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# THE SCRIPT DOCTOR IS IN: PART II

## CURES FOR THE COMMON COMPLAINTS

**P**ut on the latex gloves. In the first part of this two-part series, you learned how to stabilize the vital elements of your screenplay. Now it's time to probe your script notes for other lingering problems.

Review the feedback you have received from readers, looking for patterns; a cluster of script notes around a particular character, plot point or theme indicates an unseen problem. Like a physician evaluating a set of symptoms, use this guide to examine your script notes, make a diagnosis and administer a cure.

### DISORDER: DELUSION

#### Script Note Symptoms:

- Confusion about a particular event, choice or moment.
- Questions beginning with "Who," "What," "Where" or "Why."

**Treatment:** In his book *Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*, David Ball argues that we do not build stories on individual events, but on pairs of events. "Action," he says "occurs when something happens that makes or permits something else to happen." Action, therefore, is two events, "one leading to the other."

If a reader is confused about a particular moment in your script, trace that moment backwards and find its first half. Where is the event that leads to the problematic element? Once you've found

the specific moment, ask yourself if it can be clarified or strengthened. Continue tracing backwards, following the chain of causality all the way back to the beginning of your script. If you find any weak or broken links in the chain, reforge them.

### DISORDER: SUPERIORITY/INFERIORITY COMPLEX

#### Script Note Symptoms:

- The reader complains of predictability or declares skepticism.
- Statements such as "I saw it coming" and "I felt ahead of the story." Or the opposite: "I didn't believe that," "It was out of character," "It felt out of the blue" or "I didn't buy into it."

**Treatment:** The writer is an acupuncturist who uses pinpoint precision to align a screenplay's chi. With each moment of a script, the writer is attempting to strike a balance.

The screenwriter's challenge is to keep the audience surprised while maintain-

ing the story's credibility. Can you set it up differently, so that the events leading up to that moment conceal its approach? Can you attack the moment in an unusual way by using an unexpected setting or some unique action or dialogue?

Alternatively, if a particular moment seems implausible to your readers, how can you make it feel natural? Can you make events leading up to the moment foreshadow its approach or rewrite it so that it fits within the world of your story more realistically?

### DISORDER: MALAISE

#### Script Note Symptoms:

- Statements of apathy or restlessness.
- Complaints beginning with "I didn't care about," "I was bored by," "I wasn't interested in" or "I found my mind wandering during."

**Risk Factors & Complications:** Malaise could be the result of one simple problem, or it could stem from a horrible gangrene that is killing off your script. To pinpoint the root cause, ask the same questions a doctor would ask:

**Onset:** When did the boredom begin? Is your reader bored from the very first scene, or does the boredom begin later? Make a note of when, in the script, your audience first becomes bored.

**Pattern:** Is there a pattern to the boredom? Does it come and go? If so, what alleviates it? Is the boredom associated with a particular character or plot element?

When it comes to malaise, there are several different types, each requiring a different remedy.



ing the story's credibility. If script notes indicate that a particular moment is predictable, ask yourself how you can

<b>SYMPTOMS</b>	<b>DIAGNOSIS</b>	<b>TREATMENT</b>
Boredom starts with the very first moment of the script or when a particular character, location or plot element is introduced.	Generic person, place or thing.	Look up “dull” in a thesaurus and you will find the following: Obvious, familiar, commonplace, ordinary. If readers find some part of your script dull, it’s probably because it’s generic and therefore doesn’t generate interest. Dull things are generic things. They fall neatly into some category. Instinctively, the human brain files them away without second thought. To get your readers’ attention, you must force them to grapple with something that defies easy categorization, something interesting with details that make it unusual and sets it apart from the crowd. If your script, characters or plot defy stereotype, readers will be compelled to watch them, stick with them and explore them. Rewrite to add unique detail.
Boredom is ongoing and directed toward a particular character.	Weak character goal.	While an interesting character will catch a reader’s attention, an interesting character in pursuit of a goal will <i>keep</i> a reader’s attention. If the goal driving your character forward is important enough, the pursuit of it will force the character to make sacrifices and overcome obstacles. This is the alchemy behind every great plot in the history of storytelling: Character, conflict and sacrifice in pursuit of a goal. Characters without clear, compelling goals rob your story of a coherent and engaging plot. They wander aimlessly through the script, taking random, inconsequential action and making trivial decisions. So when you’re faced with ongoing apathy about a character, ask yourself: What, specifically, does this character want? What’s at stake if he or she doesn’t get it? How does the character’s goal force them to take action and make sacrifices? Clear, compelling answers to these questions will capture your audience’s attention and imagination.
Boredom appears after the opening scene, but before the quarter mark.	Ambiguity regarding the central character.	Once the audience enters the world of your film, they will immediately start looking for someone to guide them through it. This person is the central character of your film. If your audience is bored or restless within the first quarter of your story, it means that the audience can’t find its guide or that the central character is either lost in a jumbled crowd of other characters or has arrived too late. Introduce your central character early in the script, and focus the scenes and action around him or her.
Boredom appears after the quarter mark, but before the halfway mark.	Inactive conflict.	You’ve introduced a central character and hooked the audience into following that character by giving him or her a clear, high-stakes goal. Now it’s time for the character to encounter opposition. In screenwriting, events and decisions must arise as a result of conflict. Conflict is the engine of storytelling; it forces characters to make changes and sacrifices in response to opposition they face in pursuit of their goal. If your story sputters out and stalls, ramp up the conflict by having the central character take concrete action to thwart the opposition, or vice versa. Either action will force a reaction, which will drive the script forward.
Boredom appears at or after the halfway mark.	Lack of ideas.	The third quarter of a script is often the most difficult part to write. Many scripts fall apart here, as the story can become repetitive or disjointed. The problem is that the screenwriter has run out of plot. The well of ideas is dry. To solve this problem, simply dig a new well by placing a powerful, transformative moment in the center of your story. Whatever it is, it should break new ground, unearth new information or go to some new depth, giving your characters the momentum they need to spring into the third quarter of the script with new sources of power, new tactics and new determination.
Boredom appears after the three-quarter mark.	Weak ending.	Find your story’s resolution, the moment where the central character permanently wins (or loses) the thing he or she has been working toward. This moment should be strong and clear, with all action in the fourth quarter leading up to it. If the audience is bored in the last quarter of your script, it means that the resolution either happens too early or never happens at all.
Boredom occurs during a particular scene or sequence.	Loss of drive.	If your audience is bored during one particular scene (but not the script as a whole), look for one of the following problems: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characters have wandered away from the pursuit of their goals.</li> <li>• Characters are pursuing their goals but not encountering obstacles or resistance.</li> <li>• Characters are pursuing their goals and overcoming obstacles, but nothing is changing as a result.</li> <li>• The end of the scene leaves the characters at the same place as the beginning.</li> </ul>

Once a diagnosis has been made, it’s up to you to administer the cure and make your ailing script well again. **MM**

*This article is the second of a two-part series. The first installment, “The Script Doctor Is In: How To Triage Script Notes,”*

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