

"Write what they're buying or sell them your dream"

There are many writing paths. Here are two of them.

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Let's consider this a response to a reader question because I get this type of inquiry pretty regularly from aspiring screenwriters via email. It takes different forms:

What type of stories should I focus on?

I have a lot of story ideas: How do I know which one to write?

What's the best approach to take to maximize my chance of selling a script to Hollywood?

There is no one right answer to these questions. Even if there was and I gave it to you, you can be certain you would open the trades tomorrow to read a story about some writer who came along and did precisely the opposite, and just sold a spec for six figures.

That said broadly speaking, there are two basic paths a screenwriter can take when writing a spec script.



The most obvious approach is this: *Write what they're buying.*

It's the first rule of sales: Qualify your customer. If Hollywood is your 'customer,' then you find out what they are buying. That can mean right now, that can mean established patterns in terms of genres and movie story types over a decade or more, that can mean reading the tea leaves for what you think may be the next big thing. You do due diligence in terms of gathering information about the Hollywood acquisition market so when you assess your story concepts, your own interests, and your potential as a writer to develop your voice, you can make an informed choice in what you pursue.

I know there is a pretty persistent piece of advice given by established writers that goes something like this: "Don't pay attention to the market. Things change. What you write today won't reflect what they're buying tomorrow. Besides it's important to be authentic. The old adage is true: Write

what you know.”

The problem with this take is while it may be sound advice for some types of writers, it can be absolutely the wrong thing for others. For example, if your passion is action-thrillers, those are the movies you watch, those are the scripts you've analyzed, that's the type of story that oozes from your creative pores, then you'd probably be dumb not to track the acquisition market. First off, what if there is a script that sells or a project in development that is the precise concept you were planning on writing? What a waste of time that would be to write a script that has zero chance of selling. Second, determining what's going on in development and production may provide you with just the spark for a variation on a preexisting idea to use for a new spec. Third, you can be damn sure professional screenwriters track what sells to know what's going on. Shouldn't you? So in the case of this type of writer, why would they consciously not pay attention to the acquisition marketplace when in fact there are multiple good reasons to do precisely that?

Now I will grant you the above words of wisdom — 'Don't pay attention to the market' — is solid advice for other kinds of writers, those for example who are more interested in exploring their own creative instincts and pushing the boundaries of what they perceive the Hollywood norms to be. In that case, there is another path, an approach we may sum up in this way: *Sell them your dreams.*

At its core, this is about believing passionately in yourself as a writer and specifically your own unique vision of the world in combination with your ability to translate that perspective into a story. You watch movies, you analyze scripts, you read books, the same basic practices any aspiring screenwriter should follow, but it's all about providing fodder for your creative instincts.

It's Tarantino writing *Reservoir Dogs*. It's Sodebergh writing *Sex, Lies and Videotape*. It's Kaufman writing *Being John Malkovich*.

Think of these two approaches in terms of Hollywood's mantra re acquisitions, how the studios want something 'similar but different.'

The Write What They're Buying path is more about being *similar*.

The Sell Them Your Dream path is more about being *different*.

My advice? Go off by yourself for a day. Take a good honest look at your skills, what you bring to the table as a writer. Consider your creativity, how it works. Pay special attention to what types of movies inspire you, what kind of stories for which you have passion.

Then look at your story concepts, the entire list. If you don't have a list, put one together. Sit with each of your ideas. Which ones bubble up to the top as being the most

interesting ones? Which ones feel the most like a movie?

Finally imagine you are standing at a fork-in-the-road: One path has a sign that reads Write What They're Buying, the other path has a sign that says Sell Them Your Dream.

Which path feels right to you? Which path pulls you in its direction?

You're not looking for the right choice or a wrong choice, rather you are looking for an honest choice: Which best reflects your instincts as a writer?

Hopefully one or the other path will speak to you. If not, don't worry. Follow Yogi Berra's advice: "When you come to a fork-in-the-road, take it."

Go down one or the other, and write something. That way, you will end up with a story which has the potential to sell. Perhaps more importantly, you will learn about yourself as a writer.

How about you? Which type of writer are you? Which path will you take?

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