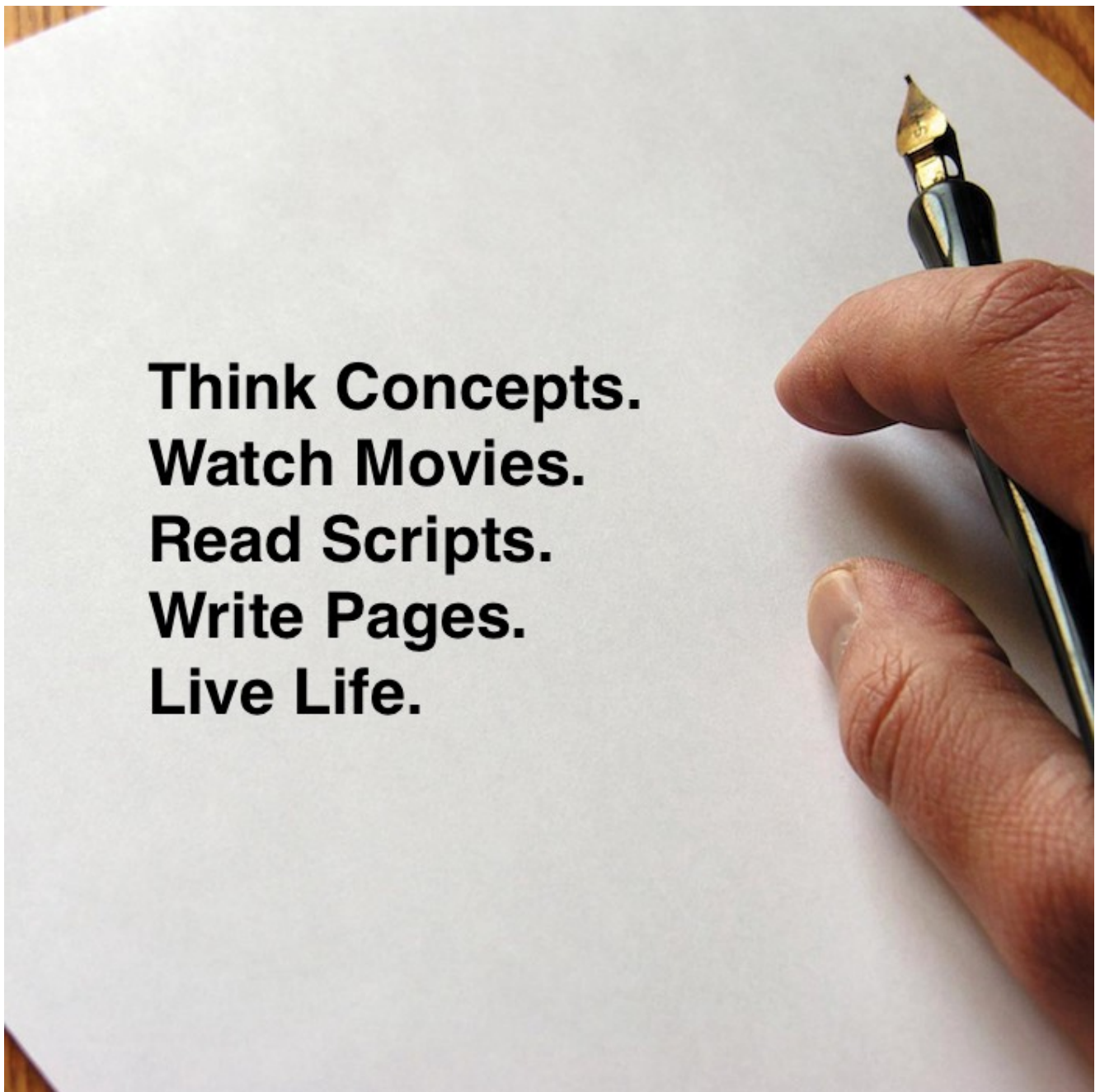


5 Keys to the Screenwriting Craft

Think Concepts. Watch Movies. Read Scripts. Write Pages. Live Life.

[Scott Myers](#)



There is no one way to learn how to be a screenwriter, however, during my 30+ years as a professional writer,

producer, and teacher, I have found these five practices are essential to grounds oneself in the screenwriting craft.

THINK CONCEPTS

The foundation of a good script is a strong story concept.

If you write a spec script based upon the first story idea that comes into your mind, that script will likely suck. Even if it's decent, it probably won't sell.

Why? Because almost assuredly, it is not a strong story concept.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of a story idea to the eventual success of a spec script.

- A good story concept enables producers and studio execs to 'see' the movie.
- A good story concept provides ammo for marketing departments to advertise the film.
- A good story concept emboldens managers and agents to sell the crap out of your script.

I believe a script's concept can represents about half of the value of a screenplay to a potential buyer. That's right, half.

Are you thinking of story ideas every day? Do you have a master list of story ideas that is... growing? Is one part of your brain on auto-pilot, always sifting through the daily data that comes your way in search of possible story ideas?

Nobel Prize-winning scientist Linus Pauling said this: "The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas."

We, as writers, should be generating "lots of ideas."

How to do that? Perhaps the single biggest key is two simple words: *What if?*

Consider anecdotes from three screenwriters:

Bob Gale: "The inspiration for coming up with the story [Back to the Future] is that I was visiting my parents in the summer of 1980, from St. Louis Missouri, and I found my father's high-school yearbook in the basement. I'm thumbing through it and I find out that my father was the president of his graduating class, which I was completely unaware of. So there's a picture of my dad, 18-years-old... The question came up in my head, 'gee, what if I had gone to school with my dad, would I have been friends with him?' That was where the light bulb went off."

James Hart: "The secret, the great key to writing Hook, came from my son. When he was six, he asked the question, 'What if Peter Pan grew up?' I had been trying to find a new way into the famous 'boy who wouldn't grow up' tale, and our son gave me the key."

Marc Norman: "The Shakespeare in Love screenplay was written by Marc Norman and playwright Tom Stoppard, although the original idea was rooted in a

third creative mind — one of Norman's son's, Zachary. It was in 1989, while studying Elizabethan drama at Boston University, that the younger Norman phoned his father with a sudden brainstorm of a movie concept — the young William Shakespeare in the Elizabethan theater. The elder Norman agreed it was a terrific idea, but he hadn't a clue what to do with it. Two years later, with bits of time stolen from other projects, the notion had formed — what if Shakespeare had writer's block while writing his timeless classic, 'Romeo and Juliet'?"

What if I had gone to school with my dad? What if Peter Pan grew up? What if Shakespeare had writers block? Or this:

"What if the alien had stayed behind on Earth?"

Want to jump start your ability to think concepts? Make the words "what if" an essential part of your brainstorming vocabulary.

WATCH MOVIES

Movies must be in your lifeblood. The best way to do that is to watch them.

I'm often surprised when I interface with aspiring screenwriters how few movies they have seen. This is wrong in so many ways.

- You gain inspiration from seeing, studying, and analyzing movies.

- Every time you see a movie, you learn something about the craft.
- There is a Gestalt understanding of the craft you gain from watching a multitude of movies.

Then this: If you expect to work in film business, it's critical you have a broad exposure to movies in order to be able to traffic in the countless references people in the industry use every day.

You simply must watch movies.

Let me delve into this further by parsing the word "watch." Broadly speaking, there are two ways to watch a movie.

The first is simply for sheer enjoyment and entertainment. Go to a theater. Rub shoulders with a real crowd to remind you of your target audience. Buy a big overpriced tub of buttered popcorn. Kick back and give yourself over to the story universe.

The second is for analysis and understanding. Cue up Netflix or pop in a DVD, and study it. Track its characters and their respective narrative functions. Identify themes. Note the story's major plot points. Better yet, do a scene-by-scene breakdown.

Both are critical, the latter to inform your mind, the former to feed your soul.

Seriously you should watching two movies per week —

minimum.

Where to start? Here: [The IMDB Top 250 movie list](#). Go through this list and note which movies you have seen and which you have not. Then work your way through the titles you haven't seen, one by one.

You can do this. You know you need to do this. The time to get started is now.

Watch. A. Movie. Today.

READ SCRIPTS

It's essential to read screenplays to study style, tone, feel, structure, pace...



Look, I get it. I *know* you don't like to read scripts. I experience a monthly reminder of this every time we do a GITS Script Reading & Analysis where it's largely empty echoes, whistling winds and tumbling tumbleweeds around

these here parts.

I'm pretty damn sure you don't want to hear me yammer on about this subject.

BUT YAMMER I WILL!!!

Why? Because there may be no single more important practice to learn the craft of screenwriting than reading scripts.

- Classic scripts: A great place to start: [The WGA 101 list](#). For a wider range, there are sites like [SimplyScripts](#).
- Spec scripts: It behooves you to read and analyze spec scripts that have sold within the last year or two in order to stay on top of narrative and stylistic trends.
- Any scripts: Unproduced, even bad ones. You can learn something from *all* scripts, even amateur ones.

When you read scripts on a regular basis, you start to intuit narrative patterns. You pick up a sense of how to write scenes. You mature your ear for dialogue. You see a variety of different writing styles. You get ideas of your own. You learn how the pros do it. And in the case of recent selling spec scripts, you track what Hollywood is buying.

There is real value in reading scripts.

And now it's time to bore you with an Old Fart story.

Before I wrote the spec script *K-9*, I read four things: Syd

Fields book "Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting," and three scripts: *Witness*, *Back to the Future* and *Breaking Away*.

Apart from having seen thousands of movies in my lifetime and a couple of cinema courses at UVA, that was the extent of my screenwriting education.

When Universal bought *K-9* and I officially broke into the business, I knew I had a lot of catching up to do if I had any chance of *staying* in the business.

One thing I did: Get my hands on every script I could to read and analyze.

Now back in those days, there were no PDF scripts. The Internet was orange juice cans, a series of tubes, duct tape and dial-up modems powered at 28.8 bps.

If you wanted to find a script, you had to go out and search for it. Physically. Like actual feet on ground, hand to hand.

My main resources: Assistants and writers. The former I sweet talked for the latest specs and production drafts. The latter like a cult, meeting at coffee shops and street corners, swapping scripts like semi-holy relics. Once I got hold of an actual screenplay, I had to take it to a Kinko's and have it copied, then return the original.

Okay, there was no trudging five miles through thick snow, fending off wolves. But still, do you have any idea what a

pain in the ass that was?

Cut to today where you can find almost any script you want online with a few keystrokes.

So if there's an edge to my post today, it's this: Writers today have it so easy. Therefore why is it so *hard* to get them read scripts?

Needless to say, I will continue with my yammering.

Read. Scripts. Damn. It.

WRITE PAGES

The only path toward productivity as a writer is to stare down the blank page.



It beckons you with a daunting whisper. It mocks you with

its dull emptiness. It freezes your soul with its ice cold whiteness.

It is — the blank page!

How can a mere 8 1/2 x 11 inch piece of white paper provoke such anxiety, such horror, such despair?

The despair of the blank page — the writer's bane!

Laying eyes upon the blank page provokes a catch in your breath, a twitch in you muscles, that special tightening in your sphincter.

Fear. But fear of what?

Fear of the not knowing. Not knowing what words will appear... or won't appear. Not knowing if the words will make sense. Not knowing if the sentences will be good. Not knowing if the story will work.

I could lay a little "power of positive thinking" on you. You know...

Imagine the possibilities!

My experience with those positive thinking platitudes is that when your blank page remains blank, the writer's life becomes about the power of positive drinking. And look where that got Hemingway!

Thus, instead of behavioral modification, let me suggest a

more philosophical, even, dare I say, *spiritual* approach.

I ask you to consider the possibility that your story already exists.

It is already *there*... all 120 pages. From FADE IN to FADE OUT. Written. Rewritten. Edited. Spell-checked. Properly formatted. And ready to go.

The story concept exists already.

The characters exist already.

The plot exists already.

The dialogue exists already.

The themes exist already.

It is there, waiting for you to find, uncover and reveal it.

Okay, Myers, if it's waiting for me, then where is it hiding out 'coz I sure as hell can't find it!!!

Your story's right there... on your blank page.

"The despair of the blank page: it is so full."

That's right, your challenge isn't the emptiness of your blank page, it's that there is so much there already. All you need to do is see it...

And you'll see it when you **believe** it.

You can choose to stare at that blank page. Sometimes that is quite valuable — clear the mind, focus your thoughts, go into a state of deep concentration. But in general, the best way to find your story on the blank page... is to start writing.

Believe it... then you'll see it.

Start writing. And watch the magic of your story reveal itself to you... as your blank pages becomes full.

LIVE LIFE



Some words of wisdom on the subject from writers:

"Learn where you came from, who you are, and where you are going. Travel in healthy and intelligent company. Immerse yourself in music. Enjoy good food and learn how to prepare it yourself. Take full

responsibility for your own behavior. Live skillfully. And never watch television.” — Russell Chatham

“In the name of God, stop a moment, cease your work, and look around you.” — Leo Tolstoy

“Writing, I think, is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice. Once in reality and once in that mirror which waits always before or behind.” — Catherine Drinker Bowen

“How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.” — Henry David Thoreau

“If you just define yourself as a screenwriter, and you have a bad day as a screenwriter, then that’s your whole world. You’re building your life on this very singular pylon. It’s important to remember that you’re a brother or a father or a boyfriend, and also that you have interests and hobbies that feed you and nourish you, and bring ideas in and balance you out. If I have a bad day screenwriting, I can come out to my studio, and I can paint and connect with myself. It’s important to build a broad life that feeds you, that nourishes you, that gives you stability.” — Joe Forte

By living life fully, we collect experiences, memories, voices, moments, feelings, all the things we need to write.

By living life, we intersect with an endless stream of

possible stories, each person, each minute rife with narrative possibilities.

By living life, we feed our mind, our heart, our soul, our creativity.

Every year, Hollywood cycles through over 30,000 story submissions. 99% of them lack emotional depth or human truth. They may be well-structured. They may have a decent story concept. They may be stylistically impressive. But if they don't generate a point of connection and resonance with a reader, characters who lift up off the page as vital, unique, alive individuals, that script will likely result in a pass.

Hollywood buyers want to feel something when they read a script. To get there in your writing, you need to live life.

Joseph Campbell said it very well:

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances without own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

Think concepts. Watch movies. Read scripts. Write pages. All important. But it's also imperative that we, as writers, live life fully... deeply... intensely.

Live. Life.

Five keys to the screenwriting craft: Think concepts. Watch movies. Read scripts. Write pages. Live life.

Onward!