

To beat or not to beat: That is the question

[Scott Myers](#)

Some reflections on the use of *Beat* in a screenplay.

CHIGURH

I guess that passes for manners in your cracker view of things.

A beat.

PROPRIETOR

Well sir I apologize. If you don't wanna accept that I don't know what else I can do for you.

Chigurh stands chewing cashews, staring while the old man works the register and puts change on the counter.

PROPRIETOR (CONT'D)

...Will there be somethin' else?

CHIGURH

I don't know. Will there?

Beat.

The proprietor turns and coughs. Chigurh stares.

Last night, I stepped in it. Yep, I did something I am loathe to see in the online screenwriting universe: create a controversy over some simple aspect of the craft. Here is the tweet in question:

You'd think after blogging for 13+ years and being on Twitter for nearly that long, I'd have learned my lesson. Apparently not!

Some context. I composed the tweet on the heels of reading a former university student's script which used *Beat* or *A beat* 50+ times. Since their draft is long and they will be dealing with tightening up relative to page count, if you figure the use of *Beat* = three lines:

Line-Space

Beat

Line-Space

$50 \times 3 = 150$ lines. That comes out to about 3 script pages.

That's the primary "place" I was coming from when I dashed off my tweet.

The other thing is having studied screenwriting for over three decades — and a considerable part of that tracking screenplay format and style — the use of *Beat* became popularized in the 80s. And like so many trends which emerge, such as breaking the fourth wall in scene description, there was a time when its use became an issue. I remember conversations with studio execs and producers who expressed their distaste for the use of *Beat* because it was distracting. I've even heard actors tell me they didn't like it because it was dictating how they should read a line or play out a moment.

That said, let me say what I **should** have written in the original tweet: There are no rules. You can do whatever you want. If you want to use *Beat* or *A beat* or *A long beat*, that is entirely your choice. If this is part of your writing style or

narrative voice, you are free to use it, just as you are free to do **anything** to best convey your story.

For example, here is an excerpt from one of the most memorable scenes in *No Country for Old Men*:

CHIGURH

I guess that passes for manners in your cracker view of things.

A beat.

PROPRIETOR

Well sir I apologize. If you don't wanna accept that I don't know what else I can do for you.

Chigurh stands chewing cashews, staring while the old man works the register and puts change on the counter.

PROPRIETOR (CONT'D)

...Will there be somethin' else?

CHIGURH

I don't know. Will there?

Beat.

The proprietor turns and coughs. Chigurh stares.

PROPRIETOR

Is somethin' wrong?

CHIGURH

With what?

PROPRIETOR

With anything?

CHIGURH

Is that what you're asking me? Is there something wrong with anything?

The proprietor looks at him, uncomfortable, looks away.

PROPRIETOR

Will there be anything else?

CHIGURH

You already asked me that.

PROPRIETOR

Well... I need to see about closin'.

CHIGURH

See about closing.

PROPRIETOR

Yessir.

CHIGURH

What time do you close?

PROPRIETOR
Now. We close now.

CHIGURH
Now is not a time. What time do you close.

PROPRIETOR
Generally around dark. At dark.

Chigurh stares, slowly chewing.

CHIGURH
You don't know what you're talking about, do you?

PROPRIETOR
Sir?

CHIGURH
I said you don't know what you're talking about.

Chigurh chews.

CHIGURH (CONT'D)
... What time do you go to bed.

PROPRIETOR
Sir?

CHIGURH
You're a bit deaf, aren't you? I said what time do you go to bed.

PROPRIETOR
Well...

A pause.

PROPRIETOR (CONT'D)
... I'd say around nine-thirty. Somewhere around nine-thirty.

CHIGURH
I could come back then.

PROPRIETOR
Why would you be comin' back? We'll be closed.

CHIGURH
You said that.

He continues to stare, chewing.

PROPRIETOR
Well... I need to close now-

CHIGURH
You live in that house behind the
store?

PROPRIETOR
Yes I do.

CHIGURH
You've lived here all your life?

A beat.

PROPRIETOR
This was my wife's father's place.
Originally.

CHIGURH
You married into it.

PROPRIETOR
We lived in Temple Texas for many
years. Raised a family there. In
Temple. We come out here about four
years ago.

CHIGURH
You married into it.

PROPRIETOR
... If that's the way you wanna put
it.

CHIGURH
I don't have some way to put it.
That's the way it is.

He finishes the cashews and wads the packet and sets it on
the counter where it begins to slowly unkink. The
proprietor's eyes have tracked the packet. Chigurh's eyes
stay on the proprietor.

CHIGURH (CONT'D)
... What's the most you've ever lost
on a coin toss?

It's interesting how the script weaves between variations of
Beat and description of a moment with lines like *The*

proprietor turns and coughs. Chigurh stares. And clearly, if the Coens choose to do anything in their scripts, that's a touchstone for skillful writing.

In the twitter thread, James Simpson makes this point:

Upbraided in the ensuing tweetstorm by some who are fans of *Beat*, let me round out my reflections on the subject by saying this: Whatever you choose to do to handle a pause or quiet moment in scene description or even a parenthetical in dialogue, whether to use *Beat* or something more descriptive like *This is a struggle, MADISON can't say it, or CASSANDRA might have been hit by a truck*, be thoughtful about it. What are you trying to convey? What is your intention for that moment? Be judicious in whatever choice you make.

In my tweet, I critiqued the use of *Beat* that it is value neutral. However, upon further reflection, perhaps that is **precisely** what is needed in a specific moment ... to allow the reader to fill in the space with their own emotions.

Beyond that, I hope this tiny brouhaha reminds each of us that we are free to do whatever we need to do to serve our story best. If using *beat* is part of what **you** do as a writer ... go for it. As those noted screenwriting gurus The Go-Go's say:

Your comments welcome.

UPDATE: Mea culpa! The people have spoken and they like

their *beats*! My rhetoric in the original tweet was too harsh. Weird because I don't believe there are any screenwriting rules and I didn't think I was dictating anyone **not** to use *beat*, just trying to make this point:

Clearly, it didn't come across that way to a **lot** of people.

In fact, Craig **does** use *beat* in his Emmy-award winning screenplays for the TV series *Chernobyl*. For example from the first episode:

Dyatlov stops. Turns. Everyone in the room stares. Two TRAINEES, PROSKURYAKOV and KUDRYAVTSEV, both 30, look at each other. For the first time, real fear.

PEREVOZCHENKO

It exploded. The core exploded.

A beat, then Dyatlov shakes his head in disgust.

DYATLOV

He's in shock. Get him out of here.

Dyatlov stops. Turns. Everyone in the room stares. Two TRAINEES, PROSKURYAKOV and KUDRYAVTSEV, both 30, look at each other. For the first time, real fear.

PEREVOZCHENKO

It exploded. The core exploded.

A beat, then Dyatlov shakes his head in disgust.

DYATLOV

He's in shock. Get him out of here.

PEREVOZCHENKO

The lid is off. The stack is burning. I saw it.

DYATLOV

(calmly)

You're confused. RBMK reactor cores don't explode. Akimov...

Akimov hesitates. Stares at the control panel. A plastic cover is lifted up over a large black switch labeled AZ-5 Then he looks at young, frightened Toptunov.

Page 9

Some folks mentioned other award-winning screenplays which use *beat*.

INT. MOVIE THEATER - LOBBY - AFTERNOON

13

The same movie theater as before. Andrew marches in. Has one goal and one goal only now.

Walks up to Nicole at the counter. Takes a deep breath, and--

ANDREW

Hey -- look -- I -- I don't know how to say this -- I see you in here all the time and -- I was just wondering --
(stops, collects himself,)
-- if you'd want to get a bite to eat with me.

Beat. Nicole just looks at him. Andrew can't believe he said what he just said. Feels like a creep. Instantly regrets it.

NICOLE

Please get away from me.

ANDREW

I'm so sorry, I -- I didn't mea--

NICOLE

I'm kidding.

NATHAN (CONT'D)

But dude, can we get it behind us?
Can we just be two guys? Nathan
and Caleb. Not the whole employer-
employee thing.

CALEB

Okay.

Beat.

CALEB (CONT'D)

It's good to meet you, Nathan.

There are professional screenwriters who use *beat* and, of course, I know that. As noted above, I composed my ill-conceived tweet after just reading a script from a young writer who used it so much that it became a distraction. That's no excuse for a tweet which comes off as telling people what to do and not do. As Craig Mazin wrote in his inimitable style:

Yes, I should have taken a beat before tweeting about *beats*.

I apologize. After this aberration in my behavior, I will return to what I've been doing for thirteen years on the blog and social media: Encouraging writers to find their distinctive voice and do whatever they need to do to write their stories the best, most effective and entertaining way possible.