

# The Spirit of the Spec

The creative empowerment of writing a spec script.

[Scott Myers](#)



I had a conversation recently with a former studio executive turned producer in which I found myself talking about the “spirit of the spec,” essentially when a person chooses to pursue a project or goal entirely on speculation with the hopes of some eventual payoff. Not everybody would make that choice. To many, with the odds so long against success, doing something on spec is not only illogical, it’s also seemingly inane.

And yet almost all screenwriters, TV writers, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and poets have as some part of their creative self the spirit of the spec.

After my conversation with the producer, it occurred to me this is a subject we should discuss here at GITS because it speaks to the very core of why we're here and what we're about as people driven by creative impulses — The Spirit of the Spec.

## **#1. You get an idea**

That's where it all starts.

An image. A feeling. A line of dialogue. A conceit. A character.

Something that catches your fancy. Causes you to stop and think. Triggers your imagination.

*Could this be a story? A novel? A movie? A TV series?*

You play around with it. Tinker with it. Ask questions.

*What genre is it? Who is the main character? What is distinctive about this idea? Is it big enough to sustain a feature-length screenplay? Is it any good?*

But the biggest question of all you can ask is the shortest one: *What if?*



What if I stuck this character in that situation?

What if I made the character a female instead of a male?

What if I started out this character as far away from their goal as possible?

What if I switched genres?

What if I switched Protagonists?

What if I amped up the stakes?

What if...

And before you know it, you are watering this seed of an idea with a cloudburst from your brainstorming. Will the seed take root? Grow? Blossom into a story worth writing?

You likely will not know the answer at this stage.

Here it is just you... and your idea.

The idea may turn out to be a pathway to success. Or a dead end. But if you are a person who lives for creativity, who exists with the oftentimes bewildering ramblings of your instincts, never forget for one second the awe and mystery that is this...

Your ideas.

They are the cornerstone of everything you do as a writer.

For those who live with the spirit of the spec, ideas are our creative lifeblood, ideas are what fuel our stories, ideas are what keep our dreams alive.

## **#2: You act on your idea**

Yes, I know this line looks like it's straight out of an early morning cable TV infomercial, but there is a fundamental truth conveyed in it that every dream-selling hack knows:

In order to make it happen, you have to...

Make. It. Happen.

If all you have is an idea, you are little more than this fellow:

FULL GROUP SHOTA man stands talking, people in g  
like gadgets are attached to his shoulders; he's  
bizarre space costume.3RD MAN

Right now it's only a notion, but I think I can get money to make it into a concept... and later turn it into an idea.

You are the equivalent of 3rd Man in the L.A. party scene from *Annie Hall*, talking about making it happen instead of making it happen.

Fortunately for a writer, there is nothing mysterious about what we need to do to act on an idea: We need to figure out the story, then write it.

As we all know, this process is not easy. We know this not only from our own personal experience, but also from the very way we talk about it.

This is where we **crack** the story, we **break** the story, we **nail** the story, we **wrangle** the story.

Every single one of those descriptors suggests the same thing: It's a struggle, a fight, a battle.

So much easier to just *talk* about your idea, like 3rd Man, rather than act on it. I know this. You know this. But let me lay two thoughts on you.

First if it was easy to craft a story, just imagine how many more people would be trying their hand at screenwriting. Or novels. Short stories. Plays. You think it's competitive now? If writing was easy, the entertainment business would be

utterly overrun by writers, a horde of chattering lemmings with stacks of three-hole punch paper jammed in their teeth, sputtering loglines along the way.

Worse imagine how shitty those scripts would be!

So yes, writing isn't easy and that is a pain in the ass for those of us who write. But every time we take up an idea and go about the process of nailing the story, we play our small, but necessary role in proving Darwin's theory: survival of the fittest.

Those with the spirit of the spec take up the fight. Those lacking the spirit, just talk about it.

Second I suggest you take those verbs I noted above — *crack, break, nail, wrangle* — and use them as scene description (they're actually good, visual words). Instead in referring to your own process of taking an idea and crafting it into a story, try using this verb:

*Find* your story.

This way you re-frame the task. It's no longer a battle, rather it's a journey. A journey of *discovery*. And the essence of what you are doing is simply this: **getting curious**.

Curious about your characters.

Curious about who they are, why they are, what they want, what they need.

Curious about their interrelationships and their respective destinies.

Curious about their goals, particularly those that come into conflict with each other.

Curious about the story universe, the various dynamics and influences at play.

Curious about how this unique mix of individuals and plot elements will evolve into being.

Prepping a story is ultimately about the act of asking questions, each one another step on the path to finding your story.

Now think on this: If there is a path, that presupposes there is an end to the path. So instead of a battle over your story where some random barbarian can spring up out of nowhere and split open your meager confidence with a pole axe, if you are on a journey of discovery, it's all a matter of taking the time, asking the questions, and walking the steps necessary to get you to that end point, where you do find your story.

And once there, you are ready to type FADE IN. Lights up. That compelling first sentence of your novel or short story.

If someone is truly infused with the spirit of the spec, they are not the 3rd Man at parties, *talking* about how they are *going* to take a notion into a concept into an idea.

Rather if you have the spirit of the spec, you act on your idea.

You get curious about it. You ask questions. You learn your way into and through it as part of your journey of discovery.

And miracle of miracles, once you reach the end of that path, you make the most profound discovery of all. That while you were trying to find the story...

The story was — all along — trying to find you.

### **#3: You write your story**

Probably most people imagine that when a writer writes a story, they are seated at their desk, plunking away at their keyboard, hour after hour until they finish their opus.

Yes, there is a good deal of 'butt on chair' time involved in writing. But when you are moved by the spirit of the spec, committing yourself wholly to your story, the fact is you are never not writing.

You are writing your story when you drive.

You are writing your story when you eat.

You are writing your story when you shower.

You are writing your story when you fold the laundry.

You are writing your story when you exercise.

You are writing your story when you sleep.

You are writing your story when you are engaged in conversation with others.





This last point can be a particularly vexing condition for your friends, family and loved ones. They know they only have a certain percentage of your attention. That at any minute, you will be there, then *not* there. Your body present, your mind off with your characters somewhere.

But it's not just somewhere, is it? No, when we write our story, we create a universe in which that story exists. The characters live and breathe. We may sit and write about them for a few hours at a time, but they go on with their existence, every minute of their every day.

And frankly that's one of the most damnable aspects of the writing process: Knowing just what to pluck out of that universe to put into our story. To my knowledge, there is only one way to determine that, summed up wonderfully by my then three year-old son when asked his advice about writing: "Go into the story, and find the animals."

We come up with an idea and test to see if it has merit.

We act on our idea by getting curious and following the path on our journey of discovery.

Then we write our story by going into it [immersing ourselves in that place and with those characters] and finding the animals [everything of substance that prowls there — moments, scenes, dialogue, images, feelings, and so on].

The animal allusion is particularly apt because stories are organic in nature and frankly rather wild, teeming with life which is both great in terms of the vitality that exists there, but also dangerous because there are times when we lose our way... as if in a jungle.

A thick, dark jungle with lots of creepy shadows, a multitude of trailheads — which ones to take?!?! — and a constant chorus of whispered voices: *Go back! Who are you kidding? This story sucks! You suck! Why are you wasting your time? You'll never make it to the end! You'll be humiliated if you continue! Epic fail dead ahead!*

On the whole, writing is not only a daunting task, it is also a frightening one.

But when you have the spirit of the spec, you have a card you can play to trump your fears, a simple and pragmatic one: "If you don't write it, you can't sell it."

There is no way around that. It's an inescapable fact. Truth with a capital "T".

Thus when we struggle with our story, even to the point of feeling fear about writing it, the spirit of the spec reminds us we haven't done squat until we have that finished manuscript in hand. Everything we do is just words vanishing into thin air, an exercise in vainglory... until we type FADE OUT / THE END.

But then a moment of true existential bliss: Printing out that final draft. Feeling the heft of those pages in our hands, their warmth as they slide out of the printer, one by one. We touch them. We hug them. We smell them.

This... THIS... is what it's all about. We have gone into the story, immersed ourselves in that universe and with those characters, given ourselves over to an all-consuming creative process in order to craft something tangible, something real. Creativity incarnate. Our story. Come to life.

And now having written our story, we are ready for the next step on our journey.

#### **#4: You put it out there**

One might think typing FADE IN, thereby signifying your commitment to writing an original screenplay, is the single act requiring the most courage in the process. But time and time again, I hear from writers who have a problem on the *other* end of the spectrum: Actually doing something with

the script when it's done.

Some have confessed to me they are petrified to submit a script to an agent or manager.

Others have said they can't even bring themselves to give their script to a professional reader for coverage.

And there are some writers who have one or more scripts — I'm talking completed drafts — which they have never let anyone read, not even friends or family, let alone somebody in the entertainment industry.

I get it. I think we all get it. As I suggested in [yesterday's post](#), writing a story is a scary endeavor. And yet the fact is the entire time you work on it — coming up with an idea, acting on that idea, the actual page-writing part of the process — your story only exists in *theory*. That is until you send your script out into the world. Only then does your story become in any meaningful sense of the word 'real.'

No matter what fears you have to overcome to write a story, they don't compare substantively with the type and degree of fear that can arise when you actually hand over your script to someone else to read.

At that point, *your* story becomes *their* story, no longer the private experience of you and your characters, but rather your characters and the world.

Talk about courage! Sure, typing FADE IN is a significant

moment. But there the stakes are limited. If you don't write a good story or don't finish, you have disappointed nobody but yourself. However if you present your story to other people, you are taking a leap of faith they will respond favorably. And if they don't? It's no longer just you and those hectoring voices of negativity in your head to deal with. Now you actually have to take into account the feelings, thoughts, impressions and — get ready for it — criticisms of *other* people.

And yet if this is a fundamental truth — "You can not sell it if you don't write it" — here is another reality etched in stone: "You can not sell it unless you submit it."

A buyer is not going to magically read your mind, buy an airplane ticket to your home town, sneak into your house, locate the drawer in which you keep your precious script, read it, then wake you up with a check for a million dollars.

No, you need to put your script out there. Indeed this is where you would do well to embrace the spirit of the spec. And the spirit of the spec provides writers with two incredibly powerful words to help them circumnavigate all their fears, thus enabling them to submit their manuscripts to people who matter.

Those two words: **Screw you!**

If you are afraid to let your spouse read your script, repeat after me: **Screw you!**

If you are afraid to let other writers read your script, repeat after me: **Screw you!**

If you are afraid to let a professional script reader provide coverage of your script, repeat after me: **Screw you!**

If you are afraid to send out email inquiries to managers about your script, repeat after me: **Screw you!**

Who is the "you" you are telling to screw? Why fear, of course. If you have any realistic chance of succeeding as a writer, you have to squash your punk-ass fears, give them a big time beat down.

*You telling me I don't have any talent? Screw you!*

*You telling me people will hate my story? Screw you!*

*You telling me not to believe in myself? Screw you!*

Screw you! Screw you! Screw you!

Here's another fact to add to your list:

You can't sell a script unless you write it.

You can't sell a script unless you submit it.

You can't sell a script unless you defeat fear.



Now you may consider that to be Coach Myers talking. If you need a confrontational therapy to get you over the hump to put your script out there, go to town. Empowered with those two key words — Screw you! — you should be on your way.

There is another dimension to the spirit of the spec. This message comes from Pastor Myers... for those who are more spiritually inclined.

Do you recall this reference from another spirit of the spec post [here](#):

*If there is a path, that presupposes there is an end to the path. So instead of a battle over your story where some random barbarian can spring up out of nowhere and split open your meager confidence with a pole axe, if you are on a journey of discovery, it's all a matter of taking the time, asking the questions, and walking the steps necessary to get you to that end point, where*

*you do find your story.*

I want you to consider this idea: Your story's path does not end when you type FADE OUT. Rather that is simply a new beginning. The path goes on. The journey goes on.

It goes on as your story gets read by others.

It goes on as your story gets bought.

It goes on as your story gets developed.

It goes on as your story gets a green light.

It goes on as your story gets produced.

It goes on as your story gets edited.

It goes on as your story gets released into theaters.

Your script, while a key component of your story, is but one step in a longer journey. I suppose you can look at the day your movie goes wide into theaters as the end of the path. But that's not even true. I get emails every week from people who have seen *K-9*, *Alaska*, or *Trojan War*. It's one of the most endearing and enduring aspects of our movies that they continue to live as long as people will watch them.

Which is to say you, as the writer, are but a player in that larger journey. Your story already exists, its path is already laid out. Whether it sells or not, gets produced or not, while we may work as fiercely as we can — and should — to make it happen, in a very real way, our story's fate has already been determined.

So in actuality, you really have nothing to fear. The destiny of your story will play out the way it will play out. Thus when



your obnoxious voices of fear would do their best to restrain you from putting your story out there, here are some other words you can use to quiet them:

**Let it go.**

I am afraid...

Let it go.

I am scared...

Let it go.

I'm not ready...

Let it go.

Afraid or not, your story's fate is determined. You can not control its destiny, only the story can.

So how to put it out there? Let it go.

Okay, two possible courses of action in confronting fear, one from Coach Myers, the other Pastor Myers. I know for many of you, this is not an issue. You knock off your scripts, you get them out there. That's being filled with the spirit of the spec. Because there is a baseline of belief undergirding what we do: If you put it out there, something can happen.

But only if you put it out there.

**#5: And if it doesn't sell...**

You write another one.



Embrace the Spirit of the Spec!