

“RED FLAGS”

Or “Why That Producer **Stopped** Reading Your Script”

By Joshua A. Cohen, Cohencidence Productions, LLC

As an indie producer who got his start screenwriting, I’ve seen both sides of the pitch. You’re the world’s best undiscovered writing talent, your commercial, high-concept screenplay has won awards, is sure to attract talent, and now all you need is an agent or producer to make it happen. Right? That’s why your script is listed on InkTip, right?

I’ve downloaded and read hundreds of screenplays from InkTip. I must in order to keep the supply of fresh material coming in. But it’s gotten to the point now that I stop reading and discard at least 60% of the scripts I receive by Page 2. Another 20% I’ll put down when I can predict the end (usually somewhere in Act 1). So now when it’s time to read a script, I don’t say to myself “ok let’s read another script,” I say “ok let’s reject another script.”

I’ll spend the time to read maybe 20% of submissions all the way through, but only if I must see how this writer finishes this story. I may only produce 1% of the scripts that reach my desk / computer / tablet, so if as soon as I’m 80% sure I’m not going to produce your script, you don’t get any more pages to win me over.

But if you’re 100% sure your script is perfect, and 80% of the producers reading your work are 80% sure it’s not, where’s the disconnect?

The shallow reason – the one that’s easy to blame on someone else – is time. I simply don’t have enough years in my life to produce every pitch that comes my way, so I must be hyper-selective. If I’m to spend 2 hours of my day (which doesn’t come easily), it comes at a cost of other projects and my own scripts. It’s an investment in time that I can never get back (and it pays nothing). If I do like your script, and I want to option it and spend time bringing it up to a Producer’s Draft, that’s a much bigger commitment on my part – months or years. If I’m to do that, every word of every line of the first draft I read must sell me on “Yes, this is my next project.”

The deeper reason, in most cases, is that the screenwriter’s passion exceeds his or her commitment to excellence in the craft. What you love about your story, your characters & your scenes is lost on a producer who’s read a hundred other scripts this year by a hundred other writers equally passionate (but less myopic) about their own work. Many competitive advantages that producers look for – like attached stars/directors, partial funding, an attractive pitch deck, positive coverage, festival awards, etc – become disadvantages if your script doesn’t have them. If you’re serious about competing against those other projects, your script *must be as perfect as it can possibly be*.

Let’s restate that for effect: ***DO NOT SUBMIT YOUR SCRIPT TO ANY PRODUCER UNTIL YOU HAVE SCULPTED IT INTO ITS MOST PERFECT FORM.***

In most cases, you only get one shot to impress a reader or producer, so don’t blow your big chance.

There are tomes dedicated to proper script and scene structure, character development, conflict, dialogue and everything else you’ve already spent years studying. I tend to read at least two books on

the craft of screenwriting for each script that I actually write. Start with McKee, Vogler, Truby and Snyder.

The following should serve as a refresher of some major points from those authors, that (when ignored) raise *RED FLAGS as excuses for me to stop reading your script* and move on to the next. My personal preferences – like numbering scenes and not starting with a flash-forward – are omitted here. Instead, these dozen **Red Flags** are common in most scripts I receive, and they should be universally acknowledged by any producer or agency reader questioned:

1. **On-the-Nose Dialogue** – This is listed first because it's the easiest tell of an inexperienced writer. Characters describing themselves, their goals, their feelings, their inner monologues, or anything else that spoon-feeds the audience is an immediate clue that this writer does not understand how to write engaging dialogue for the silver screen. Even if it's the best premise in the world with interesting, dynamic characters, I know it's going to take months (or years) of working with the writer to get his/her dialogue up to professional excellence. I've done that before and will not spend the time to do it again on spec. Pass.
2. **Expository Dialogue** – All scripts need some exposition, but many dedicate pages to it up front. If your characters have taken 5 pages to verbally bring the audience up to speed (something that should take 1 page or less), it means you haven't learned a primary lesson from the above-mentioned authors. Remember that film is a visual medium – people escape to the movies to watch stories, not listen to people recanting old stories. When researching this article, the first word I searched in my Sent Folder was "expository." Pass.
3. **Repetition** – Some repetition can work... especially if a pattern is what you're trying to show. But bashing your reader over the head with the same information/dialogue/scene 2, 3, 4 times is just unacceptable. Name one of your favorite movies in which a character gave you the same information more than once. Go ahead. I'll wait. In the meantime, I'll be reading one of the other hundred scripts in my queue. One writer had his lead call his heavy "bastard" 11 times. And he mentioned a supporting character's first & last name 9 times on a single page. Another showed his lead actress showering 3 times. Pass. Pass. Pass.
4. **Character** – If you haven't written a 1-page bio for ALL your leads and a half-page bio for ALL supporting characters, you cannot do your job properly because you've skipped a major part of your prep work. You may think your 2-dimensional caricatures will be brought to life by a capable actor and director. But the truth is that almost every script I receive has at least one scene that the writer thought would be so cool... but it completely contradicts the character's personality from 19 scenes earlier. It gives the feeling of being thrown in only to manipulate the audience, or sometimes to patch a plot hole, neither of which is the hallmark of good moviemaking. One of these in your script (due to writer's myopia) is forgivable and fixable. More than one means you don't understand how to write from character, and it's a Pass.
5. **Character** – This is important enough that it's worth repeating. You must know your characters' mindsets in every line of every scene. Any actor worth his/her weight will demand it. One script I read opened on a man driving on a twisty mountain road, hitting a pedestrian with his car, letting her in, taking her back to her house and making love to her. Not once was there any mention of her injuries or trauma, which means this writer had not put himself in her physiology or her psychology. You've theoretically spent more time on your opening sequence than any other in your script, right? So if you're already showing that you don't know one of your own

character's mindsets on page 1, there's no way you're going to be able to carry her arc through 100 pages. And we'll certainly never get a discerning name talent attached. Pass.

6. **The Question of "Why?"** - Assume I will ask "Why?" on EVERY SINGLE THING in your script. I will ask it so that when my director and talent and department heads ask me during pre-production, I have the answer. You should pre-empt this by making me never have to ask the question. I recently read a script in which I had to ask "why is this character being OCD in arranging her toiletries, when in the previous scene you mentioned she has mismatched luggage?" Others include: "Why is the evil sheriff binding the hero with rope instead of his handcuffs?" and "Why is this teenage runaway stopping at her abuser's house before hitting the road?" The answer is that the writers thought those scenes would look/sound cool on screen without asking themselves if the actions & dialogue would work with the characters they've created. Or they made a change in a draft to accommodate some plot point (again) without thinking whether it works with the character. See **Red Flag #4**. Something being cool or cinematic or convenient is not enough to justify filming it. If you aren't prepared to defend to every person who asks every choice you make for every single character, relationship, plot point, sequence, scene, action, prop, sentence, word and punctuation, then you've still got more work to do. Pass.
7. **Originality** – there really aren't any original stories, so if you think yours is original, you're wrong. That being said, like all producers, I'm looking for "the same thing, only different." Beyond just story, this should show through in your characters and your dialogue from Page 1. Of course your hero is going to save a cat... but *how* does he save it? I've heard the phrase "I love you" in at least 1,000 movies, so why would I want to produce that line yet again? Show me how your specific characters express it to each other in their own unique way. Otherwise you're betraying a lack of creativity, just as a writer does when he decides to make his story's hero a writer. Pass.
8. **Title Page** – Title, by-line, copyright and contact info. Any more or any less, and it's a clue the writer hasn't been in the industry very long. Marking "3rd Draft" or "Final draft" is a dead giveaway that that the writer just doesn't get what it means to be a writer. See **Red Flag #12**. I'll keep reading a script after a flub on the cover, but it's a cause for concern.
9. **Page Structure** – Big blocks of action, description or dialogue are giveaways that this writer has never worked as a professional Screenwriter, Director, Production Coordinator, Scheduler, Script Supervisor, DP or Editor. Same with scripts that I receive in stageplay or other non-standard format. Again, I know it's going to take months of my life to bring this script up to a level in which it's ready for my investors, talent and department heads. Pass.
10. **Script length** – I have never once in my career received a script that was perfect as is. Even if your screenplay won a dozen awards, it's still not perfect. One thing I have to do to EVERY SCRIPT I develop is cut cut cut. Yes, 120 pages is an acceptable length... but only if you've had multiple projects released theatrically, and you have name talent and an epic director attached. If you don't have those items, your spec script should be *100 pages or less*. Any more, and you are costing the production more filming days and budget than you should. You are costing theaters the ability to show your film more times in a day. You are limiting the number of people who will actually watch your movie. And, chances are, the unnecessary and repeat dialogue that are making it run long (see **Red Flags #1, 2 & 3**) will be cut at some point anyway. It's better to save the production time and money by editing yourself. If I get a script at 110+ pages, my grading standards for all the other **Red Flags** become even harsher. Don't take the chance. Be ruthless with your own writing.

11. **Budget** – A producer is thinking about more than just page count, character relationships, your grammar, page structure, transitions and whether the role will appeal to a star. He’s also thinking about how difficult and expensive it will be to film your huge CGI space battle with giant explosions and a cast of thousands on 3 different planets. Same for dialogue: a limited-location, limited-character script is attractive because it’s quick and cheap to shoot... but if it’s 120 pages worth of thick dialogue, that defeats the purpose. One writer actually wrote to me “Oh, I didn’t realize more dialogue meant more filming days.” Pass.
12. **Revisions** – Some writers have had the nerve to write “I just finished this,” or “here’s a more current draft than the one I sent you,” or “I know the script needs work, but...” If you know it needs work, do the fucking work. Writing is rewriting. When you think your script is finally finished, do another polish. Then another. Print out a draft and mark it up with a **red** pen. Read a draft from each character’s perspective (keeping in mind that each thinks the movie is about him/her). Read each character’s dialogue out loud from start to finish to make sure his/her voice is both compelling and consistent. Read an entire draft out loud to see how your action sounds to the ear (as opposed to the eye). Read it from the perspective of your dream actor... and his agent, his manager, his stylist, his wife, his girlfriend and his mother. Channel the intern at the talent agency who knows his career is at risk if he recommends the wrong script to his boss. Channel the movie critic who didn’t make it as a screenwriter and is now eager to bash your first success by showing the public how much more than you he knows about your craft. Channel a hyper-attentive fan who has nothing better to do than immortalize your continuity errors on IMDb. Once you’ve done all that and made the script the best it can possibly be (by yourself), send your perfect draft to your trusted peers, get feedback, then do a bunch more drafts and make it more perfect. Hold a table read. Film it. Watch it. Revise and polish again as many times as you can. **Only when every single word in your script is in its most perfect form should you feel confident in sending it to agents & producers.**

As a writer, you have some experience putting yourself in the minds of your characters. Do the same with your readers, respecting their time and intelligence, and more producers will read your material. And then your very time-consuming hobby may (some day) have a chance of turning into a career.