

10 Screenwriting Skills and Traits You Need

[Scott Myers](#)

Screenwriting Skill #4: Voice. "Your voice is an expression of you. What you care about. What you are passionate about. What enlivens you. What compels you to sit down and pound out pages."

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 #4: Voice

I hear this a lot in conversations with writers, but mostly with managers and producers. They're looking for writers who cover a lot of territory in terms of their traits and skills, but one of the most important is that they have a unique, identifiable voice.

Question: What the hell is a writer's voice?

Well, wouldn't you know it, there's actually a [Wikipedia page](#) on the subject. Here is the content of that page in its entirety:

The writer's voice is the individual writing style of an author, a combination of idiosyncratic usage of syntax, diction, punctuation, character development, dialogue, etc., within a given body of text (or across several works). Voice can be thought of in terms of the uniqueness of a vocal voice machine. As a trumpet has a different voice than a tuba or a violin has a different voice than a cello, so the words of one author have a different sound than the words of another. One author may have a voice that is light and fast paced while another may have a dark voice.

In creative writing, students are often encouraged to experiment with different literary styles and techniques in order to help them better develop their "voice". This aspect varies with the individual author, but having this asset is considered positive and beneficial to both the writer and his or her audience.

Guess what? I can live with this.

- Your voice reflects your "individual writing style." And that includes syntax, diction, punctuation, dialogue... but I would say most critically *character development*. I mean consider the characters of Quentin Tarantino:



Reservoir Dogs (1992)

Compared to Wes Anderson:



Moonrise Kingdom (2012)

To Shane Black:



Nice Guys (2016)

Those characters reflect writing choices. Genre, concept, tone, atmosphere... and all of that contributes and shapes a writer's voice.

- I like the metaphor of a writer's voice typified as the difference between musical instruments. Perhaps Tarantino is a brash saxophone. Anderson maybe a mandolin. Black a fuzz-tone guitar with Marshall amps stacked to the ceiling. Whatever the specifics, the fact is there is — or should be — a musical quality to the language we use in writing our stories, a combination of pitch, tone, rhythm, and timbre. And here's really why I like this imagery: It takes us far beyond anything any supposed screenwriting formula can do for you. A screenplay should in effect 'sing' to a reader, it should evoke feelings and sensations, not just hit plot points on this page or that. Music has the power to move a listener. So, too, a screenplay. Therefore consider this:

What musical instrument best describes your writer's voice?

- "Encouraged to experiment with different literary styles and techniques": Absolutely! For an aspiring screenwriter, even established ones, perhaps the single most important thing you can do to find your voice is experiment. Watch movies and read scripts to feed your creativity. Then when writing a script, try *this* approach or *that*. Supposedly the composer Felix Mendelssohn transcribed by hand exact copies of compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach, just to get a feel for those rhythms and patterns. Likewise F. Scott Fitzgerald is said to have copied by hand entire novels by Charles Dickens. Often we can zero in our voice by studying the voices of other writers, then emulating and experimenting with them.

At the end of the day, your voice is an expression of you. What you care about. What you are passionate about. What enlivens you. What compels you to sit down and pound out pages. In terms of discovering your voice, there is perhaps nothing more important than tapping into that core aspect of your Self. What do you want to say? How do you want to say it?

And if that is too obtuse, play around with that whole musical instrument thing.

Hollywood is always looking for screenwriters who demonstrate a unique, compelling, and entertaining voice.

Go. Find. Yours.

Previous posts in this series on 5 Screenwriting Traits:

[Part 1: Passion](#)

[Part 2: Courage](#)

[Part 3: Consistency](#)

[Part 4: Flexibility](#)

[Part 5: Persistence](#)

Previous post in this series on 5 Screenwriting Skills:

[Part 1: Talent](#)

[Part 2: Knowledge](#)

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Tomorrow: Conviction.