

10 Screenwriting Skills and Traits You Need

[Scott Myers](#)

Screenwriting Skill #1: Talent. "Genius gives birth, talent delivers."

During the 12+ years I've run hosted Go Into The story, I have been privileged to conduct one-on-one interviews with over two hundred screenwriters including dozens of [Black List](#) and [Nicholl Fellowship writers](#). Along the way, it's been fascinating to learn the variety of approaches to the craft, yet at the same time how certain universal themes recur.

I was struck by **five personality traits** and **five skill sets** that keep popping up in these conversations, so I thought it would be helpful to do a series, a checklist if you will, of areas we can focus on as we develop as screenwriters.

Screenwriting Skill #1: Talent

What is talent? If you root around the web with that question, you'll find a wide variety of opinions. I even did a word search for "talent" in this blog's On Writing archive. I came up with an interesting and diverse set of quotes:

"I see the notion of talent as quite irrelevant. I see instead perseverance, application, industry, assiduity,

will, will, will, desire, desire, desire."

— *Gordon Lish*

This would appear to diminish the importance of a writer's talent. Of course, Lish is speaking as someone who *has* [talent](#) and therefore its presence may come as no big deal to him. Besides I suspect he's taking a dip in a pool of hyperbole to make a point about the importance of perseverance, application, will, desire and all that, something with which I think we would all agree. But still, talent as "quite irrelevant"?

How about another quote:

"Practice, practice, practice writing. Writing is a craft that requires both talent and acquired skills. You learn by doing, by making mistakes and then seeing where you went wrong."

— *Jeffrey A. Carver*

This is interesting because [Carver](#) draws a distinction between *talent* and *skill*. If we were in a classroom setting discussing the concepts in a hypothetical manner, I wouldn't have a problem with this. However we are talking about screenwriting and that by default is tied inevitably to the business of making movies. And while practice, practice, practice is critical — something I'll be writing about this week — talent is absolutely essential to a screenwriter's success.

Therefore, I will stick with this simple definition of talent: *natural aptitude*. For purposes of this post, it means that an individual has a natural aptitude for writing.



Shakespeare in Love (1999)

Even young Will pictured here in *Shakespeare in Love* demonstrated at the beginning of the movie that talent alone was not enough to succeed. In his particular case, while his conscious goal may have been to become a great playwright, he was essentially lost, leading a shallow existence carousing, chasing women and basically not taking his craft seriously. Fortunately he found a muse in the form of Viola, a relationship which took him to the heights of passion and love, and the depths of misery and despair. For it was only then, having experienced the extremes of life, going beyond the shallow surface of his previous existence, that his talent was able to rise to glory.

And that's the point: Everything he did — indeed everything we do as writers — is all in service to our talent, to create paths so that it may stride into the light of day, onto our keyboards or pads of paper, and finally manifest in a

completed story.

"Genius gives birth, talent delivers."

— *Jack Kerouac*

Leave it to [Kerouac](#) to give us a take on the subject that anyone who works in the Hollywood film industry would appreciate. *Talent delivers.*

We've all heard of a *talent show*, right? As screenwriters, that is the bottom line: We need to show our talent. Of course, it is not the *only* requisite skill as we all know and I will discuss the rest of this week, but at some fundamental level, we need to have a level of talent that enables us to wrangle a story, put it down into 100 or so pages of a screenplay, and somehow make a magical connection with readers.

What about The Big Question looming over this discussion, one we have asked or will ask of ourselves at some point: *Do I have talent as a writer?*

Each of us has to come to our own answer. And not only *if* we have talent, but what kind of talent, say for example, we are strong when it comes to dialogue or characters, but less so with plot or themes (or whatever).

How to determine these things? Honestly, I don't know. But I do know this: If you are drawn to writing, a path you feel compelled to explore, then you must believe you have

talent, you must act on that assumption. You will get nowhere otherwise.

As we explored in this series last week, there are certain traits that benefit a screenwriter: Passion, Courage, Consistency, Flexibility, Persistence. All of those facilitate our skills. And a primary member of a screenwriter's skill set has got to be talent, more specifically being able to show our talent.

How about you? What are your thoughts on the relative importance of talent when it comes to writing? I'd love to read your thoughts in comments.

Previous posts in this series on 5 Screenwriting Traits:

[Part 1: Passion](#)

[Part 2: Courage](#)

[Part 3: Consistency](#)

[Part 4: Flexibility](#)

[Part 5: Persistence](#)

Tomorrow: Screenwriting Skill #2: Knowledge.