

Rewriting is Writing

Just because you finished a screenplay doesn't mean it's *actually* done. The script will need to be rewritten again ... and again ... and again.

So, you came up with a great idea for a screenplay. You mulled it over, fleshed it out, and then set to work—pouring your heart and soul and sweat into every page. After months and months of intensive effort, you finally made it to the last scene, bringing your story to a rousing finish and giving all of your characters their just reward. That's it, fade out, you're done—right?

Well, no.

Amateur writers see a first draft as the end of their efforts, while veterans know that it is

really just the beginning—the rolling of a ball of clay that now must be shaped into a work of art. “Writing is rewriting,” the old adage goes, and it's correct—the initial words on paper are certainly the basis, but it is only in the refinement of those words that a screenplay is truly realized.

But how exactly should one go about this business of rewriting? What should your goals and intentions for the revision be? What sort of process should you follow? For a lot of writers, the answers to these questions aren't

very clear and, as a result, all they often end up doing is retyping their script rather than truly reworking it. Here are 10 vital steps that will help you make the most of this crucial part of the screenwriting process:

1. Walk Away

Upon completing your first draft, the first thing you should do is nothing. The single most important tool you will need to do a successful rewrite is perspective—the ability to see your work for what it is, rather than what you



hoped it would be. Perspective is impossible to attain when you are caught up in the frenzy of the creative process. So, once you have finished your initial pass, walk away from it for a week or two, or five. This break will ensure that when you return to your work, you will be able to view it with fresh, objective eyes.

2. Reread Your Script

As you read your work again, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the premise of the piece understandable and established early on? The premise is the seed from which the rest of your narrative grows and must be clearly set up in the opening pages of your screenplay. If you have reached page 15 or 20 and it is still not obvious what your story is about, then you have some work to do.

theme is “friendship is forever,” and your story is about an ex-con seeking revenge on the mob boss that framed him, then you either have to adjust the theme to fit the story or vice versa.

- Are there any elements in the script that do not directly support the central theme or narrative? If there are, then those extraneous bits must be removed.
- Is the protagonist’s primary goal clear and does his pursuit of that goal drive the narrative? In dramatic storytelling, a protagonist has a strong objective that he/she sets out to achieve. All of the choices the protagonist makes, every action he takes and obstacle he overcomes should bring him closer to accomplishing that goal. If they don’t, then you must redirect him.
- Is the protagonist’s arc logically brought

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- Does the narrative flow smoothly and logically? Is the story easy to follow? In other words: Can you tell what’s going on? If you can’t, then you must revise with an eye toward clarity and comprehensible cause-and-effect.

- Does the script tell the story that you intended it to tell? Caught up in the frenzy of creation, it’s easy for a writer to get carried away by subplots, wander off on tangents, and become enamored by a single scene at the expense of the overall narrative. If that happens, use the rewrite to get your tale back on track.

- Is the theme of the piece clearly expressed by the events of the narrative? If your theme is “friendship is forever,” and your story chronicles the relationship of two buddies from the first day of kindergarten until they become roommates in a retirement home, then you’re in good shape. However, if your

about the events of the story? If your story is about a pathological liar who eventually learns to tell the truth, then the events of the story should show how lying initially benefits the protagonist, then causes him big trouble, and finally allows him to see the error of his ways. However, if the plot transforms your protagonist from a cowardly soldier into a courageous warrior, but in the end he says he has finally learned not to lie, then a visit to the narrative chiropractor is in order.

- Does your antagonist dominate? Especially when writing action films or horror movies, it is easy to give too much attention to a colorful bad guy, so it is crucial that you rein in these rogue baddies lest they steal the film from your hero(es).
- Have you told your story in cinematic fashion—through action, images and dialogue,

rather than through dialogue alone? Novice screenwriters often have their characters talk about important things—key actions and events, vital backstory, and turning points—rather than act them out. While this verbal dramatization is appropriate for the stage, it is not appropriate for the movies. One of the cardinal rules of screenwriting is: Whenever possible, show, don't tell. So if you have told, then please show instead.

- Likewise, have you properly dramatized every element of your story? Inexperienced writers are notorious for describing important plot points—a character's internal thoughts or feelings, necessary exposition, etc.—in a screenplay's action lines, but not in ways that will communicate them to the viewer. (“John, 25, is a tall, good-looking, Harvard dropout who left that esteemed

dramatic heart as possible and end them as soon as the point has been made. Any excess should be trimmed and a script should never be longer than 120 pages. (Most producers and studios today actually prefer screenplays to run approximately 110 pages.)

- Have you incorporated too much detail? Scripts are not novels; you don't need to describe every little aspect of every little thing. The descriptive passages in screenplays should be brisk and evocative, using as few words as possible to describe an action, a character, or a place before moving on as fast as possible to the next bit. If your descriptions are not, then whittle them down.

- Have you filled your script with detailed descriptions of shots, camera moves, music, or edits? If so, then remove them. As a screenwriter, your job is to structure and tell

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institution after he was caught cheating on an ethics exam. Right now, he's worried about a bad report he just received from the doctor.”) So if you have not presented all of the important information in your script through some combination of action, images or dialogue, please do so now.

- Are all storytelling gimmicks employed in your script—flashbacks, cutaways, narration, dream sequences, etc.—vital to the narrative or theme of your piece? If not, if you are just using them to gussy up a weak narrative or simply because they are trendy, then eliminate them. Form should follow function, not the other way around.

- Is the script as tight as it can possibly be? In movies pacing is paramount—neither your scenes nor your story should run on. Ideally, you should begin all scenes as close to their

a story, not to direct it.

- Does your story fulfill its genre expectations? In other words, if it's a comedy, is it funny? If it's a horror film, is it scary? If not, then a major rewrite is in order.

3. Revise the Script

Address all problems and implement necessary solutions when revising. Keep in mind that this task can be easier said than done—many writers find it difficult to tamper with something that they have labored so hard to create, even if they know it needs the revision. This emotion is understandable, but not excusable. The most important part of rewriting is to actually do the rewrite—to not just tweak or polish or fuss around the edges, but to wade in and tear the script up; cut things out; move pieces around; rework

and revise. Be fearless and be ruthless—you must have the courage to kill your darlings if they aren't working or else your screenplay will never improve.

4. Repeat

Be sure to do steps 1 through 3 as many times as necessary until the script is finally where it needs to be.

5. Get Feedback

Once you are satisfied with the script, then give it to people to read and comment on. Choose folks who can analyze your piece with an objective eye and who will give you honest and constructive criticism. Seek out fellow writers and industry colleagues—people with a grasp of the nuts and bolts of screenwriting—rather than friends and family members, who will only say nice things about your script because they don't want to hurt your feelings. Another good option is to submit your piece to a professional script analyst or coverage service to get an industry-level assessment of your piece. Once all of your analysts have responded, analyze their analysis. If one person takes issue with some aspect of your script, then it could just be that person's problem. However, if a number of people have the same problem, then it's likely that the fault lies with the script and will need to be addressed.

6. Listen to the Feedback

Do not rationalize. It's hard to hear that something you've worked on so hard is not 100-percent perfect, but if you want to make your script the best it can be, don't delude yourself into thinking that the script is better than it is. If there's a problem, don't explain it away ("They just didn't get it;" "It will be clear once it's on the screen;" etc.), fix it.

7. Rewrite Again

Rewrite as much as you need to in order to address any problems identified in the feedback. And then get additional feedback and rewrite some more.

8. Hold a Reading

When you feel you're just about done, gather some friends, assign everyone a part, and then sit back and listen as they read your

script out loud. Hearing your dialogue spoken allows you to tell if it sounds natural or stiff; to determine if the points you're trying to make are clear; and to assess the pacing and flow. If you're writing a comedy, then I believe that a reading is absolutely essential, because it's impossible to determine how well a dialogue joke works until you actually hear it. Consider taping the reading so you can have it available to review as you rewrite to fix any problems found in the reading.

9. Proofread

Your script needs to look as professional as possible when you present it to the industry, so once all of the other problems have been addressed, go over the piece carefully and correct all mistakes in spelling, grammar, punctuation, screenplay formatting, and terminology. Don't be afraid to use professional proofreading and formatting services if you need to because, as the old saying

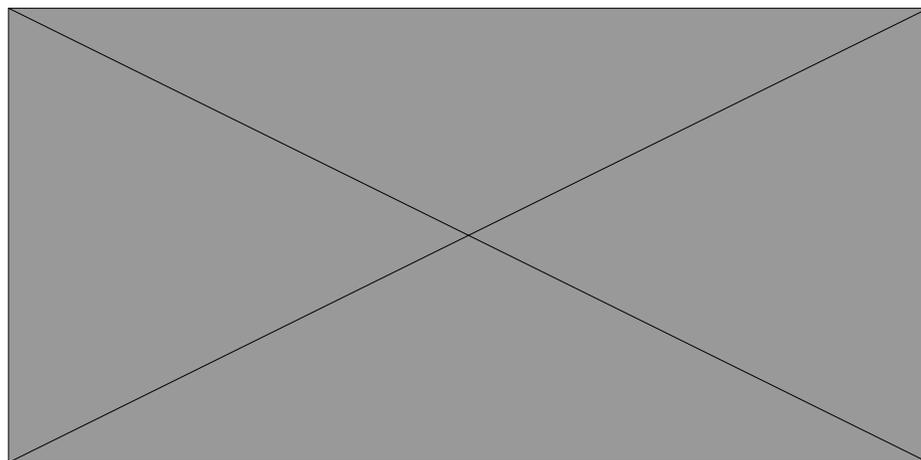
goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

10. Don't Rush

You're eager to get your work out there, make a big sale, and get your career started, but none of these things will happen if your script is not the absolute best that it can possibly be. So don't put the cart before the horse—take your time and put as much care into the rewriting of your work as you put into the initial writing. It may take more time in the short run, but the long-term rewards will be worth it. 



RAY MORTON is a writer and script consultant. His new book *Music on Film: Amadeus* is now available online and in bookstores. Morton analyzes screenplays for production companies, producers, and individual writers. He is available for private consultation and can be reached at ray@raymorton.com.



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