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# The Business of Screenwriting: They will pigeonhole you (and why this can be a good thing)

Go Into The Story Scott Myers Feb 25 · 4 min read



The co-star of *K-9* was a dog named Jerry Lee.



Jerry Lee and Michael Dooley in 'K-9'

A few years later, I landed an assignment in which the key characters were superhero mutant frogs.

Not long after that, another assignment in which the hero was a pig.

That's right: Dogs. Frogs. Hogs.

This did not happen by chance. As soon as *K-9* sold, my name went on a variety of writing lists. Evidently, one was "Animals."

Believe it or not, I have been offered even other animal projects: whales, kangaroos, monkeys.

That is a microcosm of how Hollywood operates: They pigeonhole you [animal pun intended].

If you get known as a writer who does sports dramas, you will get offered lots of sports dramas.

If you become known as a writer who does broad physical comedies, you will get offered a lot of broad physical comedies.

If your reputation is as a writer who does turgid period pieces about bipolar quadrasexual polar bears who speak in Norwegian subtitles... well, you're probably not working in Hollywood. But you get my point.

Hollywood is a busy damn place and people there tend to operate in shorthand. "That writer is good with dialogue... She's great with character-oriented projects... That duo really gets frustration comedies."

There are several reasons why this state of affairs exists. First and foremost, a predominant way studio executives look at writers is that we are problem-solvers.

The exec has a project that needs a rewrite, a fresh take, a new set of eyes. So if the project is, let's say, an R-rated adolescent romp in the vein of *American Pie*, the exec will more than likely be looking for a writer who has a track record in that area.

This is only natural. If the studio is going to commit dollars to a writer, that writer has to hit the studio's comfort level. Think about it. Who would they be more comfortable with? A writer with an established set of writing credits in the specific genre of the project in question or a writer with background in some other area?

Contributing to the state of affairs is the attitude of most managers and agents. Whereas execs look at writers as problem-solvers, reps tend to operate on a *line of least resistance* approach toward their clients.

Being both smart and busy, agents and managers tend to slot the writer into projects that are the easiest, most likely deals to make happen. If your claim to fame is aggressive action movies with lots of spilled blood, chances are you're going to have an uphill slog landing that OWA on an adaptation of the YA title "Summer Camp Puppy Love."

Here is an excerpt from an interview Tom Benedek did with manager-producer Adam Kolbrenner:

*The real true evaluation of a manager comes down to the ability to help you navigate and ultimately not waste time on scripts and ideas you shouldn't be writing... What's your voice, what are the stories you want to tell, and how are we going to get there together... If a writer comes to me and they're a great thriller writer, an action writer, and they pitch me an interesting comedy idea, okay great. Don't write that.*

*Don't write that.* Your rep is thinking not only about your next writing gig, but also your career. Think of it as your **brand**. While there are some writers who write multiple genres, most focus more or less in one narrative space.

That becomes your best path to continued employment as a writer in Hollywood.

Again, your brand.



Of course, writers contribute to the pigeonhole effect, too. After all, no one is forcing you to say yes to the projects you're offered. And frankly, if a writer nails a project in one specific subgenre, proving that's in their wheelhouse, they will likely have more confidence writing a similar project... and another similar project... and so on.

Thus, the reality is by and large, Hollywood pigeonholes writers.

Here are two things to consider in that regard.

First, make sure what you choose to write as a spec script is a genre for which you have passion. Part of that is about your energy coming through on the page. But a big part of it is when you sell that script, Hollywood will perceive that genre or even subgenre as being who you are about.

That becomes the association. "Oh, yeah, the *K-9* guy." If you choose a genre you don't particularly care about, then sell a spec in that genre, you are going to be confronted by the daunting prospect of writing a bunch of projects you don't much like.

Second, while writers are pigeonholed, it is not necessarily a permanent situation. You can break out of the stereotype. That is one of the values of a spec script to an established writer, something I wrote about [here](#).

*The Business of Screenwriting* is a weekly series of *Go Into The Story* 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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