

The Thing With Coincidences in Screenplays...

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The difference between Fate... and Writer's Convenience.



I was trying to find a visual for coincidence, but I stumbled on this bunny-kitten doppelganger which is... fate?

When I broke into Hollywood, I did everything I could to soak up knowledge about the craft. Books. Lectures. Panels. Interviews. Movies. Scripts. Those first few years were the equivalent of my film school education.

Along the way, I hit upon this Hollywood truism: *"You're only allowed one coincidence per movie."* That meant as a screenwriter, I could only count on one coincidence per script. Anything more would prove problematic.

You may ask, *"What's the big deal? Why not two coincidences?"*

One coincidence pretty much falls under the umbrella of Fate, the intersection of characters and events which is a natural part of the narrative.

That second coincidence? Since the first coincidence is tethered to Fate, the next one will come across more like **writer's convenience**. Instead of flowing organically from the narrative, it will feel like the writer is orchestrating events to make certain things happen. Not the characters. Not the confluence of plot elements. The writer pushing and prodding events to fit the writer's needs relative to the story's plot.

You do not want to be guilty of writer's convenience for many reasons, not the least of which is it yanks the reader out of the story universe when they swat palm of hand onto forehead and proclaim, *"Writer's convenience!!!"*

This is why an addendum to the original Hollywood adage — *"You're only allowed one coincidence per movie"* — is this: *"If you're going to have a coincidence, might as well make it a BIG ONE!"*

Case in point: *Little Miss Sunshine*.

The dysfunctional Hoover family takes off from Arizona to Southern California so Olive can participate in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. Along the way, they stop at a gas station. Grandpa Edwin Hoover has this exchange with Frank:

Frank, who is gay, heads off to buy some "porn" as requested by Grandpa.

Background: Frank is recuperating from an attempted suicide. Why did he try to kill himself? Because he discovered that his young lover had rejected Frank for another lover, an academic who was the Number Two Proust scholar in the world. Who is the Number One Proust scholar? Frank.

So what happens in the gas station which is stuck WAY OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE?!?!?

A sports car pulls up and while Frank — who AGAIN for the record is gay — pays for Grandpa's hard core HETEROSEXUAL porn magazine, who should waltz into the convenience store but none other than Frank's ex-young lover.

HUGE COINCIDENCE!

Moreover, who is driving the sports car? None other than the #2 Proust scholar and romantic arch-rival to Frank.



Frank's Proust rival with Frank's ex-lover intersect out in the middle of nowhere... huge coincidence.

The pair careens away, chortling at Frank who has been awkwardly attempting to hide Grandpa's busty hetero porno magazines from his former lover and lie about his career choice (he'd been fired, not quit).

So ginormous coincidence. Perhaps the script could have gotten away with it on its own merits, but another explanation why this scene works:

It's a **bad** coincidence! The intersection of these characters is not a positive event which HELPS Frank, but rather rubs salt in the wound, forcing him to confront his inner 'demons' in a deeper way.

That makes total sense: How could a script feel like writer's convenience if what transpires actually works **against** the wishes of a key character?

Therefore:

- You are only allowed one coincidence per script
- If you're going to have a coincidence, might as well make it a big one
- Avoid writer's coincidence by making it a **bad** coincidence

But wait, there's another trick I've learned: *A writer can get away with a coincidence if characters **acknowledge** the coincidence.* A perfect example:



Rick's lover. Who left him jilted at a Paris train station. Which led him to scurry off to the edge of civilization in Casablanca. Then several years later who should suddenly stride into his bar? Ilsa.

Why North Africa? Why Casablanca? Why **THIS** nightclub?

It's a HUGE coincidence. But it's also the only one in the script. And it's a BAD coincidence, something Rick definitely doesn't want, which justifies part of the scene's existence.

But the larger point is this: Rick NEEDS it. It HAS to happen.

Therefore, if a character simply states it in dialogue, like Rick's side which acknowledges the ironic nature of Fate, that minimizes the influence of writers convenience. It's Rick's narrative imperative, he HAS to deal with his past which means Ilse MUST appear in his present.

Thus, we can add this to our coincidence tip list:

- You are only allowed one coincidence per script
- If you're going to have a coincidence, might as well make it a big one
- Avoid writer's coincidence by making it a **bad** coincidence
- If you have a coincidence, have a character acknowledge it in dialogue

Some writing tips to transform Coincidence into... Fate.