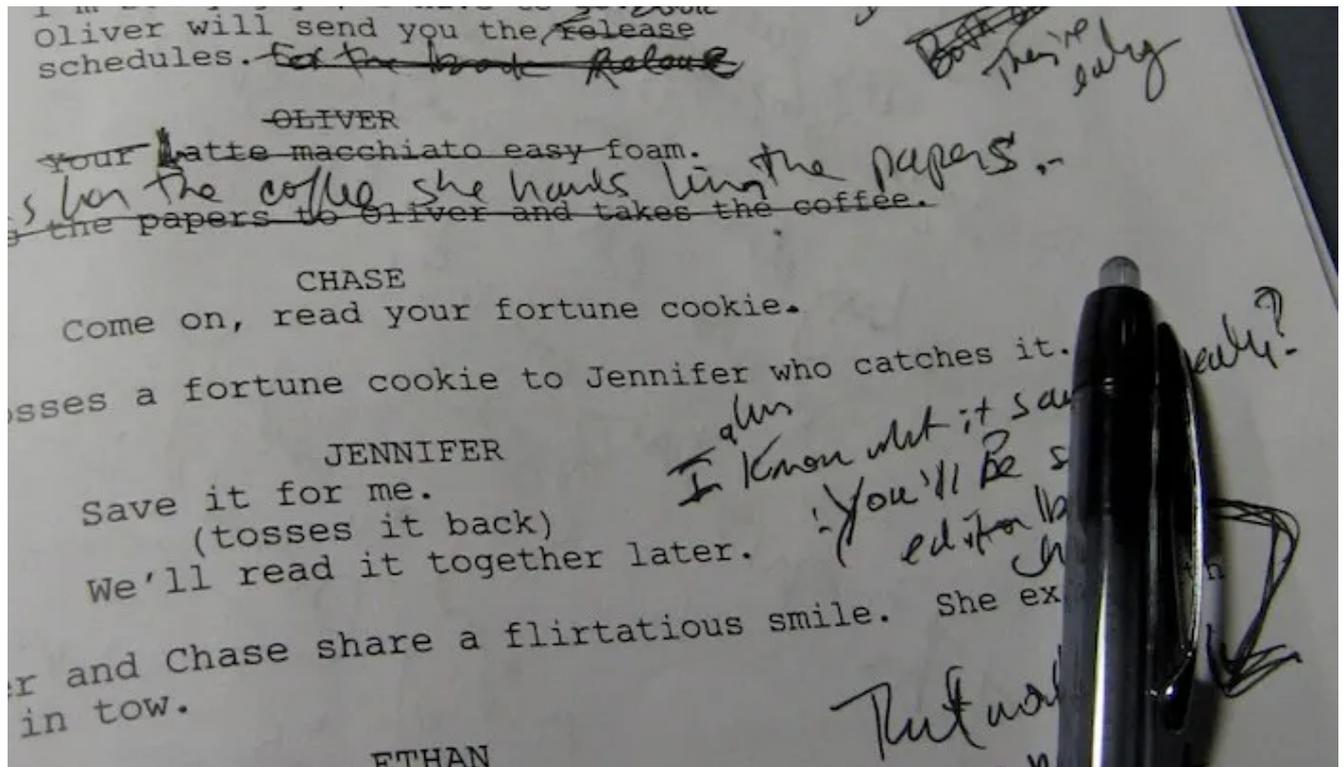


# The Business of Screenwriting: Everybody gets rewritten in Hollywood

And by *everybody*, I mean EVERYBODY!



After Universal Pictures buys the spec script *K-9*, we owe them a rewrite. We work through their notes (that's a whole other story) and pound out a new draft in about two months. A week or so later, we get a call for a meeting at our agents' office in Beverly Hills. They don't mince words. "Universal's bringing in another writer."

After all the up moments in the last few months, this news is very definitely a downer. However, our agents do their best to put a positive spin on the development.

*The fact they're bringing in another writer is a good sign, shows they believe in the project.*

*They wouldn't spend money on something they didn't think could be a hit movie.*

Here is the most memorable line, referring to the \$750K Universal is paying us:

*Look, you got fucked. But you got fucked with a golden dick.*

But the most important comment from our agents is this:

*Everybody gets rewritten in Hollywood.*

I think my agents are just being nice. A total outsider to the ways of the movie business, I have no reason to believe that eventually all screenwriters have the experience of being replaced on a project. Yet over time, I learn it's true. Every writer in Hollywood, no matter how great or small, gets rewritten.

You want proof? How about this.

Many years after that fateful meeting in our agent's office, we are up for a rewrite on a project at Paramount. We're scheduled to meet with the director and the agency messengers over the existing script, so we can prep for the meeting. I tear open the package. Flip open the script. And this is what it says on the title page:

## "Disgruntled Former Employee"

written by

Ron Bass & Al Franken

You may recognize those names.

Franken is the former "Saturday Night Live" writer-performer, then author and Air America radio show host, and former Senator from Minnesota. Bass is one of the most successful screenwriters in history having written movies that have grossed well over \$1 billion including *Rain Man* (1988), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1994), a script he co-wrote with Franken, *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *Stepmom* (1998), *Entrapment* (1999), and many others.

And here my writing partner and I are being considered to rewrite Ron Bass and a future Senator.

Like the man said... Everybody gets rewritten in Hollywood.

What does this state of affairs mean for you? Two things.

First, you must prepare yourself for the prospect that when you sell your spec script or get hired for a writing assignment, the chances are good you will be replaced on the project. A number of reasons for this. It can be that

the script actually needs significant work. Or once talent gets attached, they have their own ideas (and even their own writers) for how the story should be developed. Or studio execs will bring on an established writer so they can cover their ass in case the project goes south. *Hey, it's not my fault. We hired an A-list writer to bring it home! What more could I do?*

Even when you become an established writer, you have to be prepared for the possibility on any project that no matter how great you think your draft is, the studio will bring on other writers. As William Goldman said about Hollywood, "Nobody knows anything." This is nowhere more true than re *story*, the ins-and-outs of which mystify many folks in the business. So the default mode is simply to throw multiple writers at a project and hope they catch lightning in the proverbial bottle.

The second point is something you can do right now: Determine if you have the personality that can handle being rewritten. If you don't, then consider becoming a novelist. Or a playwright. Or commit to only writing scripts that you will direct yourself, thereby ensuring control over the material. But if you search your soul and deduce that — for whatever reason — you simply can not imagine yourself coping with being rewritten, then screenwriting might not be for you.

On the other hand, there are some upsides. With all that rewriting going on, it means more potential writing

assignments for writers. What's more, if you've worked on a movie project that features several other writers, and the movie bombs, you can say, "It's not my fault, it was those other writers." And if the movie is a hit, you can say, "I wrote that!"

In other words, there's a lot more of Hollywood's golden dick to go around.

*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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