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Reader Question: When can you stop tinkering with a script and finally say “done”?

Scott Myers Follow Jul 5 · 5 min read

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And for a writer, what the hell does “done” mean?

From Loobs:

When can you stop tinkering with a script and finally say “done”?

You could pretty much rewrite something till the end of time so I'd like to know your thoughts on when you think it's right to move on.

Thanks!



For a working screenwriter, this is an easy question to answer: You know you're done with a script when you hit its due date. But on any spec project without a hard out, you pose an excellent question, Loobs. It's the flip side of the mantra, "Writing is rewriting." If that's true, how the hell do you know when you're done? Here is a list of things you should consider doing to help you determine the answer:

1. Take a break: Whenever you finish a draft, you should set the script aside for at least week (with a first draft, I recommend at least two weeks). You need that time to get away from the project and develop a fresh set of eyes. It's amazing how perfect we can think a script is when we just finish writing a draft, then how many issues we see when we come back to it a few weeks later.

2. Have people read your script: You should give the script to some readers for a critique. I do not mean your spouse, parents, or buddies. I'm talking about people who know movies, who have a grasp of story, and who you know will be honest with you. In the best of all worlds, they are writers themselves. If you don't have access to such folks, consider paying for a professional reader to cover your script.

3. Go back to basics: One of the values of breaking your story in prep, at least the way I teach it, is you work off a series of key questions to help you shape the characters and narrative. Since you have those questions available, compare them to what you have ended up with in your current draft. Then ask yourself, "Does my script answer these questions?" If you worked up an outline, such as the one I teach [Narrative Throughline], compare that to your script to see where your major Plotline points land. If you find the script lacking on any front, you would be well advised to dig back into it and make some changes.

4. Is my script big enough: A series of [ten questions](#) you can ask yourself to see if your script is big enough to be a movie.

5. Read your script out loud: This is a great exercise as saying and hearing your words aloud allows you to get a different take on what you've written. If something doesn't flow easily across your lips, rewrite it. If you start to feel yourself losing interest in the read, stop right there and look at the sequence in question. Does it need a punch up?

6. Dialogue due diligence: A variation on #5 is to print out all the dialogue of each character separately and read them aloud, one by one. So every side your Protagonist says, print them out and read them out loud, one after the other. Every side of your Nemesis, same thing. Attractor, Mentor, Trickster, ditto. Even secondary characters. The main thing is to check and see if each character has a distinctive feel or lilt to their language — how they talk, what they say, how they say it. Also, as above, look for clunky sides and revise them to make them read better.

7. Be honest with yourself (Part 1): Are you hesitant to proclaim that your script is done because you're afraid to submit it to reps and buyers? That's okay if you are. It's always a scary thing to release your creativity out to the world. But don't let your fears keep you stymied in endless rewrites and tweaks, as they can become an excuse not to finish a script. Instead take a deep breath and see #10.

8. Be honest with yourself (Part 2): After you have gone through all of your rational approaches to determine if a script is done or not, I suggest you connect with your emotional self as well. So print out a copy of your script, go into a room all by yourself, close the door, turn off the phone, put your computer on mute, and tell everyone to leave you the hell alone for a half-hour. And then just sit with your script. I know this sounds stupid, but believe me, there may be no better way for you to get honest about the quality of your story than simple to 'be' with it in a quiet setting. Try to focus on the big questions: Is this as good as I can get it at this point in time? Have I done everything I can to assess how good it is? Is this story ready to go out into the world?

9. One final polish: This is largely an exercise in trimming — losing orphans, cutting unnecessary dialogue and scene description. A lean, tight script is one key to a good read.

10. Let it go: You can not have any chance of achieving success as a writer unless you actually submit your script to potential reps or buyers. So at some point, just let it go. If it sells, great. If it doesn't, that isn't the end of the world. You may get representation off that script. The script becomes an asset in your library, something you can dust off down the road, and try to sell again or adapt. Put it out there. All you need is the right set of eyeballs to read your script (assuming it's good).

Then what do you do? Why, start writing your next script. Since you're a loyal Go Into The Story reader, you already know the [art of stacking projects](#), so you should be good to go. You can and should follow up on the progress of your script with the various people to whom you have submitted it, but don't spend each day staring at the phone. Time never passes so slowly as that. Much better to immerse yourself in creating *another* story.

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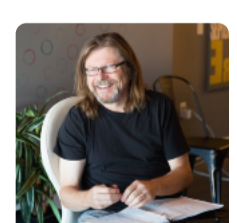
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