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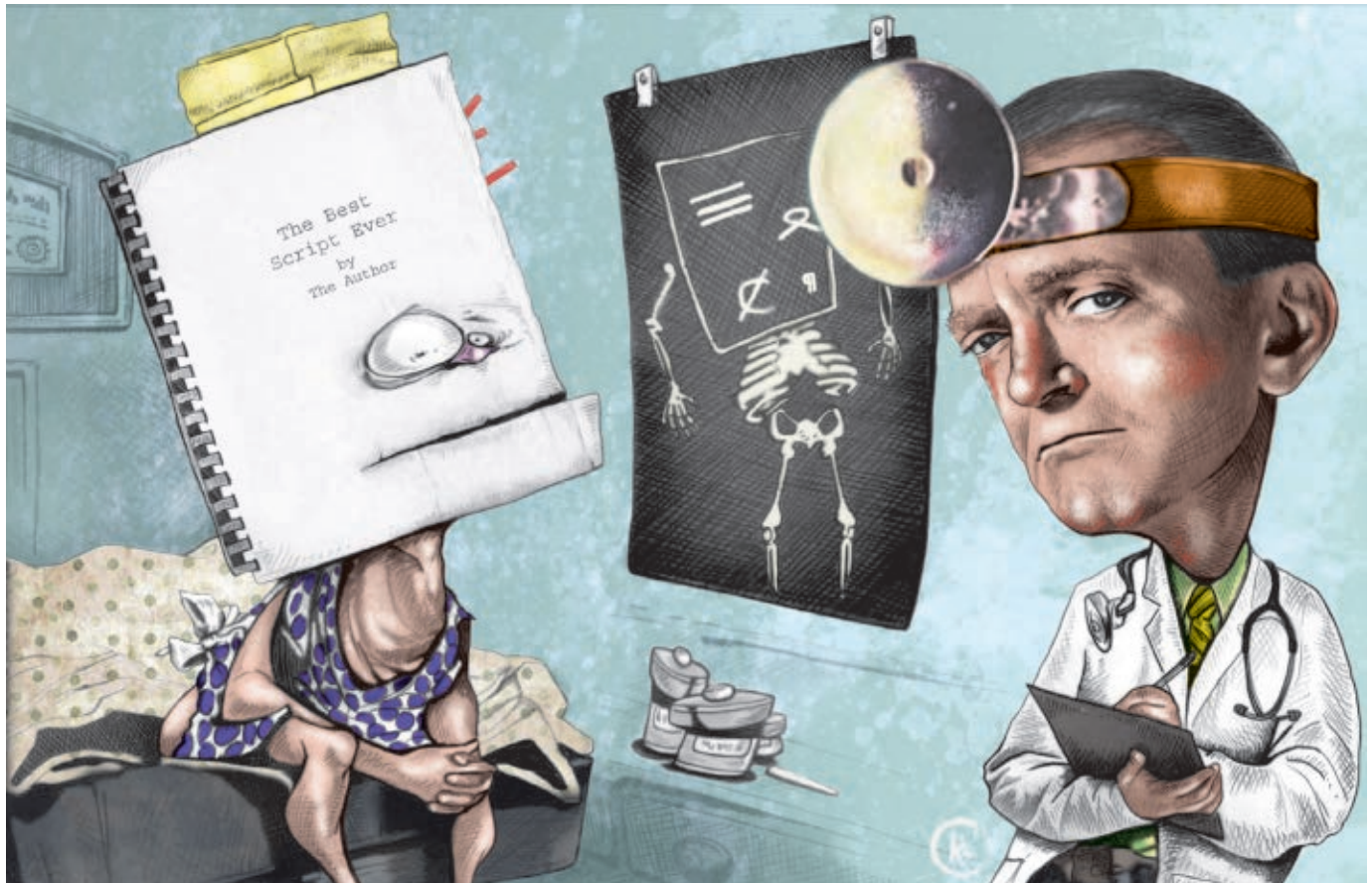
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# THE SCRIPT DOCTOR IS IN

## HOW TO TRIAGE SCRIPT NOTES



**W**hen you send your screenplay out into the world, it leaves the nurturing safety of your laptop and flies right into the path of a tornado. No matter who reads your script—professionals, peers, mentors or Mom—they are going to have opinions. Those opinions whip around in violent crosscurrents of suggestions, agendas and ideas. If you want your project and your artistic ego to survive, you've got to be ready for the storm.

Start by making your screenplay as strong as it can be. Never let a weak, muddled or unfinished script wander off on its own. Write and rewrite your

script until it has bones of steel. Even then, be prepared. In the frenzy of feedback, ideas fly like razors and script notes rain down like hail. No matter how strong your script, there will be carnage. Your project will live or die based on how well you weather the storm and how professionally you deal with the aftermath.

### 9-1-1

When the feedback starts coming in, you must listen. *Really* listen. Like an emergency operator, your job is to stay calm and collect information. You can't do that if you're talking, arguing or fuming. You know *your* vision for the story. Now you need to find out how the reader's experience compares.

Gently press the reader to answer the following questions, and take detailed notes on their responses:

**“YOU KNOW *YOUR* VISION FOR THE STORY. NOW YOU NEED TO FIND OUT HOW THE READER'S EXPERIENCE COMPARES.”**

**WHERE:** Where is the script set? What kind of world is it? Where, in the script, are the problems located?



## “EFFICIENCY AND SPECIFICITY WILL UNCLOG YOUR WRITING.”

**HOW:** How has the script hit you? How do you feel about the characters? How do you describe the experience of the story?

**WHAT:** What was engaging about the script? What was boring or alienating? What problems do you see?

**WHO:** Who is the story about? Who do you sympathize with? Who are you curious about? If there are problems in the script, which characters are involved?

Your reader may offer specific suggestions for the story. Be aware that when a reader makes a suggestion, he is doing it because he has some point of frustration with the script. As the screenwriter, your job is to understand and address that underlying frustration, not necessarily to implement the reader’s exact idea for a cure. So as you get suggestions, follow up with open-ended questions. Get the reader to talk about why he is making these suggestions and you’ll begin to understand the underlying frustration that prompted the ideas.

### S.T.A.R.T.

S.T.A.R.T. stands for “Simple Triage and Rapid Treatment.” The Department of Homeland Security recommends this protocol in the aftermath of a natural disaster, but it also works well following a development meeting. Imagine your script notes spread out in front of you like a field of rubble. Stay calm. As the screenwriter, you need to have a cool head in the midst of chaos. It won’t help if you run screaming from the scene. Take a moment (and a deep breath) and focus. Now start...

### LOCATE THE PATIENTS

Every problem in your script is like an injured body lying on the ground. Before jumping in and trying to rescue any of them, take a complete inventory. Go through your script notes, tagging each one with character name(s) and page number(s). If you don’t have specific page numbers for a note, tag it by quadrant of the story. Does the script note apply to the first quarter, the second quarter, the third quarter or the fourth quarter of your script? You may choose more than one.

### PRIORITIZE

Don’t get distracted by the blood. Just because a particular problem generates a pile of script notes does not mean that problem is most critical to the survival of your screenplay. Regardless of quantity, compile script notes into the following lists:

#### IMMEDIATE

**Protagonist:** All script notes tagged with your main character’s name. If you have two main characters—as in a buddy comedy, for example—then make a separate list for each character.

**Antagonist:** All script notes tagged with your opposition character’s name.

**Sweeping Script Notes:** Script notes which are relevant to the entire screenplay or to a huge section of the screenplay.

#### URGENT

**Supporting Characters:** For each supporting character, compile a list of script notes.

**Smaller Clusters or Patterns:** Script notes relevant to a small section of the screenplay or that reflect an intermittent pattern.

#### LATER

**Individual Notes:** Script notes relevant to a minor character or to an individual page.

This is how you will prioritize your rewrites. As you work, use your script notes to compare your perspective on each element to your reader’s perspective. Points of major disagreement are red flags.

### A.B.C.

Every paramedic, lifeguard and Girl Scout learns the ABCs of emergency medicine: Airway, Breathing, Circula-

tion. Beginning with the protagonist, then working your way through the list, you will revive your screenplay element by element.

### AIRWAY

The first step in resuscitation is to clear anything blocking the flow of air into the lungs. Early screenplay drafts have a lot of clunky writing. In an effort to get the story out, we allow ourselves to be clumsy. We overwrite, sketching out ideas in broad strokes. We slap together one-dimensional characters and generic locations. This is a necessary step in getting the screenplay onto the page, but it chokes off the flow of the story.

As you focus on a particular element of your script, try to narrow down your writing. Move from the general to the specific, from the inefficient to the efficient. Take away excess and add fine detail. In the first draft, you might know that your character is a waitress, but as you work on rewrites, you will hone in on the specifics. You will know the decor of her restaurant, the tone of her voice and the gossip of her co-workers. Replace the broad outlines of her life with a million tiny strokes. Find ways to say more about her in fewer words. Efficiency and specificity will help unclog your writing.

### BREATHING

Genre is the air that your story breathes; every element of your story adds to and amplifies it. Hollywood loves nothing more than defining and categorizing genres, but rather than getting too mired down, start by defining your genre in broad, general terms.

Review your script notes. Take a moment to answer the following questions:

*What are the five adjectives I would use to describe the world/atmosphere of my script?*

*What are the five adjectives my readers would use to describe the world/atmosphere of my script?*

Compare the adjectives from the two lists. Is there any major disagreement between them? As you rewrite, ask yourself how specific elements contribute to

**MM** the atmosphere of your screenplay. What tone do they set? What feelings do they provoke? How is the world of the script reflected in each particular element? Rewrite each script element so that it breathes the genre of your story.

**CIRCULATION**

The heart of your script is your protagonist. He or she is the life blood that pumps through your screenplay; your protagonist is vital for active characters and flourishing story lines. You must keep the heart beating.

If you are working on a character, identify that character’s core desire. What is the one thing he or she wants and needs more than anything else in the world? Why does he want it? If you are working on a particular plot element, imagine that plot element was a person. (For example, in the film *Titanic*, the ocean is not human, yet it has a heart because it creates both peace and conflict for the characters.)

**TAKE THE PULSE**

In a healthy screenplay, the heart beats strongly and regularly. As you examine a particular element of your script, take its pulse. Mark every moment when the element pushes the story forward. These moments should be clear, causing a tangible change in the story. They should occur rhythmically throughout the script. If you find long stretches of script without a pulse, rewrite to get the heart started again. Give the element a shock in order to get it moving in the right direction.

**STABILIZE THE SPINE**

You have breathed life into every element of your script. You have every element’s heart beating and blood pumping. Now it is time to move things around. Your goal is to stabilize the spine of your story. This means aligning every element of your script around a single conflict.

First, make sure that the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) define this struggle

from opposite directions. Their goals should throw them into direct conflict with each other over this single issue. Beyond the protagonist and antagonist, every supporting character should have a stake in the spine of your story. One single struggle is the backbone of your script. As you rewrite, attach every element of your script to it.

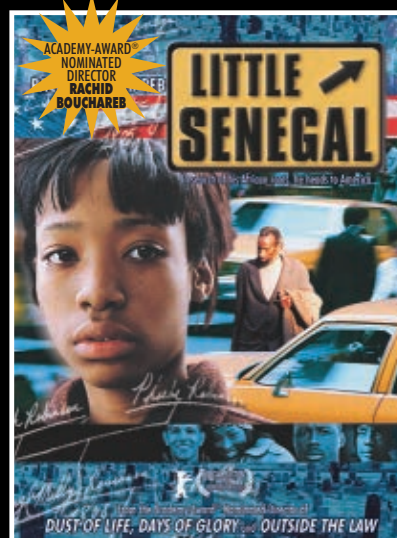
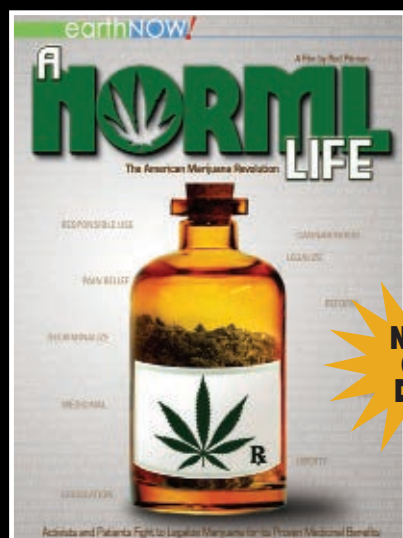
**RELAX AND REGROUP**

The immediate crisis is over. Now is a good time for a break. Put your screenplay in a safe place. Continue later with the second article in this series, “The Script Doctor Is In: Cures for Common Complaints.” It will be published in the Fall 2011 issue of *MovieMaker*, on stands in November. **MM**

Penny Penniston is the winner of the 2005 Sloan Screenplay Prize at the Tribeca Film Festival. Her book, *Talk the Talk: A Dialogue Workshop for Scriptwriters*, is available at bookstores. Learn more about her work at [www.peninkent.com](http://www.peninkent.com).

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