

Getting Feedback



Given the brutally competitive arena of screenwriting and the limited number of chances a new scribe gets, knowing your work is ready for the market is a critical survival skill.

There's a certain irony in the fact that while screenwriting is one of the most solitary trades known to man, it's also one that, by definition, requires creative feedback, whether you're a beginner or a working professional. Constructive feedback for new aspiring scribes generally consists of broad foundational principles such as plotting, characterization or dialogue. But over time those same issues become the subject of a sort of shorthand spoken among pros

whose livelihoods are impacted for better or worse by their ability to absorb and act on notes from studios, producers and stars. In between those two career poles are the often painful developmental stages required to learn to craft a commercially viable movie story on demand.

And at every turn are opportunities to get feedback, one way or another, with the knowledge that not all feedback is created equal, nor is it always the result of the same motive.

"When I've talked to managers, their feedback was sort of dry," says Tasha Huo, an aspiring writer with an M.F.A. in screenwriting from Boston University and a job as assistant to a director of development at Universal. "It was very business-related, rather than creative. It was about what's commercial. And they would then compare my script to other, successful scripts that got made into movies. Then they'd try to steer me in that direction. But the feedback was more commercial than

creative. To them, it's about how they can market a script."

Even though she works in the industry and networks aggressively, Huo notes it's difficult to get expert creative feedback—even in L.A. and even for someone with her credentials.

To overcome that natural barrier, Joe Nienalt, a Tacoma, Washington-based writer now repped by Jon Huddle at UTA and legendary former William Morris agent-turned-manager Alan Gasmer, launched an aggressive campaign several years ago to get his work known to some of the right people. "I did a lot of research," says Nienalt, who completed his first paid assignment last year for a foreign production. "And I developed a target list of players in the industry. Then I set about getting them to read my work." Not only did he

ever wrote unless you know it's the real thing because it's very hard to get a second read if they don't find something of value in the first script you send them."

Therein lies the critical importance of feedback, from the earliest stages of an aspiring writer's endeavor.

How, when and why you get it will become important factors in your career development. How you use it may very well determine whether you succeed or fail in the long run.

But feedback is available. You need it. And you'd be a fool to believe you can flourish as a creative professional without it.

Coverage Services

For the uninitiated, the clogged Hollywood system, deluged with spec scripts, rides on the

professional industry reader evaluate their work," says Misie Geatty, director of ScriptXpert, a leading coverage service owned by Final Draft, Inc.

Because paid readers apply the same commercial and creative standards they do for studios or production companies, understanding the grade you get is important for an obvious reason: Had the same reader read your script for Paramount and passed, a big door in Hollywood would have slammed shut. By using a paid coverage service, flaws and shortcomings can be addressed and fixed before Paramount sees your million-dollar masterpiece.

Such understanding and guided remedial action are vital to a new writer's development, says Matt Misetich, general manager of Script Pipeline, another major coverage provider in

“Don’t give them the first screenplay you ever wrote unless you know it’s the real thing because it’s very hard to get a second read if they don’t find something of value in the first script you send them.”

—Brian Koppelman

get feedback, he established the industry fan base that would lead to major representation and his first job—which he ultimately landed as the result of having contacted the Russian director and created a friendship on Facebook.

Such ambitious, aggressive tactics are not for everyone, cautions acclaimed New York-based writer-director-producer Brian Koppelman (*Solitary Man, Rounders*).

"I remember something Scott Rosenberg (*Con Air, Gone in 60 Seconds*) said to me and wrote about a while back," says Koppelman. "And that is if you can get a read from somebody established, who can help you either creatively or in the business, make sure you really believe in the screenplay you're pitching them. Don't give them the first screenplay you

back of script analysts, also known as readers. They are the gatekeepers at studios, production companies, management firms, and agencies. Their commercial verdict is simply recommend, consider or pass. There are very few recommends and a lot of passes. In fact, more than 95 percent of all scripts are dismissed with just such a benign-sounding rejection.

As noted by Koppelman, a writer who has received a pass from a particular entity usually finds it hard, if not impossible, to get read there again. As a result, many new writers use a paid coverage service for notes provided by a professional script analyst with experience reading for major industry players.

"For new, unrepred writers, a service like ours gives them the opportunity to have a

Los Angeles. "The first set of notes for a beginning writer is almost like a crash course in screenwriting," he says. "And you can't really start to make progress in your work until you have that basic foundation. So, we make sure that new writers understand the principles of what goes into a script. We also explain exactly what they need to work on."

For more advanced writers, Script Pipeline, ScriptXpert, and other coverage services deliver a lot more depth and detail. "For example, we can say the dialogue is good in a particular scene, but then tell them how to make the overall scene work better," Misetich states. "And that is specific advice. It's not about the basics anymore."

Scott Mullen is an L.A.-based screenwriter

Getting Coverage

Although aspiring screenwriters enjoy a range of options when it comes to getting feedback, one of the most commonly used is paid coverage, or notes from a professional script analyst. Because there are hundreds of providers, from well-known companies to obscure individuals, a prospective buyer can match needs and expectations to a budget.

ScriptXpert: Owned by Final Draft, Inc., ScriptXpert is one of the three major coverage providers that dominate a large portion of the market. Employing professional script analysts with at least five years of experience reading for a major studio, producer, or agent, ScriptXpert delivers basic coverage for \$180, extended coverage for \$270, and a development tutorial package for \$500-\$850. For more information, visit FinalDraft.com/products/scriptxpert.

ScriptShark: Owned by The New York Times Company, ScriptShark also uses professional studio-system script analysts. It provides basic coverage for \$175, with a resubmission price of

\$99 for additional notes on a subsequent draft. Studio development notes cost up to \$399. One popular option is a "reaction pack" that includes coverage from three different readers for \$375. For more information, visit Scriptshark.com.

Script Pipeline: Formed in 2000 and formerly known as Script P.I.M.P., Script Pipeline is the third member of the trinity of leading coverage services. It delivers an overall review for \$175, resubmission notes for \$125, and more in-depth development notes for \$250. For more information, visit Scriptpipeline.com.

The Screenplay Mechanic: Working screenwriter-producer Andrew Hilton is one of the most highly regarded independent script analysts in Hollywood. He has a produced credit from one of his screenplays, as well as a spec script to be directed by Stephen Norrington in development at Legendary Pictures. He recently produced his first film from a script sent to him for paid coverage. For \$89, Hilton delivers

who has provided low-cost and highly respected paid coverage for 20 years. "To get feedback from somebody who knows what they're talking about is an education," he says. "It's like taking a little master class if you've got the right person giving feedback. The key is to find feedback that is actually going to help you become a better writer. And then you need to learn how to take that feedback and really filter through it and decide what you want to do with the script."

Hundreds of paid script analysts, from major providers such as ScriptXpert to individuals such as Mullen, operate in Los Angeles and throughout the country. Services are available across a broad range of prices and options (see "Getting Coverage" sidebar).

To make sure you find a good match, ask your prospective provider to cite the credentials of your reader, as well as success stories in the marketplace. Ask for a clear explanation of exactly what you're paying for and what you can expect.

Other Options

Another excellent way to get feedback, as part of a structured, ongoing process that includes producing pages at a steady pace, is to take a screenwriting class or online workshop, says veteran TV writer and screenwriter Jeff Lowell (*John Tucker Must Die, Over Her Dead Body, Hotel for Dogs*).

"Classes are a very good way to start," says

Lowell, who has developed a reputation for taking the time to help newcomers understand the business of screenwriting. "You've got a teacher who hopefully has some experience who gives you notes. And you give notes to your classmates.

"Giving notes is a great skill to develop, as well, because pro writers have to be able to analyze the weaknesses in a script before they can rewrite it."

Even in the small Southern town where he lives, Lowell says a local community college offers a screenwriting course. For those who don't live in Los Angeles, online screenwriting programs at top universities such as UCLA are an excellent choice.

A new option, under the auspices of the widely popular screenwriting blog Go Into the Story (Gointothestory.com) hosted by writer Scott Myers (*K-9, Trojan War, Alaska*), is the Screenwriting Master Class courses Myers offers with partner Tom Benedek (*Cocoon*).

Yet another way to get feedback is to join or form a writers group. Such groups, at all skill and experience levels, are conspicuous in Los Angeles or New York, but also readily available in many smaller cities and towns.

Every Monday night for the past five years, Mullen has been one of 16 L.A. writers joined by 16 actors to do 25-page table reads each week and provide face-to-face feedback on scripts from members. Entry into the group, which mixes working pros with talented newcomers, requires at least three completed scripts and an interview.

"The group is amazing," admits Mullen. "When you hear actors read your script, the dialogue that works really pops. And the stuff that doesn't work really lies flat—especially if you're doing a comedy. If it's funny, you're going to get a laugh. But with actors and a moderator who calls on audience members for comments, the feedback you get is amazing."

Huo has enjoyed similar benefits from a smaller, writer-only group. On the proverbial one-to-10 scale, she gives the experience a 10-plus.

For writers who don't live in L.A., there are also several good online forums that can function like writers groups. One is Done Deal Pro (DoneDealPro.com). Another is the GITS Club spin-off from Go Into the Story. At both, visitors can ask questions and even

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expert, practical notes with extensive suggestions for general improvement or the solution of specific problems. For more information, visit Screenplaymechanic.com.

Erik Bork: Erik Bork is a two-time Emmy® Award-winning writer for his scripts for *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Band of Brothers*. As a critically acclaimed working writer, Bork provides mentoring and coverage services to serious aspirants. For \$485, clients receive either four-page written coverage, or page-by-page margin notes, or a one-hour phone conversation.

For \$569, clients can have any two of those. For \$645, they get all three. Bork also provides ongoing mentoring and general consultation for \$95 an hour. For more information, visit Flyingwrestler.com.

Mike Cheda: Touted by the late, great Blake Snyder as the best in the business, independent script analyst Cheda is also a produced writer who has sold a number of spec scripts to major studios. For \$250, he delivers a detailed script analysis that includes a specific assessment of salability in the current market. Development notes are \$1,000. A pro's commercial assessment of a one-page synopsis is \$100. For more information, visit Mikecheda.com.

Scott Mullen: Another of the most respected script analysts in Hollywood, Mullen is a screenwriter who has provided paid coverage for the past 20 years. He specializes in working with beginning writers and for just \$60, delivers thoughtful notes with a lot of attention to detail. For more information, e-mail him at scottmullen9@sbcglobal.net.

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post pages, acts, or full scripts for feedback. In recent months, established pros such as Craig Mazin (*Scary Movie 3*, *Scary Movie 4*, *The Hangover Part II*), Derek Haas (*3:10 to Yuma*, *2 Fast 2 Furious*, *Wanted*), and Lowell have begun providing notes on three-page increments of newbie scripts.

Mentoring

The Holy Grail of feedback, of course, is an ongoing relationship with a working pro who's willing to not only provide feedback, but help show you the ropes of the business. That's a benefit Nienalt got from Done Deal Pro a few years ago when he struck up a friendship with rising-star TV writer Bill Wheeler, who posted under a pseudonym at DDP. "He was my first mentor," says Nienalt. "He gave me some very constructive feedback early on."

Last year, Huo enjoyed similar serendipity when she met writer Dalan Musson when they

played on a Universal softball team together. Musson, a former videogame writer, had done the near-impossible in a stagnant spec market earlier in the year when he sold a spec to Warner Bros. and got a blind deal for a second script at the same time. In turn, as a way of paying forward his success, which includes representation by ICM and Industry Entertainment, Musson became Huo's mentor.

"Working with a mentor has been completely different from any other kind of experience I've had before," explains Huo, who has written seven scripts and is now working with Musson on the one she thinks can earn her representation. "He has his foot in the door," she says, "so he comes from that perspective, not only as a writer giving great creative feedback, but also as someone who has the practical knowledge of what it takes to become a successful screenwriter in the business. So he can advise me on my script in very specific

ways that address both of those needs. And that is something I never had before."

Career Survival 101

Even though feedback is essential for new writers, getting it—and acting on it—becomes increasingly important as you climb the ladder to working pro. "It's an insanely important skill if you want to have a career," says Lowell. "As a working screenwriter, you're going to get notes ... and a lot of them. If you're defensive and argue about why what you wrote is correct, no one's going to want to hire you. It's that simple."

From her perch at Universal, Huo agrees. "We don't like working with writers who can't take feedback," she says.

At the same time, says produced screenwriter Andrew Hilton, who also has a spec script currently in development at Legendary Pictures, writers on the way up—or already encamped in the Promised Land—must learn to distinguish good feedback from bad feedback.

"I'm choosier now about who I take feedback from and what I do with it," states Hilton, a former studio reader who now provides popular and respected paid coverage as The Screenplay Mechanic. "Over the years, as you take more meetings with studios, you realize there is a difference between good notes and bad notes—and that there is plenty of both out there. The rule that I abide by is that if they are just making the script different, then I may not implement them. But if I think they will make the script better, then, of course, I implement them."

As the classic caveat on all things Hollywood, however, Hilton invokes William Goldman's legendary observation that "nobody knows anything."

But, he quickly adds, there is no such thing as a script that can't be improved.

Given that reality, he advises that finding the right sources of feedback is a requisite for success at every stage of a screenwriting career. 

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JOHN BUCHANAN is an award-winning, nationally published journalist and magazine writer whose work has appeared in more than 100 newspapers and magazines. He is currently a freelance reporter for the global news agency Reuters.