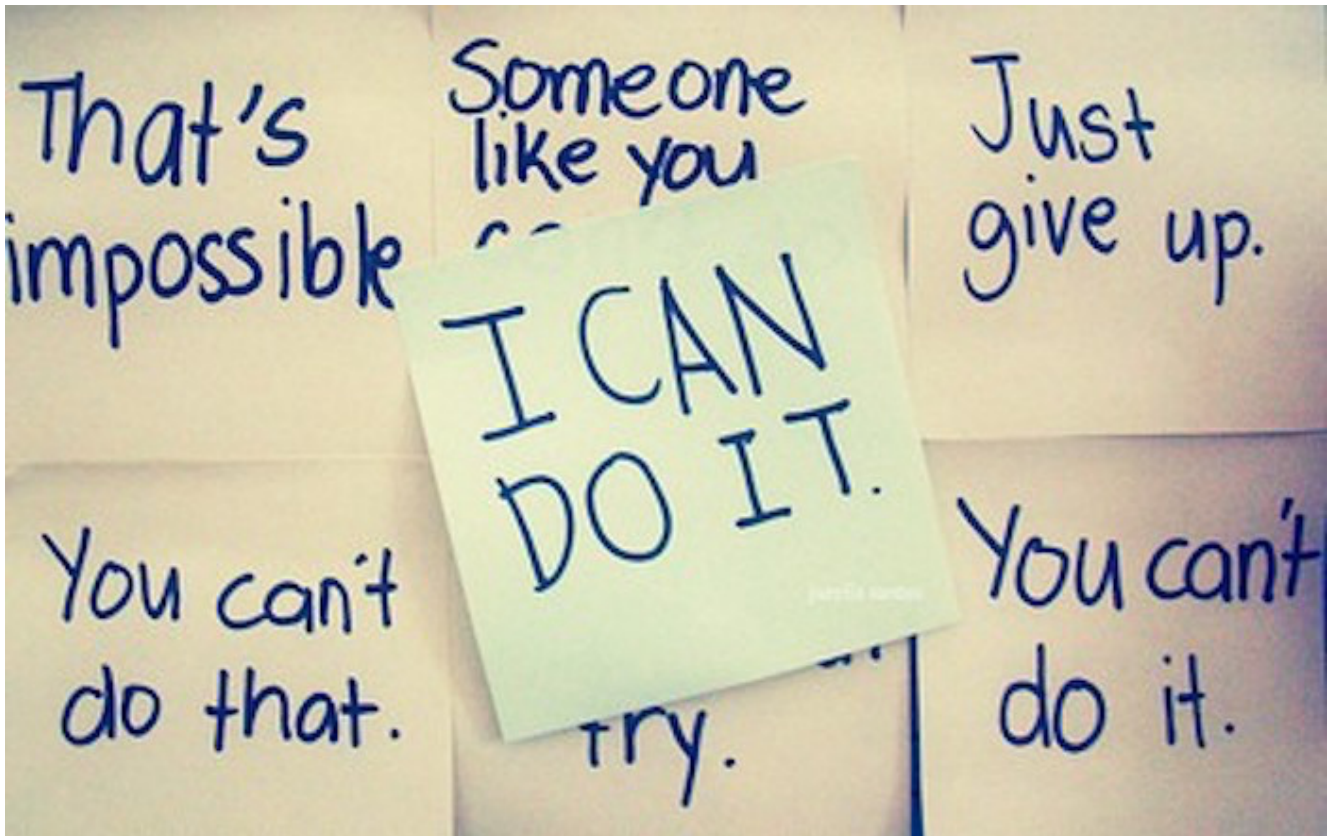


The Business of Screenwriting: I can do that!

[Scott Myers](#)

A writer rises to meet the challenge of any story.



It's 1986. About 12:30AM. At Charlie's nightclub in Ventura, California where I've just finished performing my comedy act. As I'm packing up my gear, I get into a conversation with Steve, one of the club owners. He's in his second year of the USC Peter Stark Producing Program and he's in a bind. To graduate, he has to do the equivalent of a master thesis, and this involves him taking a screenplay, budgeting it, figuring out a marketing plan, and so on. He had a screenplay for the thesis, one called "Destiny Turns on the Radio," written by [Robert Ramsey](#)

& [Matthew Stone](#), but the script has just gotten optioned (and later produced) — good news for the writers, bad news for Steve because he needs to find another screenplay and fast.

As sort of a half-joke, Steve asks me if I could write a screenplay. And these are the words that emerge from my mouth: "I can do that."

Those four words change my life.

Some background. Both Steve and I love movies and we have talked many times before about the subject, his favorite movies, my favorite movies. I'm sure that isn't what Steve was thinking when he offhandedly asked if I could write a script. He just knows that I am funny and I write my comedy material.

Some more background. In fact, I do not know how to write a screenplay. I've never even seen one when I say "I can do that." But I have *watched* thousands of movies. And I can write.

So the next day, Steve gives me four items: "Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting," by Syd Field and three screenplays — *Back to the Future*, *Witness*, and *Breaking Away*. I go on the road with my act for several days, reading the book and scripts, then call up Steve, and say, "I can write you a screenplay."

In less than two months, I write "Stand Up," a drama-

comedy about a young stand-up comic (what else!) who goes on the road with a veteran comedian who is going off the deep end psychologically. Steve uses that script for his master's thesis. We team up to write a second script called "Dream Car." Then a third one: "K-9." So within about nine months of me saying, "I can do that," I have co-written a spec script that Universal Pictures purchases.

What does this have to do with the business of screenwriting? Simply this. When you have the opportunity to write something, seize it. The first few years I worked in Hollywood, I'll be frank: I wasn't a very good screenwriter, simply because I hadn't spent the requisite time studying the craft. As soon as Universal bought *K-9*, I went on a crash course, immersing myself in every resource I could find — reading screenwriting books, analyzing screenplays, watching movies, attending lectures, talking to writers. And with each writing assignment or pitch opportunity, no matter what the specifics, I always answered, "I can do that." Yes, I wanted to get the gig for the money. But more important to me was the chance to learn by writing.

What I discovered was this: A writer rises to meet the story. Even if they feel like they're in over their head, if they commit themselves fully to the task, and immerse themselves in that story universe, it's likely they can find and write that story.

Now I'll be the first to say that there are times when you do not say yes, times when you walk away from a potential writing assignment. Some stories just aren't good fits. Some projects are snakebit from the start. Some situations just don't feel right in terms of the personalities involved. In other words, you also have to have the resolve to say *no*.

But fundamentally, I believe a writer must have the instinct to take on a challenge, even if they have doubts. Hell, there's not a story I've written where I didn't go into it with some sort of fear of failure.

As writers, we create. The act of creating is a *positive* experience. The sheer act of typing FADE IN is a tacit acknowledgment that yes, we can do that, we can write this script.

So when the opportunities to write a story come, whether you're outside the business and it's a spec script or you're working as a writer in Hollywood and it's a paying gig, always keep these four words at the ready:

"I can do that."

Because you know what? Chances are, you can.

The Business of Screenwriting is a weekly series of GITS posts based upon my experiences as a complete Hollywood outsider who sold a spec script for a lot of money, parlayed that into a screenwriting career during

which time I've made some good choices, some okay decisions, and some really stupid ones. Hopefully you'll be the wiser for what you learn here.

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