

# The Business of Screenwriting: The Phone Call

"They want your script."

[Scott Myers](#)

Exactly thirty-five years ago today, this happened.

It's 10:00AM, Monday, January 19, 1987. I pile into my ten-year-old beat-up Ford filled with the gear of my trade: guitar, amplifier, PA system and speakers, suitcase, and most importantly a big trunk in which I have all my props, and a dolly to move said trunk up and down nightclub stairs.

I key the ignition — never sure if the car will start or not. This morning, it does. I have a 6 hour drive ahead of me from Berkeley, where I live with my wife of eighteen months as she completes her B.A. at Cal, and Southern California where I will be performing for the next six weeks, four nights a week in Ventura, three nights in Thousand Oaks.

Two year ago, I switched my act from musician to musician-comedian for reasons that still aren't entirely clear to me. Yes, I'm funny, and I've made a living, such as it is, performing in a blur of clubs. But is this *really* what I want to be doing with my life?

Fortunately, there is this other thing I've discovered: screenwriting.

For the last year, I have traveled up and down the state performing in clubs all over southern and northern California, but my creative focus has been on learning the craft of screenwriting. I've written two bad scripts, but this third one feels like a winner. It's called *K-9*. The idea is inspired by the story of a Ventura County policeman whose canine police partner was shot and killed in the line of duty. When I met with the cop, a burly guy with thick muscles, he pulled out some photos of the dog — and started to cry. He was so attached to his deceased partner, he felt he could no longer do police work, opting to become a firefighter instead.

How could a tough cop bond that deeply with a police dog? That question became the heart and soul of the script my partner and I would write — a comedy with some heart.

Our writing process has been this: We'd get together when I was in Ventura, talk through the story, then I'd go on the road, working it through further, driving and brainstorming ideas, scenes, and potential dialogue into a cheap hand-held tape recorder. I scheduled breaks from the club circuit so I could take a week off here, a few days there to transcribe notes and pound out pages at home. I'd bring those pages back to SoCal and we'd work through them. Then after another round of gigs, I'd return to Berkeley to do rewrites.

I've been writing the script on my wife's Apple IIc, using four 5 1/4" floppy discs to store the data. I have to adjust all the margins manually line by line to match up with proper screenplay format. The dot matrix printer is slow, taking a half-hour to spit out 100 or so script pages. At the time, this is considered cutting edge.

As I pull away from the house my wife and I rent in Berkeley, my thoughts are focused on one thing: Over the weekend, the creative group at Twentieth Century Fox was scheduled to read *K-9*. My partner, who has been an intern at the studio, slipped an early draft to two execs there. They liked the script and kindly gave us some notes. I made their changes, sent off a copy of the final draft to my writing partner with a letter that said, "If Hollywood doesn't buy this script, they don't know what they're doing."

Yes, that is how little I understand about the movie business.

I had gone out the previous night with my wife for a drink at our local watering hole down the street from our house. There I told her, "I think the script is going to sell. I just have this feeling." She smiled and nodded like a good mate is supposed to.

Now I'm crawling through Bay Area traffic. My writing partner says we should know something by 11:30 or so after the studio's creative group Monday morning meeting. I am targeting the Shell gas station off the 101 in King City.

There's a pay phone there. I'll call to see what the word is.

So I have this 90 minute drive from Berkeley to King City. And as I rattle along in my Ford, I process my thoughts and feelings. I know that in the short time I've discovered screenwriting, it is something I love. It encompasses everything I'm about — a lifelong passion for movies, creativity, writing, and telling stories. There is a part of me that wants this screenwriting thing to happen very, very much.

But I also understand my fate is out of my hands. I have done everything I can. I did a ton of research by meeting with and observing the Ventura County K-9 cops as they trained. I worked and reworked the story multiple times. I read and re-read Syd Fields to try and grasp the basic concepts of screenplay structure and the mystery of "plot points." I analyzed the only three screenplays I could lay my hands on: *Witness*, *Back to the Future*, and *Breaking Away*. I carried *K-9* with me as I drove up and down California, as I climbed on stage to perform every night, everywhere I went, the story went with me. And I wrote whenever I could, usually well into the night, one stint for 36 hours without sleep.

Now it is out of my hands. And as much as I want this whole screenwriting thing to happen, I am at peace. Those 90 minutes in the car feel like an almost sacred experience.

*Whatever happens will happen. Give it up. Let it go.*

And so when I pull into the Shell station in King City, instead of racing to make a phone call, I calmly fill my car with gas, use the restroom, and only then head over to the pay phones.





I drop in a quarter, dial my writing partner's number, and get his answering machine.

"Hey, this is me. Just checking in to see if you've heard anything."

Click.

I turn away to leave, then a thought occurs to me: If he had found out something, perhaps he would have called my wife. So I plunk another quarter into the pay phone and dial home.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's — "

"They want your script."

"What — "

"Steve called. Fox wants to buy your script."

And that's the phone call... that changed my life.

*The Business of Screenwriting is a weekly series of Go Into The Story posts based upon my experiences as a complete Hollywood outsider who sold a spec script for a lot of money, parlayed that into a screenwriting career*

*during which time I've made some good choices, some okay decisions, and some really stupid ones. Hopefully you'll be the wiser for what you learn here.*

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