The 28 Revisions

Rather than read a script through repeatedly from Page One to the end, I find it can help to apply filters, doing specific reads for certain things. Like going to the gym and working only one muscle group at a time.

There are classes and books and lectures on story structure: *get a clear emotional through-line, build in fundamental conflicts,* and so on. I'll assume you know all that. Tailor the following revisions to your own perceived weaknessness, and use your unique perceptions to devise your own categories. You won't need every one on every project, as you'll hear, but these are the ones that work for me.

1) **SPELLING AND GRAMMAR**. Some of the people who read your script early on will be literate. Don't halt their eyes. Typing the possessive "its" with an apostrophe 20 times is a cough all the way through a stage monologue, except, unlike the actor, you have a chance to take it out before anyone sees it. If you're dyslexic, have someone help you. If you've made up a name or used an uncommon word, anything Spellcheck won't catch, go back and look at each place it occurs.

        This is actually a fun pass for me, because I can feel like I'm rewriting but I'm really not.

        And grammar, my god. You'd be surprised how often people write things like "I was really waiting forward to this." Or, "That's one of the main differences besides you and me." Once, during sitcom hiring season, I read a spec *Married With Children* with over 300 typos. The writer had spelled Al Bundy's name "ALL," 70 times. It made me angry reading it. I phoned the agent. He didn't see what the big deal was. Agents aren't proofreaders: you have to do it.

        I would urge you to please read more literary fiction. And not just fantasy, admirable though some YA is. Every good book you read improves your screenplay. Everything you find out about people and the world expands your ability to cleverly reflect it. Be capable of writing about the world as it is. See it clearly.

2) THE PROMISE OF THE FIRST FIVE PAGES. Say or depict something early to let the reader know this will be solid. Think of the first few pages as making an implicit promise. It needn't be a promise of your theme, or a pet-the-kitty establishment of character. It can just be an warranty of authorial steadiness. Authenticity of situation, period or place. Let them know that what lies ahead is worth taking seriously. It's up to you how you convey this, but give it serious thought. You're saying, "Here's a tale to be reckoned with, one you haven't seen before, but trust me, you're in good hands. I know what I'm doing. Okay, now let's go."

A lot of professional readers, taking home 20 scripts a night, quit reading in the first five pages. (I had a term: a *10-15*, for a script where you read ten pages, then throw it fifteen feet.) What they're mostly passing on is clear amateurism. Let them know you're not in that crowd. Be confident and exact in your own skills. Fly the plane. Those first five pages let the reader settle in comfortably for the ride.

3) FIRST APPEARANCES.
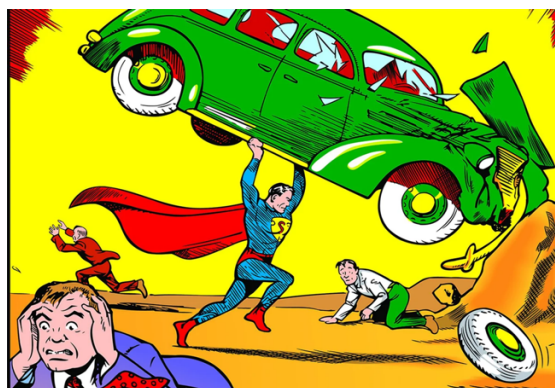
Are each of your main characters interestingly described on their first appearance? The settings too, if they're novel and important. Descriptions of the three or four leads must intrigue performers. And producers, who imagine hiring performers, who always have other offers. Are the description lines interesting without being over-the-top, or overly specific?

Something you can do is *situate* the character instead of describing them physically. Something like: "Meet Jackson, 40-ish, running for the subway, breakfast sandwich in one hand, tattered briefcase in the other, one shoelace untied. It's fair to say that Jackson's not having a great morning." Rather than, "Lisa wears her hair up a bun," say, "Lisa's got a no-nonsense hair style to match her attitude." Leave some room for the reader (and, later, a casting director) to picture their favorite performers in the roles you've provided. Don't specify limitations, like hair color or height, unless these will become important later.

- Pick one character. Read just their dialogue and scenes, then go back and look at how you described them on their first appearance, which usually you wrote before you knew them quite as well. Now that you know them better: is there a more apt way of describing them?
- Are the leads' characteristics as you first describe them **embodied** in what they do later? Basically: if you've said someone is *like something*, do we get to *see them being like that*? If your alien monsters have big head-stingers, make sure they head-

sting someone. Follow through on your description. The quality you say someone has the first time we meet them: do they demonstrate it?

4) PACE. Try reading the middle third first. Just jump in. Would it catch your attention if you happened upon it on TV? Does it drag anywhere? Then read the first third. Then read the last half, overlapping the middle third. The idea is to jog you out of your big-view rhythm and look at how the scenes are performing back-to-back without story context. Then re-read the whole thing a few times. An eighth or ninth read-through from the beginning will usually tell you where it walks, where it runs, where it lays back and gathers strength, where it races flat-out.

With linear narrative fiction, the first third says, "**Hey, watch this**." The second third says, "**See?**" The final third says, "**Surprise!"** – though, in genre stuff – comedy, superhero, rampaging monster -- the last third is often a continuation of some well-established premise. In Act Three, Jason Bourne's still running, but now he's wounded.

Reading it **aloud** to someone can show you what drags better than reading it silently to yourself.   Notice where you start to speed up or skip. (I had two students read their comedy pilot to a college writing class. They started panicking about eight pages in.) David Lynch shot and cut *Eraserhead* for many years. He says it was only when he was standing in the lobby at the first screening and actually heard the music start that he suddenly realized, "It's too long!"

This reading is for pace, not for cuts. Sometimes adding a strong line to a scene can make the whole sequence zing along.

With pace in mind, be wary of having too many sitting-and-talking scenes back-to-back. Don't start your career with a courtroom drama.

Be wary of showing *characters being bored*. And of starting scenes with a character in bed. I know, *Groundhog Day*… but you'd be amazed how many first-year fiction students start their narratives with, "She woke up and rubbed her eyes…" I usually assume someone has a bedroom. I don't need to see them wake up in it.   For a good education in what *not* to do, watch a festival of first-year college student films. You will see a lot of people waking up, then getting dressed, then looking through their empty kitchen cabinets. Because waking up is the start of your day doesn't mean it should be the start of your screenplay. First-year film student stuff is a great look at what happens when people have cameras and energy and a terrific visual sense before they have story ideas, before they've deeply considered the full range of things that can happen to human beings.

5) Are you **PULLED FROM SCENE TO SCENE?**
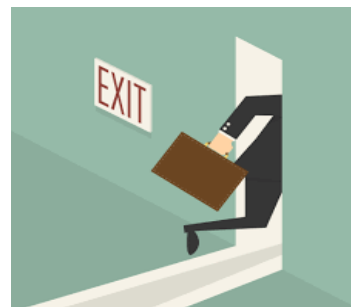
Watch a group of children at the point in a story when you say, "And *then*…!" What's left unsaid and unshown at the end of each scene is a sort of ligament, a connective tissue that pulls you forward. Not necessarily to the very next scene, but to something ahead. Think of a scene as a room with an In door and an Out door. Characters come FROM somewhere and they're going TO somewhere. Don't go out by the same door you came in. In an ideal scene, something changes, so that someone's unable to go back to exactly the way things were. It can be the smallest comment or gesture inside a scene that reminds us: this moment, this event, is a part of a larger structure. This belongs. "Look: it's important that you see this."

Try not to write a bunch of "the person then moves to a new place" scenes. Life meanders, but you're choosing which parts of a meandering life to show. Antonioni's *Blow Up (*1966) is full of driving-around scenes. Likewise, Jacques Demy's *Model Shop* (1969), which feels like it was an 80-page screenplay filled-out to feature length with car sequences. *Then he took this street, then he took that street, then he turned a corner…*

The worst examples of scenes that don't pull you forward seem to be in Stoner Comedy. In nearly every stoner's idea of a cool story, a series of semi-interesting things happen in a row. The hero goofily survives them all. Nothing accumulates, no structural tension is created. The same with any ideas given to you by your rideshare driver.

An effective scene isn't necessarily action. It might be a cigarette butt on a sidewalk outside someone's apartment, slowly burning out and going dark. Someone was standing here and now they're gone. Why? Some scenes just raise a question. Any question makes an audience lean forward. "Yeah? And then what?"

6) Did I **PULL ANY PUNCHES**? Some sequences are hard to face. Emotional conflict, the alienating or the disturbing. Stuff that's hard-to-pull-off or needs real down-in-the-dirt detailed writing. I confess to disliking the on-the-page drudgery of writing fights, sports, chases and weddings. So much of each is *pro forma,* the same as every other fight, wedding, chase.

The main thing to ask with this pass: did I skip the hard part, cut away from something that might have been technically or emotionally tricky for me to depict? Like: did I cut from an argument in a bar to the hero sitting somewhere later with a bloody face? Let's see some punches.

An example from recent literature: Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. (Yes, it won the Pulitzer.) A young Black man gets pulled over by a racist white cop in 1964 Mississippi… and CUT. What got said? How ugly was it? Who knows? Two boxers, one white, one black, prepare for an annual boxing match in a reformatory… CUT to after the fight. Black kid mouths off to white jailer… CUT to the kid in the hole. Compare this conflict-avoidance with Denise Nicholas's brilliant 2005 Mississippi civil rights novel *Freshwater Road*, which delivers all the punches.

7) **VARIATION OF SCALE**.

Two-shot scenes, crowd scenes, party scenes, woman-alone-on-a-mountain scenes. You can't vary scale hugely in every story (see the nifty low-budget *The Cube*), but you can keep an eye open for it. Vary your focal length. Somewhere, draw people's attention to something UP CLOSE. And, somewhere, go WAY BACK.   (The first season of *The Wire*, up until about episode #10, had hardly any "Here's what West Baltimore looks like" scenes. This was a puzzlement to me.)

       Don't think just in terms of rooms, the way you must in a stage play. Get outside. Where are we? What's nearby? Water? Mountains? What does it *feel like* to be here?

       Be mindful that some sets carry their own implications. Elevators are for awkwardness, porches are for rumination and romance, bicycles are for segues or thinking, poor for dialogue. People don't change their minds on bicycles. Planes and trains are for changes of ambition.   Submarines are for terror. Have a very good reason to go by submarine.

8) Check your characters' **KNOWLEDGE LINES**. Especially for suspense, mystery, cop, spy, noir: does everyone **figure out** the things they'd probably get, at the right times for your suspense or your comedy? Don't have a lead character be too stupid too long, even in horror where dangerous innocence is a mainstay.   Do the characters do what they'd do, given what they know, even though you and the audience know better? And, a dereliction I notice a lot: do you have a character who should know something, confusingly not acting on their knowledge? Are they still behaving as if they don't know it? Worse: does someone who knows something crucial not tell anyone? Especially if it's something that would get them out of trouble or deflect an accusation made against them?

       Consider playing around with timing. What if someone figured something out a little earlier or later? Realization moments grab an audience's attention. So does action by characters whom the audience knows are mistaken. Even hearing a character describe the moment they realized something years in the past holds attention.

       Aaron Sorkin and Scott Frank's screenplay for the 1993 film *Malice* pivots around something Bebe Neuwirth tells Bill Pullman halfway through the movie, in a bar. It's a small detail that Neuwirth's character has known for a while but withheld. Her cautious revelation changes everything for the protagonist.

Watch the Coen Brothers' *Blood Simple* for a brilliant juggling of who-knows-what-and-when. All four characters act based on wildly wrong assumptions. With the very last line, one of them finds the truth. Part of the genius of the film is the way that vital information is cleverly kept away from each of the four main characters.

Check out *The Day Of The Jackal* for a terrific two-character *pas de deux*, with Investigator Lebel learning about the Jackal only what it *helps the story for him to know*, at first far behind what the audience knows, but closing the gap as the assassin draws closer to de Gaulle.

Zinneman's film has a remarkable sequence when the detective visits Madame de Montpellier's house *before* the Jackal: the cat gets ahead of the mouse. That switch is structurally defensible, but it is hard to believe Madame de Montpellier would allow into her bed a man whom Lebel and a SWAT team just landed a helicopter on her lawn to warn her about. She has knowledge, but she fails to act on it in a way that we understand.

9) ADDITIONAL RESEARCH will often expand your story by turning up something more interesting than the detail you used.

Do a Google Street View walk through the town you've used as a setting. Or if it's fictional, walk through a town of the same layout and climate.   Even if you're confined to one old-West town, think where else you can set a dialogue scene. You've got a scene, two guys, ten lines. It's smart and funny and exact. But does it have to be in the saloon?   Hey, what if they're both on the roof of the saloon, matter-of-factly patching the bullet holes from last Saturday night? How did you drain a septic tank in the 1840s? Where did they empty the spittoons? Where did they store coffins in the winter, when the ground was too hard to dig?

On sitcoms, I always walk the set to see the things the characters will see. Objects give you ideas. "Oh, there's an antique bed warmer." If you're writing historical, read a few novels set in your timeline. You've put your werewolf story in 1873 New York: you might discover that's the year in which Alfred Beach demonstrated the first leg of the NY subway, which went 300 feet under a clothing store on Broadway.   Great set for a chase!

Speaking of reading: the writer and teacher Rob Roberge suggests that his students, when reading anything, consider what affect the other author's material is having on their own work. That memorable chapter you read last night: how did it influence your writing? Is there anything about it you wish you could capture somehow in your story? I would suggest doing a lot of fiction reading while you're writing, not just watching movies or TV. Good literary fiction is emotional research, keeping you in touch with the full palette of human behavior.

10) *Speaking of research:* Is your story **CONSISTENT** with the **dates and places** you established? Was July the 4th on a weekend that year? Was Molson's sold on tap in Buffalo? Would Abraham Lincoln have known what a stapler was? (Yes. There was a primitive version in the 1840s.) How about pasteurized milk? (Nope. 1890s.) Don't have anyone get a pesky infection before 1928, when penicillin was discovered.

Do a quick check for the **days of the year** your story implicitly covers. If somebody added up your story days beginning with some stated date, do you have shopkeepers working on Christmas or New Year's? Did Halloween happen? St. Patrick's Day? A national election? Thanksgiving? Consider businesses closed for the day, tourists, parades, fireworks. Screenwriter Brian Cooke told me it was only after the release of his frenetic comedy *No Sex Please, We're British* that he realized he accidentally had someone mail a letter, and get the reply by mail on the same day.

11) DO SOME CUTS.

Don't look at page length, just cut what doesn't seem as strong as the stuff surrounding it. Imagine you're in the editing room and your finished film needs to lose five minutes. Is it immediately obvious what you'd chop?

If a scene isn't lighting you up, try saving a copy, then deleting and re-writing the whole scene from memory. Not having your own words in front of you can free you up to wander a little more – you're not just deepening your own rut.

When cutting for time or length, an unfortunate thing about comedies, particularly sitcoms, is that when they're long, the least necessary things are the jokes. You can't lose setup, story turns, climax, key action or resolution, but jokes can always come out.

If you're ambivalent about a large cut: take it out temporarily, save the script under a new name, put it aside for a while, then go back and read the script without it. Does it feel lighter on its feet, or do you really miss it?

12) No TWO SCENES WITH THE SAME FUNCTION unless the repetition

serves its own purpose. Possibly combine any two scenes that do essentially the same thing. Any repetition of something we already know, unless you rachet-up tension or stakes, or introduce facts to a key character who hadn't known them, can feel like it's dragging, and an audience won't always know why their attention is wandering. This doesn't apply in farce, which is repetition with variation or with increasing peril.

I've occasionally discovered two scenes I thought were quite different, because they were set in different places or used different characters, accomplishing almost the same thing. If you've got two scenes of someone shopping, they'd better be a shoplifter. If you do have two scenes, both of which you like, but which seem to be communicating the same idea, say, the feeling of a happy home, or the irredeemableness of a bad guy, try making one of them accomplish something concrete that isn't in the other.

13) DON'T GIVE A CHARACTER A PROBLEM THAT A CELL PHONE WILL BE ABLE TO SOLVE 5 YEARS FROM NOW. Your phone can already identify 40,000 plants by their leaf patterns and 10,000 birds by their calls. It can tell you the age of rocks and whether they're metamorphic, igneous or sedimentary. Coming soon is probably makes and years of cars, building styles, maybe the calorie count of your restaurant meal. Give it a general thought: might my character's problem in this scene, which is necessary to create tension, be one button away from solved in a few years? What will that mean for the shelf life of my script?

14) Try not to have too many things, including devices, that are essentially **MAGIC**.

Characters are supposed to have problems. Magic devices solve problems.   They're the modern *deus ex machina,* with literal *machinas*. Even in action scripts, I prefer the rule, "A problem happens to someone and the type of person they are makes it a challenge," (*Mute Witness, The Hobbit, Jurassic Park*) to the unfortunately popular, "A problem happens to someone and the type of person they are makes it really easy." (*Taken*, most Jason Statham films, the MCU.) Bambi brings his mother back to life with his amazing deer-rejuvenating stare! Captain Kirk turns on the Klingon vaporizer. Anything with too-amazing tech or superpowers short-cuts the potential of drama. Tiny problems aren't useful story elements, they're irritations. Don't write a movie about irritations. The studios already have the people they want to write Hulk Meets Wonder Woman.

I can maybe forgive Don Cheadle's electromagnetic "pinch" device that blacked out Las Vegas in *Ocean's Eleven*, but barely. A device exists that can almost do that, but it's 100 feet tall and has a range of 20 feet. With the right impossible device Danny Ocean could also have teleported into the vault, but in a heist I want everything to be harder, not solvable by magical gimmicks.

15) Are there **DAUNTING BLOCKS OF DESCRIPTIVE TEXT** that can be trimmed?   Lucille Ball used to call everything that wasn't dialogue "the black stuff." A lot of readers skip it, believe it or not. When I write the black stuff in a creature film I'm laying-out important imaginative details for myself, to get things straight in my head. In a later read, I ask, was that scaffolding all necessary? Unless you're writing something that you intend to direct yourself, or you're working closely with a director, I wouldn't get overly descriptive with directional text.

And have a very good reason to specify left or right, exact age, or car color.   A black cat means something different in a scene. A black Volkswagen doesn't.

16) HAVE I BEEN SEDUCED anywhere by my own cleverness?

Is there stuff in here just because I felt ingenious?   You can fall in love with your own brilliance and give characters long speeches about whatever it was you studied in college. A *script* isn't more impressive because it contains an amazing one-take tracking shot. There's a difference between your characters showing they're clever and you showing you're clever.

A related note: Try not to write in that 1980s Shane Black-influenced style: "We're dollying at racing-bike speed over the fiercest house fire you're ever seen! We can feel the heat as the camera suddenly flies through a window, up a rickety attic ladder to the face of Susan, the most beautiful…" Write the movie, not the trailer.

17) AIR.   Even in an action-filled film, is there somewhere to breathe? A moment of quiet conversation, or just scenery. Atmosphere. Pensiveness. In *The Terminator,* Sarah Connor stops running from the machine and sits somewhere with John Connor under a bridge, just talking. (Exceptions: films where *non-stop* is the point. *Crank, Lola Run, Speed, Hardcore Henry*.)

18) VESTIGIALS.

You can accidentally leave in your screenplay stumps of things that once fit your purpose but don't any more. A characteristic you gave someone purely so they could do a scene that you lost. You had a hit man shelling pistachios because a dropped shell was going to be a clue, but now that scene is gone and he's still eating pistachios. Which is hell on the Sound Department.

Say to yourself, "I started out with this idea, or this feeling. As I wrote, it grew into something different, because I discovered new things about my story. Is there stuff left over that was right for the early idea, but which I don't need in what it became?" I opened my script with the hero's mom doing prison time, so that late in the film he could apply some crucial lock-picking advice she gave him when he was in grade school. Now that he falls in love with a locksmith, do I still need mom to go to prison?

19) LINE, MOMENT, SCENE. These are the three focal lengths you have to communicate comedy. Line and Scene are obvious, but do you have a few **moments** that people will remember?

Great moments are rarely structurally necessary. The screenplay would be fine without them, just less memorable. Woody Allen sneezing away $2,000 worth of cocaine in *Annie Hall,* or inhaling helium from parade balloons during the chase in *Broadway Danny Rose*. Kevin Kline tossing his gun over the airport metal detector in *A Fish Called Wanda*. Robert DeNiro in *Midnight Run* when he's just threatened to kill Charles Grodin and leave him in a ditch, covering the pay phone mouthpiece and shaking his head reassuringly to Grodin.

See Jerry Belson's *Surrender,* with Michael Caine, after his 3rd punishing divorce, choosing between two courthouse elevators that arrive at the same time, one with a large Black man holding 2 snarling rottweilers with spike collars, the other with a beautiful woman…

20) MY SCENES WORK, BUT ARE THEY IN THE RIGHT ORDER?

Our tendency is to write in a rhythm of days. Breakfast, work, lunch, work, dinner, bed. This can impose a rhythm for realization-and-action that's not always ideal for story development. It can start to chug. Often, moving a whole scene to a new place and making the little changes that let it work there can be as exciting as writing a cool scene in the first place. It does something to the scenes around it, like a ripple in a pond. Try it. Same advice as on CUTS: save it as EXPERIMENT DRAFT and see what you think a few days later. Check out Christopher Nolan's first film, *Following,* where he did a linear edit, then the eventual

non-synch edit that jumps around in time, perhaps leading him to the idea of making his next film, *Memento,* run backwards.

If your protagonist learns something, then moves forward to a new scene where that information is crucial to him or her, you can consider going to the later scene first, then cutting-in the information as a flashback right before, or after, its value is evident. A nice example of a long hold on information is the last third of David Ward's *The Sting*, where we don't find out until after the climactic gunfire how much Newman has known about, and planned for, the cop tailing Redford.

21) MOVE ON WHEN THE SCENE IS OVER.

Don't let the audience get itchy. Wrap it up when you've got what you came for. Conversely: take the important thing in the scene and consider moving it towards the end. After a torturous crawl through a tight cave deep below the earth, your explorer discovers an ancient jar covered with thick dust. He opens the jar and adjusts his head flashlight to see… a hand-drawn map? A jewel? A human jaw bone? I'd say unless you're planning on introducing cave snakes, that scene is done. Move to a scene where the consequences of what you've just revealed can be examined in a new context, or by additional characters.

22) Have you ABANDONED ANYONE in a scene?

Did you put someone in a scene, give them one line, then forget about them for eight pages? Go back and check to see if you've left anyone hanging. Cop shows and medical dramas walk people through and out. "Here's that X-ray!" If someone is stranded but they need to hear what's going on, maybe give them a tiny bit of color. Have them unknotting their kid's

Slinky during a business meeting. The business will make them useful for cutaways; your editor will thank you.

      I have a prejudice from TV writing that says if I show a family of four in a car, everyone who's awake gets at least one line or piece of business.

23) **IMAGINE YOURSELF ON LOCATION**, shooting each scene.   Easier to do if you've been there and you know that location sets are about boredom. Coffee, donuts, cold wind, tedium. Street closures, crew parking. What will make this quarter-of-a-page worth that trouble? In *No Country For Old Men,* Anton Chigurh doesn't just cross a covered bridge, he shoots a crow through the passenger window, *then* drives across. You learn that the crazy guy is on the move, *and* you get some character reinforcement.

24) Do the **VERBAL REFERENCES THAT PEOPLE MAKE** match their life experience? Check that you don't have two different characters each saying something is "lousy" or "cool." People each have their own favorite phrases of approval and disdain. Even in 1940s underworld drama, don't give two hoods precisely the same thug lingo. This is one of the things that has made period movies inadvertently comical. Everyone reacts to the monster or to the shootout exactly the same way.

      Read only Marta's lines, then read only Sven's lines. Are they clearly different people with different educations, backgrounds, obsessions? Folks aren't all at the same pitch of coherence, irritability, attentiveness or the amount of coffee they've had.

25)   Do I have someone **STRUGGLING TO UNDERSTAND** some aspect of the world?

I came late to the realization that it helps a script to have someone in it be puzzled by something. People don't have complete pictures of how every element of the world works. This doesn't mean you need to put a philosopher in your Spring Break script, just watch out for an overabundance of formulaic cockiness. Or apathy… that *I'm-a-dumb-person-who-doesn't-give-a-shit* stuff. I love those scenes in *Zodiac* where the cops, Mark Ruffalo and Anthony Edwards, discuss sushi in 1968. "You ever try sushi?" One of the things that peeved me about *Game of Thrones* was that everyone except Samwell Tarly and John Snow was strong and purposeful and confident and wise and full of bold pronouncements and determination. Everyone had a big plan and was single-minded and persuasive. Like they were all posing for their own heroic comic book panel. Yeah, I know, that's the genre, but

too much masterful pronouncement starts to become laughable. Even serious people have questions. They battle bureaucracy and idiots, poorly-written instructions, malfunctioning equipment, unhelpful Customer Service. A drama without any suggestion of the real-world nonsense we go through can feel as though it's been laminated for our hygienic protection.

26) Do a read for **POTENTIAL INCLUSION**. You're not the casting director, so I don't mean that, like a bank ad, you have to specify when we're panning a farmer's market that we show persons of color, disabled, First Nations – let casting handle that – but do a read for where you may have been lazy in your small assumptions.

A **variety of types** enlivens scenes. Your truck-stop manager, "A BURLY 50-YEAR-OLD," has one line: "Toilet's broken. Pee behind the building." Would it be more interesting if maybe his ten-year-old daughter is running the desk for two minutes and looks up from her Judy Blume to say that? There are all kinds of people and some of them are more interesting than the first types who come to mind.

White writers: don't specify that everyone's blonde unless you're remaking *Village of the Damned.*

27) The **HAVE I BEEN TOO EASILY SATISFIED?** pass. There's something I call the My Precious Toddler Effect. Every parent loves their kids' crayon art. They're seeing something made by their bright, adorable offspring. Everyone else just sees a plane with both wings on the same side. It feels so great to type FADE OUT. You really feel you've accomplished something. You know how difficult it was to write your script, and this burnishes your appraisal of what you've accomplished.

An interesting experiment: send it to a reader, then don't re-read it yourself until they tell you they've started it. For some reason that I've never quite understood, you immediately get a more critical take, like David Lynch standing outside that first screening of *Eraserhead*. I discovered this when writing monologue. Right before the host delivers your carefully-wrought lines, for some reason you suddenly know exactly where it'll bomb.

No one cares how much you sweated it. Don't be pleased with how hard you worked, ask with a jeweler's eye how well the pages work.

Most of the foregoing assumes you're working on your own idea, but it's possible you're working on assignment. In that case, there needs to be a pass for:

28) Did I write **WHAT THEY ASKED FOR**?

You can get carried away with your own enthusiasms and forget the enthusiasm of the people who said, "Great! Now go write *that!*"

This also applies to anything you may have written for a specific performer, or for potential collaboration with a director who has a definite style.

There are other tricks to apply to specific types of scripts. Comedies, animation. Sitcom pilots. I cover many of those details in my book, *Comedy Writer*.
https://www.amazon.com/COMEDY-WRITER-veteran-sitcoms-animation/dp/B08QM15ZYQ

The most common problems with spec scripts, I find, are:

- **1) Straightforward recitation** of events with too few twists. A too-faithful elaboration of the tagline. Scenes that come from nothing and lead straightforwardly, through the premise, in an arrow shape, to the end. Dullness.

- **2) Ho-hum dialogue**.   The characters whom someone goes to the trouble to film should say more interesting things than the people lining up to see the film. For comedy specifically: cut comic clichés, the stuff anyone's uncle could have said. "Whoa, this looks bad." "This is why we can't have nice things." To hand a script to someone is to say, "You've never seen this before." Read some play scripts. Tom Stoppard, Wendy Wasserstein, Christopher Durang. In a stage comedy, the dialogue must seem fresh, line by line, night after night. Make something new.

- **3) For comedies**, cut the not-trying moments, where someone says or does something dumb or inept and the smart funny character just says "... *seriously?*" or rolls their eyes, because we know they could be hilarious if they wanted to, but they're not going to try. You do see this on-screen, where non-lines are ad-libbed by actors and left in by weary directors, but in an original script this is Comedy Loitering. This is Lesson # 1 for beginning comedy writers: because you've seen someone do a really easy thing doesn't mean there are high-paying jobs for people to do that easy thing. In screenwriting, as in the other arts, or in welding, learn to do the hard things.

ALSO, it should go without saying, but don't write anything based on someone else's intellectual property. If you don't have a legal option on the rights, no one will touch it. Think up something new. I answered 250 questions over four years on a Quora precursor site called AllExperts. A quarter of the questions I got were from people who had the idea to make a movie – no story, just the idea, "make a movie" – based on a video game they'd played. They wanted to be paid to tell the video game company that their game could be a film. You know what? They have people for that.

Now, go rip it up.

Andrew Nicholls / May 2023