion. "Our club" is a kind of a code to communicate some sort of ownership that he feels. Character B goes further. He didn't want this teacher as a member at all! And we learn that the teacher was a pro golfer and that something happened at Pebble Beach.

In summation we have two characters. They aren't totally listening to each other. Notice that character B doesn't directly answer character A's question. He kind of answers it in his own way.

There's a bit of conflict (not so much between them but between them and the teacher/golfer at least) and, finally, there's a mystery: what happened at Pebble Beach?

One quick fix: Now, I've got as much to learn about writing dialogue as anyone else, but here's one thing that I try to do at least. Make sure my characters aren't listening to each other 100%. And to go a little further, figure out why they're not 100% listening to each other. It's not a fool proof trick but it can help elevate a basic exchange and create more interest for the reader.

Script Conventions

I think this, is in part, connected to my thoughts about action lines. But, too often, I saw scripts that were hampered by what looked like a general lack of care in either formatting or use of screenplay elements.

For example, there's no need for a slug line to be followed with a transition ("CUT TO"). There's no need to cap the beginning of a word in a parenthetical. There's no need for a parenthetical to come at the end of a line of dialogue. Etc.

Every screenwriter is going to develop their own stylistic quirks. (Read Dan Gilroy's 'Nightcrawler' script for an extreme but awesome example of doing things your own way.) But, at the start, as you're learning, you're better off trying to stick to a fairly basic style. The better scripts in this contest did that.

Take a look at the first couple of pages of 'Snowbound.' It's inviting. There are some longer action lines but notice how they interspersed with shorter lines, dialogue and transitions. That's a look that at least helps the reader get past the first hurdle when they open a PDF.

'Snowbound' and 'Lifetime of Sadness' were both scripts that were well formatted. Now, take a look at your own script. Is your style kind of all over the place? Are they different?

One quick fix: Other than making sure you're using proper screenwriting software here's one tip that you shouldn't ignore: read scripts. Then read more scripts. Every creative discipline that I can think of builds upon what has come before. If you enjoy screenwriting, soak up the lessons that you can learn by reading scripts. Copy scripts, too. Open up your software and retype a favorite scene. Did it come out the same? Worse? Better? Learn how to make the formatting and conventions serve your vision.

Surprises

This is a tough one and, honestly, I think this could almost apply to almost 90% of the scripts, even the ones that placed in the top 10. But I secretly believe that striving to achieve the ability to deliver surprises in your short script, your feature, your comedy pilot, your Snapchat or whatever is going to serve you well.

Think about the best shorts you've seen on the Internet in the last couple of years. Here's the one that always gets me is 'The Present.' Link here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjqIU5FgsYc>

It's about a kid who gets a three-legged dog. Go watch it and come back. I'll wait. Okay. Are you crying like a big baby yet? Just me? Okay, fine. Anyway, the surprise in this short is terrific and I think it's perfectly disguised. And it fits perfectly. And it feels like magic, at least to me. And, jeez, how can we ever create anything so good on our own?

In this reader's mind, there's one script in the Proverbs contest that delivers a surprise on this level. It's both unexpected, a little shocking and perfect. You'll find it in 'The Gift.' Spoiler alert: it's an emotional surprise.

Oh here's one more that I thought delivered an interesting surprise that's stuck with me. And it's not emotional, it's comedic. You'll find this surprise in 'A Grave Error.'

So what's the common element between the three (A Grave Error, The Gift, and The Present)?

I think it's all in the setup. The Present sets up a kid who seems like an asshole. We probably wouldn't pay any attention to this kid for more than 30 seconds but then an element is introduced that changes the world. In this case, the three-legged puppy. And by the end of the story, we love the kid, we love the puppy, we love everything and we want to share this experience with someone. That's what a great surprise can give your writing.

And so, the setup gives you your surprise. The better you can get at establishing the set up, the easier I think it gets to deliver your surprise. I think a lot of times, where the scripts might've missed, even though they had a good story, they didn't deliver the surprise properly, the moment that everything clicks together.

Easier to say than do? For sure. Am I personally any better at this than anyone else? Probably not. But think about all the great surprises you've encountered in stories. If they were truly magic, they'd just *POOF* appear. And we'd feel the magic. No set up required. But here in the real world, we have to make the magic for ourselves. You and I and everyone else that commits a piece of writing to any medium is the magicmaker. And the magic is in the setup and in the reader's expectations.

Take 'Almost Famous.' The most satisfying surprise in that story (for me). William, our protagonist, gives Penny Lane (famous groupie) his address in San Diego as they part for what seems like the last time. His expectation, Penny Lane (his crush) will come visit him. Later in the film, the surprise arrives. A knock on the door. And who's there. It's Russell. The superstar guitarist who's been avoiding William. The setup for this? William has spent the bulk of the movie trying to interview the inscrutable Russell. Without the setup, it's just a random thing.

Now, think about your own story. What journey did you try to take the reader on? What did you set up and then how did you pay it off? Or did you not pay it off? 90% of the surprises in the Proverb contest stories were either telegraphed or not impactful because they weren't properly setup. I still think The Gift is one of the best though. Read it and absorb its lessons.

So here's the one quick fix: make the thing that happens at the end of your story less random. Connect it back to your beginning. Always. Something has to change in your story. But the thing that changes? It's more powerful, as best as I can figure out, if it's connected to where you started.

The End. For Now.

Thanks for reading. Hopefully you were able to get some value from this that you can take back to your own work. I learned a bunch from reviewing so many scripts and I was really impressed with a lot of the thinking and stories. Best of luck as you keep pursuing your writing dreams.