

## **“RED FLAGS”**

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

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As a screenwriter who evolved into indie producer, I’ve seen both sides of the pitch. 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?

I read 100-200 screenplays each year. I must. But it’s gotten to the point now that I stop reading at least 70% of them by Page 2. Another 20% I’ll hold off deleting until I’ve gotten a flavor of the writer’s dialogue and can predict the end (usually somewhere in Act 1). So now, “*Ok it’s time to read a great script,*” has become “*How quickly can I reject another?*”

I’ll spend the time to read maybe 10% of spec submissions all the way through, but only if both the story and dialogue are so original, with subtext and impact, that they draw me back to reading after an interruption. I will produce <1% of the scripts that reach me, so as soon as I’m 50% sure that I’m not going to produce your script, you don’t get any more pages to win me over.

The shallow reason – the one that’s easy to blame on me – is time. I simply don’t have enough years in my life to produce (or fix) every pitch or script that comes my way, so I must be hyper-selective. If I’m to spend 2+ hours of my day focused on your creation, it comes at a cost of other projects and my own writing. It’s an investment in time that I can never get back (and it pays nothing). If I do like something about your script, and I want to option it & bring it up to a Producer’s Draft, that’s a much bigger commitment on my part... months or more. To reach that level, every word of every line of the first draft I read must sell me on “*Wow, 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 about seeing their own visions on screen. If your script doesn’t come with attached stars/directors, partial funding, an attractive pitch deck, positive coverage, festival awards, etc, 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 an experienced reader, 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 digest at least two books or online courses on the craft for each script that I actually write. I recommend starting 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 to put down your script.*** They tell me that reading any more will be wasteful, and my (limited) time will be better spent on another project. My personal preferences – like not starting with a flash-forward – are omitted here. Instead, these dozen **Red Flags** are common in most scripts out there (including my own earlier attempts), and they should be universally acknowledged by any producer or professional reader:

1. **On-the-Nose Dialogue** – This is first because it’s the easiest tell of an inexperienced writer. Characters describing themselves, their archetypes, their goals, their feelings, their inner

monologues, or anything else that spoon-feeds the audience is an immediate giveaway that this writer does not understand how to craft engaging, textured, layered dialogue for the silver screen. Even if it's the best premise in the world with interesting 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 will not spend the time to do that again on spec. Pass.

2. **Expository Dialogue** – When researching this article, the first word searched in my Sent Folder was “expository.” All scripts need some exposition, but many dedicate pages to it. If your characters have to verbally bring the audience up to speed, it means you haven't learned a primary lesson about screenwriting (*show, don't tell*). Remember that film is a visual medium... people escape to the movies to watch stories visually, not to listen to repeated stories. Pass.
3. **Repetition** – Some repetition can work... especially if a pattern is what you're trying to show. But bashing your reader/audience over the head with the same information/dialogue/scene multiple 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 submission had a lead call his antagonist “bastard” 11 times. And the writer mentioned a supporting character's first & last name 9 times on a single page. Another wrote 3 separate shower scenes for his lead actress. Pass. Pass. Pass.
4. **Character** – If you haven't written a biography or interview for ALL your significant characters, you cannot do your job properly, because you've skipped a major part of your prep work. You may think your repackaged, 2-dimensional caricatures will be brought to life by a capable director and actors. But the truth is that almost every script out there has at least one scene that the writer thought would be so cool... even though it completely contradicts its 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 film-making. 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 every characters' mindsets in every line of their entire arcs. 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, taking her back to her house and making sweet, sweet love to her. Not once was there any mention of her injuries or trauma, which means this writer had not put himself in her psychology or her physiology. You've theoretically spent more time on your opening sequence than any other in your script, right? If a writer shows that he doesn't know one of his own character's mindsets on page 1, it's obvious he won't be able to craft her arc through 100 pages. And I'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 never leaving any questions in my mind. Recent questions have included: “*why is this character being OCD in arranging her toiletries, when in the previous scene you mentioned she has mismatched luggage?*” and “*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 (to all 3) is that the writers thought those scenes would look/sound cool on screen without asking themselves if they would work with the characters they've created. Or perhaps they made changes to drafts to accommodate some producer or actor or plot point (again) without thinking whether it works with the character. See **Red Flags 4 & 5**. Something being cool or cinematic or convenient is not

enough to justify filming it. If you aren't prepared to defend (to every reader 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 she 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, as when a writer makes his hero a writer. Pass.
8. **Page Count** – I have never once received a script that was perfect as-is. Even if your screenplay won a dozen awards, it's still not perfect. One thing I 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 bankable talent and director attached. Otherwise, your script should be *100 pages or less*. Period. Any more, and you're costing the production more filming days and budget than you should. You're costing theaters the ability to show your film more times in a day. You're 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 a script comes in over 110 pages, grading standards for all the other **Red Flags** become even harsher. Don't take the chance. Be ruthless with your own writing.
9. **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. Including an old date runs the risk of a producer not even opening it. Marking "3<sup>rd</sup> 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 after a flub on the cover, but it's a cause for concern.
10. **Page Structure** – Big blocks of action, description or dialogue are giveaways that this writer has never worked as a professional Screenwriter, Director, UPM/PC, Script Supervisor, DP or Editor. Same with scripts 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. So unless your script already has money attached, it's a pass.
11. **Budget** – A producer is thinking about more than just character relationships, grammar, 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 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, forcing a star to work under hot lights for weeks, that defeats the purpose. One writer actually wrote to me "Oh, I didn't realize that 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 last week,"* 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 drafts 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 fanbase, his stylist, his wife, his girlfriend, his boyfriend and his mother. Channel the intern at the talent agency who knows his career is at stake if he recommends the wrong property 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 your 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. Critique some material from other writers, then look at yours again with a fresh perspective. 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 your very time-consuming hobby may (some day) have a chance of turning into a career.