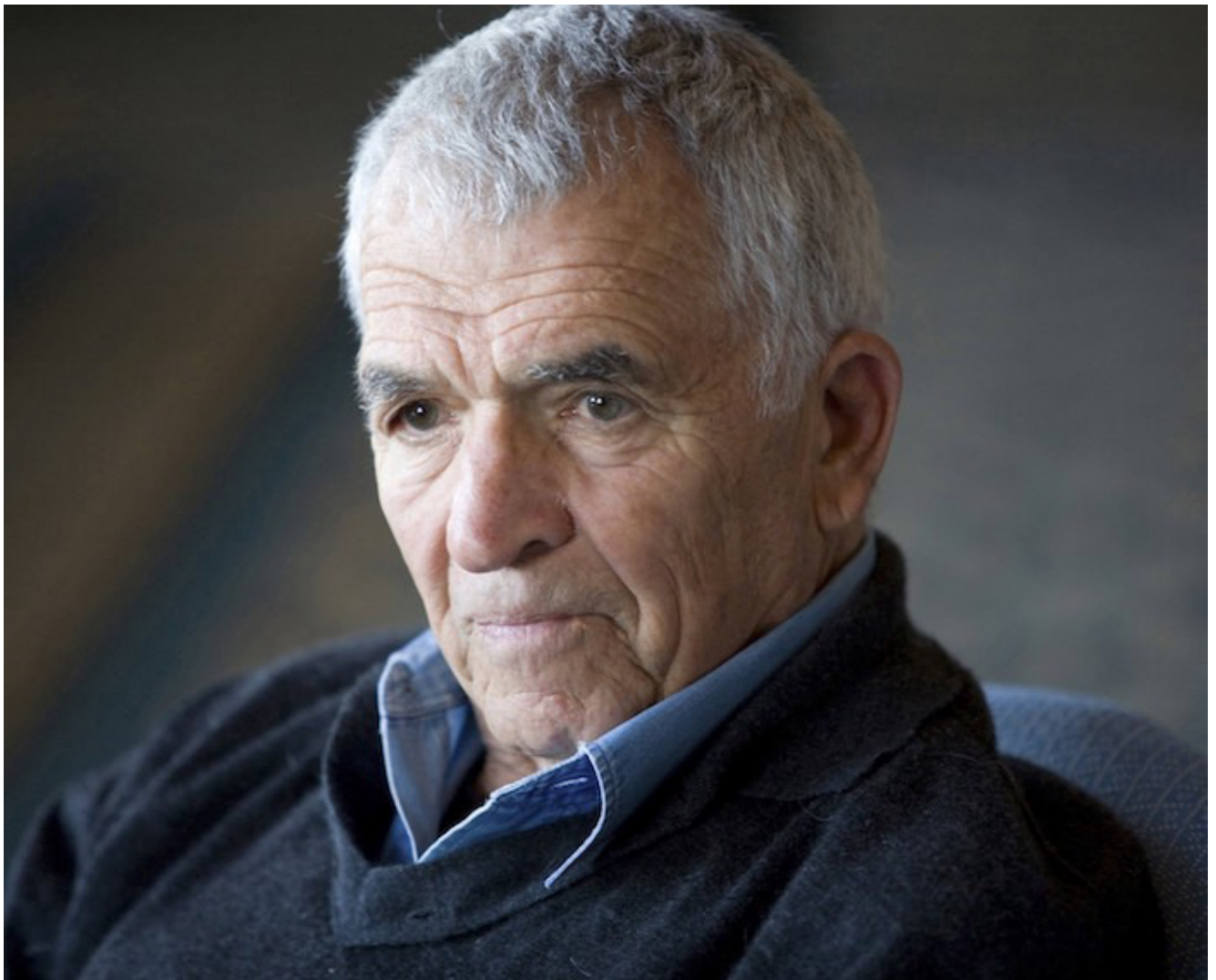


How They Write A Script: Alvin Sargent

[Scott Myers](#)

"I think too many people are too organized; they've got it all worked out, instead of hearing their characters first. Get the goop out first, then organize."



Alvin Sargent

[Alvin Sargent](#) is one of the most well-respected screenwriters in Hollywood. He's the brother of [Herb Sargent](#) who up until his death in 2005 was president of the WGA, East and was married to long-time Hollywood

producer [Laura Ziskin](#) (she died in 2011). One look at his screenwriting credits — [Paper Moon \(1973\)](#), [Julia \(1977\)](#), [Ordinary People \(1980\)](#), [Nuts \(1987\)](#), [Spiderman 2 \(2004\)](#), and [Spiderman 3 \(2007\)](#), among many more — and you know you are dealing with a top-flight professional.

When I first broke into screenwriting as a profession in 1987, I read everything I could on every screenwriter — and to this day, some of the best advice I found during that time was from Alvin Sargent. Beyond everything else, Sargent challenges writers to leap before they look, take risks, get messy. That, he insists, is how we find the magic in our characters and stories. And so, here are some choice quotes from Alvin Sargent, gathered from books and articles over the years.

ON STRUCTURE

"I do a great deal of free-associating. Talk, for pages and pages, I don't know what's going on. Then I find something alive — I hope. I think too many people are too organized; they've got it all worked out, instead of hearing their characters first. Get the goop out first, then organize."

ON CHARACTERS

"Over a period of time, I begin to understand them, to think about them not only in terms of where they are in the story. I think about where these people are today,

even when I'm not writing. Sometimes they never come back, and so sometimes I fire them."

ON SPONTANEITY

"Rigidity is the mother of rigidity. It's very exciting to be ridiculous. I wish I could be even more so than I am.

Jump! Jumping is a lifeline, not the suicide or the predictable. It brings you to life. Take the character and put him where he least wants to be. If it's honest, it'll be worth exploring."

ON THE WRITING PROCESS

"My confidence grows or dissolves with each day's work. As I work and start to see 'it' happening and realize that I'm moving somewhere, that there's some kind of real life, then it's a good day.

"But when it doesn't seem to be working for a long time, or you just can't find the truth, then the terror sets in. You must not stop. You cannot give in to anxiety. Maintain energy. Drive. Rage. Whatever it takes to keep writing.

"Even though you can't immediately solve problems, that doesn't mean the work isn't alive. You go back. Back to the beginning. The process is to move into it, come up to it, step by step, find out where you've hit it wrong, what's dishonest. Where you've gone wrong usually involves a matter of honesty. You've been dishonest either to the character or to the structure of the piece."

ON FREEING YOURSELF TO WRITE

"You must write everyday. Free yourself. Free association. An hour alone a day. Blind writing. Write in the dark. Don't think about what it is you're writing. Just put a piece of paper in the typewriter, take your clothes off and go! No destination... pay it no attention... it's pure unconscious exercise. Pages of it. Keep it up until embarrassment disappears. Eliminate resistance. Look at it in the morning. Amazing sometimes. Most of it won't make any sense. But there'll always be a small kernel of truth that relates to what you're working on at the time. You won't even know you created it. It will appear, and it is yours. Pure gold, a product of that pure part of you that does not know how to resist."

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