THE ART OF BETTERIZATION

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Alright, so to kick this off, here's the most important lesson I ever learned in film school, which is "Don't live in North Hollywood and try to commute to USC." The second most important lesson I learned is: "The are only two things you have control over in this industry: the quantity and the quality of your work."

That's it.

You don't have control over the schedules of actors, the whims of directors, the taste (or lack thereof*)* of studio executives, the unpredictability of the market, how your r mmm. M m mmm
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epresentatives represent you – all of that stuff is out of your hands. The sooner you can accept that, the happier, healthier creative life you're gonna have. Think of it like being in AA – "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

So here's the good news: you have control over how much you write and how good that writing is. Someone once asked Warren Buffet what the secret to success is, and he said: "Do good work in a public space." If you have a kick-ass work ethic and you're writing material that's undeniable, all it means is you haven't gotten enough eyeballs on it yet. But – 99% of the cases I've seen when a writer is still trying to break in, the issue isn't from lack of exposure. It usually stems from a problem with the writer's work ethic, or from the quality of their work. Genuine pieces of undiscovered talent are almost a myth in this town, because here's the thing you have to remember about Hollywood: everyone wants to be the person who discovered an amazing writer.

How do you become that writer? You know that you've leveled up in your career -- that you're "ready" -- when other people read your material and start thinking selfishly. Like "I could benefit from being involved with this person." And the quantity and quality of your work dictates when you get to that point.

Now, as for "quantity" half of that equation, I could spend an hour talking about strategies for developing a stronger work ethic. I personally cranked out 20 terrible scripts before I finally wrote a good one; other writers I know only wrote five. But talking about work ethic strategies isn't that useful because everybody engages with their muse differently. The main thing that I will say is: "The more the better." Here's an exercise that was useful for me…

Make a list of what you do every day – maybe you work, maybe you go to school, hit the gym, parent your kids, cook for your spouse, hunt man for sport, whatever. Add it all up, and the sum total of that list… is you. On a practical level, you are what you do everyday. If "writing" is what you want to be doing, but isn't on that list? Put it there. Because creativity feeds off momentum,

and momentum is built by a daily habit. There's a book called "The War Of Art" by Stephen Pressfield, and he puts it like this: "The muse favors the working stiff."

That's all I'm gonna say about the "quantity" half of that equation, so let's talk about "quality." That's where the rubber meets the road. Because you can write a million scripts and if the execution's not there, life is gonna suck for you. That's what this class is really about: creating strategies to make sure your work is better than it could've been.

When I was at USC, my writing mentor used to say "When you finish your script, be sure to feed it through the betterizer a few times before you turn it in." And that got me thinking: what does it mean to "betterize" something?

There are two types of writers in this world: 1, those who think their work is ready before everyone else does, and 2: those who think it's never quite ready. That second group are the betterizers. And they make up *most* of the writers currently working, and ALL of the writers whose careers last more than a couple years.

They're the ones who are constantly asking: "how can I improve my material?" They're the ones who know that the real magic happens on the second or third rewrite -- be it for an outline, a pitch, or a full pilot or feature script. That old cliché about how "writing is rewriting?" It's a cliché because it's fucking true.

YES, there are people out there who are able to just sit down and bust out perfect, elegant, thoughtfully crafted first drafts… but I don't trust those people. I don't like them. I don't want them living next door to me. I wouldn't want them dating my sister. Because those people are fucking CYBORGS. The rest of us real humans? We gotta settle for the fact that our first drafts are usually going to be a week-old bag of butt sandwiches. I call all my first drafts the "vomit draft." The real good stuff happens when we step away for a second, put on our problem solving hats, and come back to un-fuck that piece of material.

CRACKING A TAKE

Now, obviously "betterization" is such a broad concept that we could apply it to any part of the writing process – characters, dialogue, structure, story, theme, voice, set pieces, jokes, page design, you name it. And who knows, we might do a whole series of these classes where we devote each class to betterizing a single aspect of writing. But for this one, the specific area I want to focus on is something that they don't teach in film school but I wish they had, because the great majority of a writer's career is spent on this: it's what's known as "cracking a take."

For those of you who don't know, "cracking a take" is the bedrock foundation of any script. It's when an idea grows up and becomes a pitch or an outline. If an idea is a caterpillar and a script is a butterfly, this is the chrysalis. It's a document, usually 5 pages long, where you figure out the macro-view of your movie or TV show.

When you're pitching to get hired on an assignment, this "take" is your first chance to state your case about why YOU, specifically, should get this job. It's also an important part of writing a feature-length spec, because it's the first step towards the full outline of what will become your script. (By "full outline", I mean a document usually 10-15 pages long; that's a different class altogether. This "take" is the baby version of that full outline.)

Now, side note: there are writers out there who will swear by not outlining. They'll say "Stephen King doesn't outline. Elmore Leonard doesn't outline. George RR Martin doesn't outline." They'll say "there are gardeners, then there are architects; architects start their process with a detailed blueprint, while gardeners treat their stories like plants they're growing, letting them evolve organically as the gardener trims here, or adds some sunlight and fertilizer there." But here's the thing – most scripts written by unestablished writers who consider themselves "gardeners?" Those scripts tend to be 100% fertilizer.

Starting without a blueprint and making it up as you go along is how you get that "Two Brothers" bit from "Rick and Morty." *Two brothers. In a van. And then a meteor hit. And they ran as fast as they could. From giant cat-monsters. And then a giant tornado came. And that's when things got knocked into twelfth gear...A Mexican...armada shows up. With weapons made from tomatoes. And you better betch'ur bottom dollar that these two brothers know how to handle business, in 'Alien...Invasion Tomato Monster Mexican Armada Brothers...Who Are Just Regular Brothers Running...in a Van from an...Asteroid and All Sorts of Things: The Movie'*

Writing this "take" document is vital to writing your own piece of original material, but it's an even BIGGER part of landing work from a studio, production company, or network.

You meet with an executive at one of these places, and they'll pitch you an idea. Sometimes it's just an idea they came up with, like "Hey, you know what they've never done a disaster movie about? Lightning!" (*No shit, that actually got pitched to me*.) More often, they're coming to you with a preexisting property – a movie they're doing a sequel for, an adaptation of a TV show, book, short story, comic, video game, toy, theme park ride, board game, breakfast cereal character. This is where Hollywood's making most of its money these days, is on pre-branded material. The depressing part about being a feature writer is that if you walk into Universal tomorrow with an AMAZING piece of original material, and I walk in there with the movie rights to HUNGRY HUNGRY HIPPOS, I'm going to get more heat. The executives will be gathered around me, asking: "But WHY are the hippos hungry? Can the hippos be eating CITIES? And ooh, what if we tell it from *the point of view of one of the balls that the hippos are trying to eat*? It'll be like Godzilla, but with more ball-eating!" This is why people want to work in TV.

Anyway, the best way you can set yourself up to write a great spec, or to sell a pitch, or land an assignment, is to figure out how to crack a take that's better than your competition. When you're pitching a movie or a TV show, this take-doc is what you turn into your executives so you can get their notes, and you use those notes to create the pitch that you then deliver verbally to the

bosses. But in order to get to that point, you gotta make the most kick-ass first impression possible with that initial document, and that's what we're gonna learn how to do today.

Here's how you can start betterizing from the moment you set out to develop an idea…

Betterization is about knowing exactly what kind of story you're telling.

I'm amazed at how many writers don't know about the four types of stories, i.e. the four character arcs. Redemption, Corruption, Morality, Tragedy.

Redemption: Character changes, and that's good (GROUNDHOG DAY, almost every movie)
Corruption: Character changes, and that's bad (BREAKING BAD)
Morality: Character refuses to change, and that's good (BABY DRIVER)
Tragedy: Character refuses to change, and that's bad (REQUIEUM FOR A DREAM)

If you start out knowing what kind of journey your main character is going to be having, you're setting yourself up to win.

On this same note, it's vital to figure out if the story you're telling is a movie or a TV series. And within that, think about the sub-categories. If it's a movie, is it a studio movie or independent film? Keep in mind, studios are rarely making original material these days – all the money they used to spend on developing original content is now being poured into buying pre-existing brands and franchises. But they still do sometimes buy spec scripts, but the target is narrow….

If your movie is: a bio-pic, an R-rated comedy, an action or sci-fi movie they can sell overseas, a really clever elevated horror concept (like GET OUT, HAPPY DEATH DAY, or A QUIET PLACE), or something that's clearly a vehicle for an existing star (like a "a Mellissa McCarthy comedy", "an action movie for The Rock", "a Liam Neeson thriller")… all of that is studio spec material.

If your movie is: smaller, character-driven, a straight-up comedy or drama, a period piece, or something that's only going to appeal to one or two of the four quadrants (the four quadrants being audiences that are young, old, male, female), then you're writing something geared toward an independent financier.

Got something that feels too epic in scope to fit into a two-hour movie? Or something that is geared toward sophisticated grown-up audiences with English as their native language? Something difficult, challenging, edgy, or otherwise niche? Most likely you're writing a TV show for cable, HBO, or Netflix. (Take out the words "difficult, challenging, or edgy" and you're most likely writing a show geared toward network television.)

So those are the two big questions to ask right off the bat: *what type of story am I telling (based on my character arc), and who am I aiming this toward?*

Next thing to understand about betterization is that it's about CHOICES.

When you're dreaming up ideas – be it for a movie plot, a scene, a character, a line of dialogue… the first idea that you think of is your A-choice. It's the first thing you think of because you've seen it before. It's the cliché your brain has memorized.

Next after that is your B-choice. It's the idea you don't think of first, because it's new and different and *OMG something we've never seen before…* but it also doesn't further your project, because it's just your brain overcorrecting from your A-choice.

Then finally, you've got your C-choice. That's where you wanna be. That's the one where you land on something you haven't seen before, but that isn't so "new and different" that it leads to dead ends, and that makes you excited about what's going to happen next.

I went through this process recently on a pitch I was doing. My writing partner and I were up for the adaptation of THE OREGON TRAIL. Remember that old video game where you try to get your family to Oregon and everybody dies of dysentery? Yes, that one, and no, my father doesn't know what I actually do for a living.

When we sat down to crack our take, the first place my brain went was: "Okay, so it's about a family that gets stuck inside the video game, and they have to complete the Trail in order to get back to the real world!" Which is a CLASSIC A-CHOICE, because it's literally the plot of that new fucking JUMANJI movie.

So next we thought: "That game pulled no punches with how brutal it was to its characters, so what if we make it a hardcore wilderness survival movie, like THE REVENANT? That's new and different, right?" Which is a total B-CHOICE -- certainly not what people are expecting, but it's also completely the wrong tone for the source material. That's like doing a gritty adaptation of Pac-Man where Pac Man's an Oxycontin addict running around gobbling up pills while running from the ghosts of his past.

So then we thought to ourselves: "The main thing that everyone remembers from this game is dying repeatedly, so how do we make a fun, playful movie out of that?" And that's when we landed on our C-CHOICE. Here's the intro of what we pitched them…

T*his is a comedy about an arrogant city slicker who goes out on the Oregon Trail and promptly gets himself killed -- not once, but over and over again -- and every time he dies, he wakes up back at the start of the trail. And he has to keep doing this until he conquers it, like GROUNDHOG DAY in the wilderness. Because let's be honest -- if there was ever a game that would work perfectly as a timeloop movie, it's this one.*

And here's the thing – that process of thinking through your choices until you land on that C-choice, is something you can (and should) apply to every aspect of writing. It's how you dodge clichés, surprise your audience, and let your reader know they're in good hands. Here's an example of how you can apply that process within a given scene you're writing.

For example, in RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, Indy faces off against a crazy swordsman. A-choice – have Indy pick up a sword and fight him to the death! B-choice – the swordsman lops off Indy's arm, and the rest of the movie is him getting it sewn back on in the hospital. C-choice? Indy sighs, pulls his gun, and gives us one of the most iconic scenes in movie history.

Now, when you're still in the early stages of cracking your take, remember this…

Betterization means understanding the inverse relationship between concept and execution.

What that means is: *the less impressive a concept is, the more impressive your execution needs to be.* Certain types of concepts have a track record being shittily executed, so you gotta work twice as hard to make them great. Concepts that fall into this category include zombies, sharks, giant snakes, Bigfoot, masked serial killers, ninjas, guys who do parkour, cops going undercover as strippers/hookers/sharks, horny teenagers at prom, and hit men. ESPECIALLY hit-men.

On that note, the last big hit-man movie was JOHN WICK. It's about an emotionless badass assassin who goes on a mission of revenge – there's a million movies with that kind of plot, and most of them star Steven Segal and are being sold out of the trunk of some guy's car. So what did the WICK writers do with that concept to betterize it? They made the revenge about his dog, which we've never seen before. (Plus, audiences HATE to see dogs die.) They also set the film in this gigantic secret criminal world with its own codes, customs, and currency, which we've never seen before. They gave all the characters personal history with each other, which is rare for a hitman movie, because hitmen aren't supposed to have friends.

Here's another example: BABY DRIVER -- a movie about a teenager who is somehow an amazing getaway driver because he… listens to music while driving. You know who else does that? EVERYONE ELSE IN THE WORLD. If that's all it takes to be a great wheelman, my dad would be outrunning the LAPD with Jimmy Buffet cranked up in his Ford Explorer. That movie was 100% execution-dependent… but because it had a genius like Edgar Wright behind it, they knocked it out of the park.

So here's the lesson: until you've shown the industry that you're a genius who can be trusted to make an A+ script out of a C-minus concept, you're better off spending your time on projects where the concept itself is so awesome that people will give you the benefit of the doubt.

Look at A QUIET PLACE – a horror movie about a family who has to live in silence because the world's been invaded by creatures that hunt by sound. What makes that a strong concept? First off, it's about a family, so there's something universal grounding it. Moreso, it automatically engages your brain and makes you start wondering about all the different sounds you make in a day. You start asking questions like: "How do you do basic everyday things, like cook and wash clothes?" "What if I screamed in my sleep?" "What if someone farts in the middle of dinner?"

You know a concept is good when it's STICKY – when it lodges in your brain, when it makes you sit up and start wondering about the possibilities.

Betterizing is about emotional engagement.

Now, let's say you don't have an idea that's "sticky" – but it's something you're super passionate about and you desperately want to write. Does this mean you should drop it in favor of a stickier idea you're less excited about? Hell no – always chase that feeling of excitement, because that's the big initial push that's going to help carry you along when this job starts to feel more like work than play. You're going to spend every day chasing that initial high. Always follow the thing that makes your pulse quicken.

No, if you've got an unsticky idea that you just HAVE to write, the best way to nail your execution is to focus on the most important area of any script: how it emotionally engages with the reader. There's a great quote from Maya Angelou: "*People will forget what you said, they'll forget what you did, but people will never forget the way you made them feel."* And that goes double for when you're telling a story.

So how do you make the reader emotionally engage?

The best way to do that is to know your characters and their relationships inside and out, and to care deeply about them yourself. And the easiest route to that place is to look for the positive in every character you write. Even your minor characters. Even your villains. Find those areas where you recognize common humanity between yourself and the people you're writing about. Then balance those positive traits out with flaws.

So for example: Han Solo – what's he like, using only positive words? He's rakish, sexy, independent, loyal, a wisecracking smartass. Now describe him using only negative words: he's selfish, he's kind of a dick, he's cocky, he's egotistical.

Next, Hannibal Lecter – what's he like, using only positive words? He's extremely intelligent, well-educated, cultured, articulate, a good listener, has exquisite taste, and he's polite. Now describe him using only negative words: he's a fucking sociopath who eats people.

Now, imagine stripping away all the positive, or all the negative, from either of those characters. See how flat they become? See how they go from being memorable to generic? That's why everyone you write needs that balance of positive and negative.

These characters are hall-of-famers because the writers had enough empathy to get in their heads and understand them. That's the key here – empathy. An average writer will JUDGE their characters. Good guys are good, bad guys are bad. A betterizer will EMPATHIZE with their characters, and find the dark shades within the heroes and the traces of humanity in villains.

There's a quote from Tarantino that I love from his commentary track on the TRUE ROMANCE dvd. He says: "*You should always feel a little bit embarrassed to show your script to people because of how much it reveals about you."* And that cuts to the core of what I'm talking about. The difference between a hack and a true writer is that the latter always uses their work to expose something truthful about their own heart. And that's not something you can fake; readers are overworked and underpaid, but they're not stupid – they can tell when a writer is phoning it in, and they can tell when a writer is bringing honor to the work.

The first script I ever sold to a studio was this spec called EXEMPT, about a teenager who falls in with a group of kids who have diplomatic immunity from the law, and get into all kinds of wild trouble -- basically FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF set in the world of GRAND THEFT AUTO. But what was surprising to me after we sold the script was that people would tell me how emotional the story was – that was not the feedback I was expecting. But it was what I received, because underneath all of that script's insanity and bad behavior, it was about a kid who was desperate to belong somewhere.

I had written it at a time in my life where I hadn't really found my tribe of people yet, and some part of me was yearning for that, and that yearning found its way onto the page. Without meaning to, I'd revealed a piece of my own heart... in a story where the first scene is a bunch of kids going joyriding in a stolen cop car while high on liquid MDMA. The script sold because it was fun and marketable, but it RESONATED with people because it emotionally engaged them.

Here's the checklist of things to think about when you're first starting out cracking your take…

1: Do I know what type of story I'm telling? Do I understand what my character's arc is?
2: Is my concept the result of an A-choice, B-choice, or C-choice?
3: Is my concept sticky enough that I'll be given the benefit of the doubt? And if not, do I know how to elevate this concept through execution?
4: Do I have the elements to emotionally engage my reader? Am I empathizing with or judging my characters as I sketch them out? What truth about myself am I revealing here?

And once you've answered those questions, now it's time to get into the nuts and bolts of how to put one of these documents together…

THE STEPS OF CREATING A STORY DOCUMENT

If you're creating this as an pitch/outline for a feature, it's going to be slightly different than what you'd create when you're pitching a TV series. We'll get into those details later, but just know these two things have WAY more in common than they have differences.

So now let's break this down step by step…

Step 1 is to write a MISSION STATEMENT for the project. Here's one is from JJ Philibin, who wrote for NEW GIRL. It's a pitch she sold to NBC for a show called FORMER FAT GIRL.

Like most women I know, I've been trying to lose twelve pounds since I was two weeks old, and weighed twelve pounds. It would just be so great if I could do it, because I would immediately find true love. And I'd be so confident, I'd probably just be like, well, pitch over, already, and you'd be like, sold! For me, food has always been the problem and the solution. I was a chubby kid finding solace in the bottom of a twenty-piece box of McNuggets, sowing the seeds of self-hatred that would flourish for years to come. So of course I related to this story. I think everyone can. Maybe it's not weight. Maybe you can keep a bag of frozen french fries in your freezer without knowing for a fact that you will eat the entire bag in one sitting, still frozen. Good for you. But we all have that superficial thing we don't like about ourselves that sometimes feels like it defines us. It feels like if you just had a different voice or a fancier college degree or a thicker… head of hair, life wouldn't suck so hard. We all have that thing that keeps us from fully accepting ourselves, and we assume it's the one thing standing in our way.

"Former Fat Girl" is a show about what happens when one woman eliminates her biggest insecurity, and finds that losing the weight was just the beginning of gaining a sense of self. Because it's not that superficial flaw that defines us, but who we've become in spite of it… probably because of it.

This next one is one of my own, for a show I just set up with Intrigue and DJ2, called KICK.

Funny story: when I was 19 and trying to get my writing career going, I started a fake management company out of my bedroom in suburban Utah. Armed with a cell phone, a copy of the Hollywood Creative Directory, and no sense whatsoever, I created an imaginary new shingle called Sundance Literary --"a new branch of the Sundance Institute, representing writers from our summer labs." And the thing is, it actually worked. I got an entire operation running, had fake office stationary and everything. And most importantly, I had David Lortz.

"David Lortz" was my alias, the one and only employee of Sundance Literary, and he was everything younger me was not. Confident. Charming. Cool. He got me my first meetings. Got my first script optioned. My first taste of validation. I fucking LOVED being him. But then the real Sundance Institute found out about my shenanigans, and they threatened to sue me if I didn't cut the shit, so I

retired from the management game and got my career going the normal (boring) way. Moral of the story is: I think there's something universal about the desire to temporarily become someone else. To step into the shoes of another person who doesn't share your lifetime's worth of hangups, your neuroses, your fears. After all, who hasn't longed to shed their old skin, for just a moment, and be free? That is why KICK resonated with me so much – this is a story about the pleasures, and the perils, of temporarily existing as another human being. Only unlike me, the hero in kick has no choice but to become other people – and he does it because his mortal soul depends on it.

Okay, so – what did you guys take away from hearing those mission statements? What goes into one that makes it good? What do they need to accomplish?

1: It shows that you are ABSOLUTELY PASSIONATE about this project.
2: It shows you have a PERSONAL CONNECTION to the material.
3: It shows that your personal connection to the material is also UNIVERSAL. That your emotional engagement will translate into millions of people's emotional engagement.
4: It gives a hint about what the story's going to be about on a thematic level.

Betterizing means demonstrating why YOU personally are the right person for this job, that you understand the material better than anyone else, and that your hands are the right ones to carry this expensive, time-consuming endeavor for the buyer.

Here's why it's so important to establish that personal connection to the material: it shows you're not simply a hired gun. It shows that you're in it for the long haul, and not just to make a quick buck. And most of all, it shows that you have a UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE on the material.

The thing that the entertainment industry values most that rarely gets talked about? Authenticity. Most people who grow up to be executives have lead boring fucking lives. They haven't done that much interesting shit. If they had, they'd be on the operating end of the creative machine instead of inside the gears. So any writer who brings experience to the table that the execs themselves have not had? That's a big part of what makes them sit up and pay attention.

My friend Will Beall was my show creator on TRAINING DAY and is now writing AQUAMAN over at Warner Bros along with about a million other things – he used to be an LAPD homicide detective. That authentic experience has given him immeasurable clout over executives. (Plus, he's not scared of any of 'em, because once your wrestle a guy for your gun in an alley, the VP at Sony isn't so intimidating anymore.)

But you don't even have to have had anything that extreme as that in your past. The BEFORE SUNRISE, BEFORE SUNSET, and BEFORE MIDNIGHT movies all exist because Richard Linklater stayed up all night walking around Vienna with a girl he fell in love with when he was young. Greta Gerwig went to Catholic school in Sacramento and turned that into an Oscar nominee with LADY BIRD. The point is, think about things in your own life that, in one way or

another, make you an expert on what you're writing about, and talk about those things in your mission statement.

Next up: THE TEASE. This is where you pick a particularly juicy scene in your story, and you drop us right into it. Hook us right off the bat. When you're picking out this scene, a good way to look at it is: "What scene am I MOST excited about writing? What is the scene that could ONLY happen in this movie?"

GOOD WILL HUNTING "apples" scene, A QUIET PLACE "foot on the nail while giving birth" scene. In SICARIO, the traffic jam. In SCREAM, the opening scene on the phone where we see the first horror movie where the characters have seen horror movies and are aware of their rules. That's the scene you want to pitch people as your tease.

Here's what the tease is meant to accomplish.

1. Set up the world our character lives in
2. Introduce our main character in a way that shows their position in life (work, social status, etc)
3. Give us a twist that is going to open a mystery or compelling moment showing us why this world is different from other things we've seen.
4. Give our character a chance to react to that twist—what does that reaction tell us about them as a person?

Here's an example from that TV show KICK I'm doing. This is the tease I came up with…

DAN JENKINS *wishes he could be anyone but himself. He's 30 years old and has just been fired from his job at a Seattle tech firm after being publicly disgraced in a massive data breach scandal he had nothing to do with. And to top it off, his fiancée has just broken up with him. So… he's come up with a solution. Cut to him on the Aurora Bridge in the rain, drunk, preparing to leap to his death. Posts one last thing on Facebook, sets the phone down on the ledge, prepares to jump, then… grabs his phone to edit his post. Puts it back, makes to jump, and… edits it one more time. And then in this moment, he realizes: "This is stupid. I'll live." And right as he turns to climb over the rail, BOOM! A SEMI blasts past, sprays a giant cold puddle at him and he's sent falling off his perch. And as he goes falling down, down, down toward the water…*

WE SNAP TO Dan's POV coming into focus: weirdly enough, we're in DOWNTOWN LA, amidst a MASSIVE GUN BATTLE that makes the shootout in HEAT look like paintball. We freak out, looking down to see we're decked out in TACTICAL ARMOR, an AK-47 in our hands. Are we, like, SWAT? Pull back to reveal – nope, we're a ***BANK ROBBER*** *in a bloody hockey mask. As the LAPD unloads the apocalypse, Dan ducks behind a car, glances in a mirror, sees something WRONG in his reflection. Pulls off his mask, and the guy in the mirror is <u>not</u> Dan but a tattooed HENRY ROLLINS MOTHERFUCKER with ice-chip eyes and a neck like a thigh. BLAM! Bullet blows the mirror to slow-motion smithereens, about to do the same to Dan's skull, as he says in VO: "<u>Here's the thing about dying: it gets easier every time you do it</u>."*

CHARACTER

The most important thing to remember here is that the person reading your document is thinking about casting. So you're not really giving them specific physical details (unless those details are inherently important to the larger story, like how Zoolander is really, really really, good-looking, or how Steve Martin in ROXANNE has a giant schnoz, or how Deadpool is disfigured.) The idea is to give them a clear insight into who this character is.

Here's an example that is in desperate need of betterization: the description of Bradley Cooper in AMERICAN SNIPER. "*CHRIS KYLE lays prone, dick in the dirt, eye to the glass of a .300 Win-Mag sniper rifle. He's a Texas boy with a shitty grin, blondish goatee and vital blue eyes."*

Ok, first off, WHAT IS A SHITTY GRIN? Because I know what that sounds like to me, and I don't like it. Also – "dick in the dirt?" Fucking HARD PASS. After that, everything else is physical characteristics. The only thing that tells us anything that resonates is the phrase "Texas boy."

Or check out how Christopher Nolan introduces Leonardo DiCaprio in INCEPTION: *His name is DOMM COBB, 35, handsome, tailored.* Now, before you think I'm shitting on Nolan's writing, keep in mind that he knew he'd be directing this movie himself and didn't need to sell anyone with a great description of his lead. He could've said "My lead is DiCaprio, STFU." But if Chris Nolan were a writer just starting out, people reading this script would go: "Ok, first off, his name is Domm Cobb?? That's like a noise I make when I'm falling asleep." (Which I guess might be a reference to what INCEPTION is about, but who the fuck knows.) And that's followed by two words that get used to describe 95% of the movie heroes in history: "handsome and tailored." If you're Chris Nolan, you can get away with this, but for the rest of us, we gotta work a LOT harder with how we describe our heroes.

Here's a "betterized" character description. This is from a Will Beall script he's doing with Joel Silver called THE LIONHUNTERS. The opening takes place in 1987, and he introduces his main character like this: "*SAM BRADEN (26) hand on the wheel of a T-TOP TRANS AM. Arrogant. Handsome and he knows it. Swashbuckling swagger. Pornstache. Testosterone to make your eyes water. 20 years we'll call that a mullet. 1987, we still call it a haircut. Reagan's in The White House, Daryl Gates is Police Chief, and Braden's got the best job in the world, LAPD UNDERCOVER NARCOTICS."*

Or check out how the writers describe their female lead in THE THIN MAN…

NORA CHARLES, is coming through. She is a woman of about twenty-six… a tremendously vital person, interested in everybody and everything, in contrast to Nick's apparent indifference to anything except when he is going to get his next drink. There is a warm understanding relationship between them. They are really crazy about each other, but undemonstrative and

humorous in their companionship. They are tolerant, easy-going, taking drink for drink, and battling their way together with a dry humor.

Now, while we're on this, let me to diverge for a second and make a request of my male writers: when you introduce your female characters, don't make it sound like you're rubbing one out. Why? Because one: gross. Two: there's way more female executives now than there used to be, and they do not fucking play, and three, **GROSS**.

Feast your eyes upon how noted women's studies major Tarantino describes his lead in DEATH PROOF: *A tall (maybe 6ft) Amazonian Mulatto goddess walks down her hallway, dressed in a baby tee, and panties that her big ass (a good thing) spill out of, and her long legs grow out of. Her big bare feet slap on the hard wood floor. She moves to the cool rockabilly beat as she paces like a tiger putting on her clothes. Outside her apartment she hears a "Honk Honk." She sticks her long mane of silky black curly hair, her giraffish neck and her broad shoulders, out of the window and yells to a car below.*

Fucking WOW.

When it comes to describing my female leads, I had to learn my own lesson the hard way. Back in 2011, I was working on the remake of ROMANCING THE STONE over at Fox, and we'd gender-swapped it so that the badass jungle adventurer was a woman and the neurotic New York City intellectual was a guy. But even then, in this supposedly feminist reimagining of that story, I still focused on the physical traits of my female lead when I introduced her. I talked about her looks more than her personality. So jump ahead a few years and that script's gotten a new life at a new studio. The culture's become more conscious. First thing I did when we took it back out? Rewrite her intro.

The 2011 description of her went something like: *"This is SID SULLIVAN, 29, beautiful in a hard kind of way, sporting a camo jacket and low-cut tank top.* In 2018, I changed it to: "*SID SULLIVAN: 29. Tank top, camo jacket. An unrepentant envelope-pusher, bomb-thrower and shit-stirrer, glints of mischief and anarchy in her eyes."*

And the thing is, I'm so glad I changed that -- because by focusing on her personality, it laid down a gauntlet that I had to live up to, by creating behavior to match it for the rest of the movie. Part of betterization is to look at your outdated writing habits, and replace them with habits that empower your characters and the performers playing them.

CHARACTERS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

The best piece of advice I ever got about writing this part of the document is: *"Focus on the ways in which these people complicate each other's lives."* If conflict is the root of drama, then you should always be looking for ways that these people can conflict with each other.

There's a quote from Mike Nichols that I love: *"There are three main types of scenes- seduction, negotiation, fight."* So with each secondary character you come up with, ask yourself: "what is the main way in which they're going to interact with my lead? Seduction, negotiation, or fight?"

FIGURING OUT YOUR CHARACTER'S PRIMARY TRAIT

One big complaint readers have about the features and pilots they read is that the characters are vague, bland, or ill-defined. And that's because usually, the writer skipped a step at the start: they started writing without figuring out what the PRIMARY TRAIT of that character is.

Mean Girls – Lindsey Lohan wants to fit in.
Kill Bill: the bride wants revenge.
Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri: Frances McDormand wants justice for her daughter.

FIGURING OUT YOUR CHARACTER'S FLAW

In EDGE OF TOMORROW, Tom Cruise's flaw is that he's a coward – which is the perfect flaw to give a guy who's about to get thrown into the scariest battle in human history. Replace that flaw with, say, his flaw from TOP GUN – he's a hothead who takes too many risks – and the movie falls apart.

In FLIGHT, Denzel's flaw is that he's a self-destructive, cokehead alcoholic – which is the perfect flaw for a guy whose future relies on him maintaining a mask of sobriety. Replace that flaw with "He's an uptight guy who needs to cut loose", and the movie falls apart.

In THE GOOD PLACE, Kristin Bell's flaw is that she's selfish – and has to pretend to be selfless in order to avoid Hell. Make it so that her flaw is that she's a people-pleaser, and bam, no show.

So whatever flaw you pick for your character, make sure it directly interfaces with the challenges they're going to be facing in your story.

MIDDLE SECTION

--For a feature document, the two to three pages comprising your middle is going to lay out your first, second, and third act. Give us a fairly detailed look into Act 1, then broaden out for act 2. Give us the broad beats of what's going on in the character's journey: conflicts, challenges, obstacles, escalation. You're focusing on the types of big moments and set-pieces that would be seen in the movie's trailer. And you're focusing on three specific moments when your main character undergoes moments of change or has their personal values put to the test.

--And finally in, Act 3, you focus on the climactic sequence of the movie. What's the big final set piece? What's the emotional high point? How does the character arc resolve?

--For a TV pitch: this is where you give us a 1 to 1.5 page breakdown of what happens in the pilot. It's broad strokes -- just the main plot line, and how that is affecting our lead character's decisions and position for the series. The page after is about SEASON AND SERIES – just a

broad layout of the major storylines, character arcs, and conflicts. If what you're pitching is a very serialized story, like LOST or THE GOOD PLACE, then you indicate the singular theme for future seasons and the main character's arc/storyline for each.

FINAL SECTION

--This is the wrap-up. You've just spent the past couple pages firing big blasts of story and character and incident at your reader, so this is the part where you let all of that fade away, and return to the place where you started: what the heart of the story is. What it's about "underneath it all." (*I shit you not, Spielberg convinced Paramount to make the first TRANSFORMERS movie by telling them: "At its heart, all it's all about what it's like being a kid and getting your first car." Or maybe he said "I'm Steven Spielberg, motherfuckers, open your wallets."*) If your story leans dramatic, or scary, or actiony, leave us with a moment that gives us goosebumps or a shot of adrenaline. If it's comedic, end on a laugh.

Here's the last thing I'll say: <u>betterization is about bringing honor to the work</u>. Storytelling is the earliest tradition that people have – it's why humans thousands of years ago made characters and legends out of the night stars.

By choosing to be a writer -- and by bringing honor to your craft -- you're helping carry on something sacred. Now do your ancestors proud and get to work.