



HOW TO SPOT A GOOD STORY

Tips from a script consultant to help you differentiate good stories from bad stories and to help you produce the script you've always dreamed of producing.

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Introduction

Synopsis, step outlines, completed scripts: for television, movies, and maybe the internet... Your mailbox is probably overflowing with dozens of requests from authors, co-producers, and agents who want to encourage you to read their projects.

And of course, you'll read these projects all for the fear of missing that rare pearl. You'll approve some, you'll reject others. You'll sometimes feel like you're making the right decision, but you'll more often feel that you're wrong.

I am a script consultant and last year, I analyzed 120 feature films of all kinds. Of these 120 scripts, only 2 were in the excellent category, a dozen were « promising », the rest were not even worth looking at. The problem? All of these projects (the good, the bad, and the ugly): they all had a producer.

What drives producers to invest in poor projects?

What makes them turn a blind eye to a script's weaknesses or an author's inexperience?

Why are they so often wrong?

My various collaborations with producers have allowed me to figure out the answers to these questions. There are three kinds of producers:

- The nice guys/producers (guys might be too colloquial): the ones who accept projects because the sender is a friend (the most common kind).
- The new guys: the ones who lack the tools to identify the right scripts.
- The optimists: the ones who think that a story can be saved as long as the concept is good.

This guide aims to help all of these profiles (and maybe you, too).

In this guide, inspired by my own script consulting method, you'll find everything you need to objectively analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a project according to a list of specific criteria.



Foreword

Before moving forward with the analysis, some small details are needed:

Projects

The following example of analysis concerns only predevelopment or preliminary read-throughs. If the project you wish to analyze is already being developed and has already been read several times, the topics we are going to discuss are not applicable. The purpose of this guide is not to accompany the author in the development of the project, but to know if the project has the potential to be the object of an investment.

First Readings = Major Problems

Since this is a first reading, we will only focus on the most important comments. The screenplay's strengths and weaknesses will be analyzed holistically, not by looking at the most minute details. The dialogues, the rhythm, and the building of scenes will be dealt with later.

Analysis Method

I divide my reading analysis into five phases. The order of these phases is important: we start with generalities and then proceed to the details.

I also invite you to consider each phase as a step towards the next phase. A script struggling to pass phase 1 won't have much of a chance of passing on to phase 2, and so on.

You may be surprised to discover a range of questions beside each topic. Each question exists to provoke good reasoning and to encourage you to answer honestly, without lying.



Before we start, the basics

- *So, what's a good story anyway?*
- *The purpose of a first analyze.*
- *Reading.*



So, what's a good story anyway?

Before you start reading or analyzing a screenplay, you must know what differentiates a good story from a bad one and define your assessment criteria. By being conscious of your tastes, your desires, and mistakes you feel are unforgivable, you reduce your chances of saying yes to the wrong project.

As an example, here are the three most important criteria for me:

A good story is a solid story

The story must be consistent and have no major gaps.

At the development stage, all stories have weaknesses, but the bigger the weaknesses, the harder it will be for the script to catch up to itself. Not to mention that big weaknesses testify to the author's lack of experience.

A good story is an engaging story

The viewer goes to the movies to live an experience: laugh, cry, be afraid... A screenplay that does not offer this experience is, as nutritionists would say, an empty calorie. The story and the characters must trigger different emotions for the viewer, according to the film genre.

The story teaches a lesson

I like when a movie - comedy, drama, thriller etc. - teaches me something. I must therefore feel fulfilled while reading through the script.



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EXERCICE

Now it's your turn to determine your criteria or your no go script situation. Make a list of what you want and what you don't want to find in a project. As a producer, I also invite you to question the type of films you want to produce. Are you more of an auteur, action, horror, or romantic comedy kind of producer? As a viewer, what makes you tick?

These questions are essential because it will be easier for you to work on a genre that you like, regardless of the difficulties you encounter.



The purpose of a first analyze

A text analysis aims:

- To evaluate a project's potential based on the strength of its concept and its “wow factor”
- To evaluate the screenplay's strengths and weaknesses
- To evaluate the content of future work if rewrites are to be expected
- To evaluate the author's ability to achieve the desired result. An author reveals a lot of him/herself through his/her script. In a single reading, it is possible to evaluate his/her experience and ability to complete the project.

Reading

The First 10-20 Pages Test.

You only read a text more than once if you have doubts.

If I happen to read a project two or three times, I do it to make sure that my first impression is good and that I understood everything. I invite you to do the same if you have any doubts. But in all honesty, the first 10-20 pages of a script are enough to form an opinion on the work.

If in 20 pages, the story didn't pull you in, you didn't understand anything, or you noticed that it's already filled with inconsistencies, there is no need for you to read the remaining 120 pages. A project like this, even based on a promising concept, will take years to develop.



And now, the Analysis

- *Phase 1: Attractiveness of the Script*
- *Phase 2: Evaluation of the Story*
- *Phase 3: Quality of the Experience*
- *Phase 4: Your Satisfaction*
- *Phase 5: The Writer's Skills*



Attractiveness of the Script

Phase 1 of the analysis aims to determine if the project is capable of moving crowds of people and to evaluate its uniqueness.

In short, what we are trying to evaluate at this stage is called the project's marketing muscle.

The project's marketing muscle is what will make the target (the audience) want to go out of their way to see the film. The clearer, more powerful, more gender-conscious and, why not add innovative the marketing message, the more the project will attract attention.

To evaluate the project's drawing power, we will focus on the following topics: the subject, the concept, the genre, the target audience, and the writer's point of view.

The Subject

A film's subject is what the film is about. What is a good subject? In my opinion, a good subject is an identifiable subject that is well addressed and defended with conviction by its author. The subject does not have to address a current issue. The writer's point of view matters more.

Warning: if it is impossible to identify the project's subject, this means that the writer is unable to express it through the story (and this is not good news). The story must express the subject.

What you should be asking yourself

- What is the film about?
- What is the main topic?
- Does the film deal with a current or an obsolete subject?
- Is the subject well addressed? Is it caricatured? Was the subject better addressed in another movie?
- Does the film address other topics?
- Does the film address too many topics?



The Concept

The film's concept is nothing more than a succinct summary of the story's mechanism. In other words, it is the idea behind the story.

Example of a well-known concept:

Tootsie: an unemployed actor disguises himself as a woman to get into auditions.

Good Concept vs. Bad Concept.

A bad concept is a concept that is too long and that the author is unable to articulate. BUT, a bad concept is not a concept devoid of originality. Do you find that the project you're reading's concept has been addressed over and over again? That's normal, since new ideas are very rare. While the concept is important, the writer's vision of the subject is what prevails..

The Genre

A genre assembles several codes (emotional, visual, narrative) that give the film its color and make it belong to a category. Examples of genres include: humor, parody, fantasy, thriller, romance, sci-fi, auteur, etc...

Hybrid Genres... Good or Bad?

Mixing genres is possible, but beware of the escalation. Mixing too many genres can jeopardize the film's identity: Less is More. Less is better.

What you should be asking yourself

- Can you tell what the film's concept is?
- Do you like this concept?
- Does it attract you?
- Who is this concept for?
- Who is the target audience?
- Is the concept likely to attract the target audience? Why or why not?

What you should be asking yourself

- What genre does the film belong to?
- Does the film comply with this particular genre's codes?
- Will fans of the genre enjoy the movie? Is it a hybrid movie?
- If so, do the genres work well together? Does the film mix too many genres at once?



The Writer's Point of View

The writer's point of view is the writer's vision of the subject(s) addressed in the film. In other words, what we want to know is if the writer has a message to convey and if the characters and the story support this message.

I'm the kind of script consultant that thinks that writing with a message is important no matter the genre: comedy, thriller, sci-fi, auteur, etc. Sharing a point of view gives the movie character and makes it more impactful for the audience.

A film on the same subject already exists. Good or bad news?

All subjects, all dramatic situations have already been addressed on the big screen. It is therefore likely that the project in your hands already exists or has already existed in another genre or in another format. Although similar in many ways, these projects will never be identical for one simple reason: the individuals who wrote them are unique. Their sensibilities and visions differ. But it is from each one's difference that the unicity of a film is born.

To answer the question: can a film be made if its subject has already been addressed? The answer is yes.

The author and the director's visions are the true richness of a film.

Be careful, however, and make sure that the plot or the characters are not identical from one work to another.

What you should be asking yourself

- What is the writer's point of view on the subject?
- Are you sensitive to this point of view?
- Would you have preferred the writer take another stance?
- Is the writer's point of view different, does (s)he bring something new to the table? Does (s)he see things as black and white? If so, where?



Evaluation of the Story

During this crucial stage, we will evaluate the story's solidity and the author's dramaturgy. Without going into too much detail, we will review the essential elements that create the foundation of a good story. To do this, I will assume that you are familiar with the basics of screenwriting. If you want to improve your script writing skills, I invite you to read the following books: John Truby, "The Anatomy of Story" and Yves Lavandier, "The Dramaturgy".

Before moving on to the story's assessment, I suggest that we reflect on the following question: what makes a story a "solid story"?

A solid story is a coherent, structured story, with clear and high quality goals (ie that avoids manichaeism).

The Story's coherence

Articulated somewhat simplistically, a coherent story is a story that unfolds logically, without any anomaly. Depending on the work's stage, some inconsistencies may escape the authors, but if the story is riddled with big mistakes or clumsiness, there is no need to go any further.

The presence of many anomalies is proof of the author's lack of experience.

What you should be asking yourself

- Is the story coherent?
- Have you noticed any major anomalies?
- Are there several?



The Structure

A structured story is a story that unfolds around an axis called the main plot. Plot twists and climaxes punctuate this plot to help it progress to its final resolution.

The plots are divided into two categories: the main plot and the subplots.

– The Main Plot is the plot around which the story is focused. This is the most important one. It is generally related to the hero and his quest.

– Subplots complement the main plot. They address secondary characters or a less important issue in the hero's life and often take up less space in the story.

As an aside...

You will notice that I am not referring to any particular structure.

You have probably heard of many structures that have been listed in many books, but I do not believe in their reductive scheme. In my opinion, there are as many possibilities for structure as there are authors, and everyone is entitled to play with the boundaries of possibility as long as the story works.

In other words, if you like the project but it does not follow a pre-existing structure, and it still remains consistent, I think the story deserves a chance.

What you should be asking yourself

- Does the story have a beginning, a middle, and an end?
- Does it have a trigger, a twist, a climax, and a resolution?
- What is the conflict in the story?
- Are there subplots that feed the main plot?
- Do the plots make sense? Is every plot structured like a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end?



The Story's Qualities

What is a quality story?

A quality story is a story that does not follow the conventional path, and if it does, it differs somehow.

A quality story is above all a story that refuses clichés and does not fall into annoying dualism. It is also a demanding, consistent story.

The Story's Goals

Does the story make sense? That's what I hear when I talk about the "challenges" of a story. More technically, the story's challenges are embodied by the main goals.

To go even further...

A so-called story that makes sense is a story that is supported by what is known as the main dramatic issue, the crucial question that will keep the audience in suspense throughout the movie. Example: will the hero achieve his goal? No need to tell you that the absence of this question is not a very good sign...

What you should be asking yourself

- Does the story rest on clichés? In other words: do the dialogues and the plot's sources seem to you like they are "clichés"?
- Are the characters complex or are they black and white?
- Did you notice a lot of *Deus ex machina* (or coincidences)?
- Are the story's sources innovative or expected?

What you should be asking yourself

- Are the challenges in the story clear? What is the story's purpose?
- Can you identify the main dramatic issue? Does the film resolve this dramatic issue?

Quality of the Experience

Phase 3 is when I evaluate how much I like the story.

Did I like it? Was it boring at times? All the time? These are the questions I will try to answer.

Why is this step important?

Because the viewer goes to the movies to live an experience - whether this experience is funny or sad, intense or light-hearted - and it is the writer's duty to give the viewer what (s)he expects.

My role as a script consultant is to make sure this experience exists and to evaluate its quality. The quality of this experience depends on certain non-interchangeable criteria:

- characters,
- the quality, the depth, and the diversity of the emotion conveyed,
- how the suspense is controlled.

Characters

Characters are one of the pillars of a story's success. They are so important that our interest in the plot depends on them. Why? Simply because characters and plots are intertwined.

During this phase, we seek to evaluate our degree of empathy towards the characters and how interested we are in what happens to them.

During a first reading, we will only focus on the main characters: heroes, villains, and allies.

What you should be asking yourself: Are the characters engaging? Are they credible, realistic, or rather caricatural?

What you should be asking yourself

- Do I feel empathy for the characters? What about for the villain?
- Can I identify with their problematic and their path?
- Am I satisfied with their evolution?



Emotions and Resonance

We go to the movies to feel emotions, to vibrate.

If I go to see a horror movie, I want to be scared.

If I go to see a comedy, I want to laugh.

If I go to see a drama, I want to cry.

In the case of a hybrid film, I try to live several emotions in the same film.

My role in script consulting is to ensure that this emotion, depending on the film's genre, is well and truly conveyed throughout the story, the dialogues, and the characters' behavior.

There is nothing worse than a film without a soul, without emotion, that you come out of empty, as if you hadn't experienced a thing. So, be attentive to your emotions.

Suspense

Finally, one of the best ways to increase public interest in a story is to incorporate suspense.

Mastering the suspense is knowing how to keep the audience in suspense from the beginning to the end of the film and it does not apply to thrillers alone.

Each film must find a way to convey, surprise, and captivate its audience.

What you should be asking yourself

- What emotions did I feel when I watched the movie?
- Are the emotions I felt in line with the film and its genre?
- What did I feel when I left the movie theater? What was the lasting emotion I felt?
- Did the film speak to me?

What you should be asking yourself

- Were you kept on your toes throughout the movie?
- Were you bored?
- What was the reason you wanted to watch the whole movie through to the end?



Satisfaction

You are a producer but you are also a reader and a spectator. In short, you are the audience.

To properly evaluate a work, you must become the audience again.

Why?

Taking the place of the spectator will allow you to anticipate how the movie will be received: positively or negatively. But only the spectator in you can evaluate this. Unlike the producer who is sometimes too lenient, the viewer knows how to be intransigent. (S)he says things bluntly; what (s)he feels, without fear of offending.

Your mission is to evaluate your overall satisfaction of the work by relying on the quality of the promise. Each work makes a promise, and it is important to make sure that this promise is kept.

Let's dig in more with the following questions:

What you should be asking yourself

- Did the film keep its promises?
- In relation to the pitch, was I disappointed? Pleasantly surprised?
- What grade would I give the film?
- Would I go see this movie in theaters? Would I recommend it to someone?



The Writer's Skills

Imagine that you love the project's concept, that you really like the script, but that it still has many flaws. Imagine that you would like to develop the project but that you doubt the writer's skills and don't find him/her talented enough to properly execute the project.

Signing the wrong writer can lead to many problems (timeout, hiring another writer, or even failure to write the script). Learning to gauge the screenwriter's abilities is therefore essential. This is how I proceed to evaluate a writer's abilities based on the material I receive:

Case 1 : the script has too many blunders

If the story has too many inconsistencies, if it is not structured, if it does not answer the dramatic question (or others): the author has little knowledge of dramatic writing. With or without a script consultant, you will not be able to fill the gaps. It will be very difficult for this project to succeed.

Case 2 : the script is a little clumsy

If the story's clumsiness does not affect its structure, if the characters are well developed or the story keeps the concept's promise: the writer knows what (s)he is doing. S(h)e just needs a boost. In this case, using a script consultant or a co-author can be useful.

Case 3 : the well-known writer who messed up

Warning! An experienced writer can not and does not know how to write everything. If you receive a project written by a successful writer BUT that the project in question doesn't meet expectations, don't believe that the author's fame will change the problem's outcome. A bad project is a bad project, no matter who wrote it.



Summary of questions

Attractiveness of the Script

The subject

- What is the film about?
- What is the main topic?
- Does the film deal with a current or an obsolete subject?
- Is the subject well addressed? Is it caricatured? Was the subject better addressed in another movie?
- Does the film address other topics?
- Does the film address too many topics?

The Concept

- Can you tell what the film's concept is?
- Do you like this concept? Does it attract you?
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- Is the concept likely to attract the target audience? Why or why not?

The Genre

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The Writer's Point of View

- What is the writer's point of view on the subject?
- Are you sensitive to this point of view?
- Would you have preferred the writer take another stance?
- Is the writer's point of view different, does (s)he bring something new to the table? Does (s)he see things as black and white? If so, where?



Evaluation of the Story

The story's coherence

- Is the story coherent?
- Have you noticed any major anomalies? Are there several?

The Structure

- Does the story have a beginning, a middle, and an end?
- Does it have a trigger, a twist, a climax, and a resolution?
- What is the conflict in the story?
- Are there subplots that feed the main plot? Do the plots make sense? Is every plot structured like a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end?

The Story's Qualities

- Does the story rest on clichés? In other words: do the dialogues and the plot's sources seem to you like they are "clichés"?
- Are the characters complex or are they black and white?
- Did you notice a lot of Deix ex machina (or coincidences)?
- Are the story's sources innovative or expected?

The Story's Goals

- Are the challenges in the story clear?
- What is the story's purpose?
- Can you identify the main dramatic issue?
- Does the film resolve this dramatic issue?



Quality of the Experience

Characters

- Do I feel empathy for the characters?
- What about for the villain?
- Can I identify with their problematic and their path?
- Am I satisfied with their evolution?

Emotions and Resonance

- What emotions did I feel when I watched the movie?
- Are the emotions I felt in line with the film and its genre?
- What did I feel when I left the movie theater? What was the lasting emotion I felt?
- Did the film speak to me?

Suspense

- Were you kept on your toes throughout the movie?
- Were you bored?
- What was the reason you wanted to watch the whole movie through to the end?

Your satisfaction

- Did the film keep its promises?
- In relation to the pitch, was I disappointed? Pleasantly surprised?
- What grade would I give the film?
- Would I go see this movie in theaters? Would I recommend it to someone?



LAST TIP

Two opinions are better than just one. If you need a second or third review, please reach out by clicking [here](#). As a freelance script consultant, working for Latin, European and North American territories, it'd be my pleasure to help you.

Estelle Konik

(For Better Scripts)

