



American
Screenwriters
Association



40 COMMON ROOKIE SCREENWRITING MISTAKES

**Written by Steven Kirwan
ASA Executive Director**

Introduction

There are many ways an aspiring but inexperienced screenwriter can crush a potentially brilliant writing career. Some are basic, while others are insider expectations that seem to defy logic. This guide is intended to help you avoid many of these common pitfalls, goofs, mistakes, and oddities and increase the chance that your screenplay will be noticed.

There is nothing magical or proprietary about the items in this guide. Everything described here is basic "Screenwriting 101" material taught in most screenwriting schools, courses, seminars, webinars, and workbooks.

The items are not presented in any particular order, but they all need to become part of your writing arsenal.

One more thing: The rules described in this guide are for new screenwriters. If you are a prolific writer who has sold screenplays, such as Spielberg, Tarantino, Sorkin, or Cameron, then it is "anything goes!"

Good luck, enjoy the journey, and write, write, write!

1 Screenplays About a Situation Rather Than a Character

Producers want compelling personal stories. That means your protagonist needs to be at the center of the story. The situation should be designed to reveal the character's inner qualities.

The "Spider-Man" franchise is not about saving MJ from the bad guys. The movies focus on Peter Parker's internal struggle between his personal desires and his responsibility to help others.

2 Protagonists Who Are All Good

There are very few Mother Teresas around. If your protagonist is a goody-two-shoes, the character will not be believable or, worse yet, will be boring. Audiences connect with characters when they see themselves in the role. People are flawed. Characters should be, too.

Who is more compelling in "The Wizard of Oz": Glinda the Good Witch or Dorothy? Glinda is sweet and good, but a little boring. Dorothy abducted her dog from the mean neighbor, ran away from home, and went on an adventure that landed her in trouble. Not boring.

3 Writing a Sequel or Book Adaptation

Unless you are a well-known screenwriter or the original author, forget it. Aside from potential trademark and copyright infringement issues, which are VERY REAL... Wait, that IS the big deal. If you want to write a sequel or adaptation, get approval from the original copyright owner FIRST. Good luck!

4 Clichés

The nerdy bookworm gets bullied. The soldier turns to his buddy and says, "We got incoming." The young housewife burns dinner. Secret lovers say, "We've got to stop meeting like this." A kid sits outside the principal's office. Someone says, "What is the worst that could happen?" BEEN THERE, DONE THAT. MANY, MANY, MANY TIMES.

5 Too Many Characters With Similar Names

A group of teens went to the beach. One of them is missing. Is it Tommy, Tom, Tony, Toni, Tina, or Tanya?

6 Too Many Transitions Into and Out of Scenes

Watch your favorite movie and count the number of times the protagonist walks into or out of a scene. Most likely, the scenes start in mid-action. People are already in the room. By the way, does anyone actually say "goodbye" when leaving a room? Not often.

There are times when ingress and egress transitions are acceptable, but only if they are critical to the scene.

7 Good Enough Is Not Good Enough

Your first draft is awful. It had better be. Your first pass should be rough and fluid and contain lots of errors. It means you are creating and brainstorming amazing ideas. Editing stifles creativity.

But NEVER, NEVER, NEVER send in your first draft. If you do not rewrite at least five times (I rewrote my first screenplay 14 times), you are not performing your due diligence.

8 Failure to Get Professional Criticism

Once you have sold a few screenplays, you can slide on this one. I said you can, but you should not. Most first-time screenwriters are emotionally attached to their stories. Do not be. A screenplay is a product.

I guarantee that producers or readers will look at your screenplay with harsh eyes, if they look at it at all. Pay for professional coverage first, pay attention to the critique, and then rewrite. Then get another professional coverage. And then rewrite again. And again.

9 Expecting to Sell Your First Screenplay

Because so many new screenwriters have. NOT! Okay, it does happen, but rarely. If you have a polished screenplay, have received a "recommend" on your professional coverage, have won a screenplay contest, and become an excellent screenplay marketer, maybe. Just do not EXPECT it to happen!

10 Weak Characters

Failure to develop characters fully is a common problem for all screenwriters, particularly rookies. People are complex, and their strengths and weaknesses are equally important in shaping their behavior. Avoid clichéd, simplistic people. Every character in your story needs a purpose, identifiable motivations, real needs, and real flaws. Each character must be crucial to the story.

11 Extraneous Characters

You should test every character's importance to the story. If you can remove a character with no consequence to the story, the character is clutter. Producers see that as laziness on the writer's part.

Here is a simple test: Would your screenplay be hurt by deleting any character? If the answer is no, get rid of that character. Or rewrite the character and make them relevant, complex, identifiable, and believable.

12 Failure to Create Suspense and Tension

Suspense and tension are like the smell of bacon cooking for breakfast, if you like bacon! They create the emotional hook that interests producers and keeps moviegoers on the edge of their seats. Think of tension as winding the clock and suspense as the expectation that the spring will pop at any second.

Every scene should create tension and build suspense toward the story's climax. Failing to create tension will prevent readers and audiences from caring about your characters and their challenges.

13 Writing Your Life Story

Unless you are Donald Trump, Whoopi Goldberg, Sir Edmund Hillary, or Casey Anthony, nobody really cares. Really. Producers want stories that audiences will care about enough to give up their money.

If your life story is compelling in a way that the average "everyperson" will care about, then maybe. But if you truly believe your story is worth sharing, start by writing a short story and getting it published. If you can do that, you may have something.

14 Disjointed Scenes and Character Arcs

One of the most common newbie mistakes is allowing the story or character to spiral out of control. Instead of funneling the story into a single, dramatic, suspenseful climax, the story takes on too many problems at once.

The result is a diluted, meaningless, or, even worse, boring plot that meanders and fizzles. Ask yourself whether each scene and character moves the story forward toward the final outcome.

15 Hitting the Wall

You are in the zone. Action and dialogue are rolling off your fingertips like bullets flying in battle. Fast and furious. And then, WHAM! You slam into the wall. Not one more word.

This is very common and can occur for several reasons. Maybe, after reading what you wrote, your idea seems silly or meaningless. Or maybe you just cannot see how to transition from the current scene to the next.

If it happens, do not stress out. Stew on it for a day or two. If your concept is good, you will figure out how to move past the wall. If not, set it aside, return to where you were before the mental explosion, and work forward from there.

P.S. If you get a great idea that does not fit your current screenplay, write it down. I have launched entire screenplays from scenes I originally developed for, and then cut from, a different screenplay.

16 Breaking the 80 120 Rule

If your screenplay is longer than 120 pages, you need to CUT. If it is fewer than 80 pages, you need to WRITE. It is uncommon for a major motion picture to be shorter or longer than 90 to 100 minutes.

Since each script page equals about one minute of film, producers often skip reading a screenplay altogether because of its length.

17 Writing Derivative Screenplays

It may seem tempting to use a character from your favorite movie or book or to write a spin-off. Resist the temptation! Much like sequels and book adaptations, derivative works are a hard sell because of copyright and trademark issues.

Perhaps even more compelling is the difficulty of recreating the original story's flair or the character's voice. No two screenwriters write the same way, and your version will likely be less familiar, and therefore less believable, than the original.

18 Indistinct Characters

Rookie writers often forget to change speech patterns for different characters. They write each character in exactly the same voice, style, and cadence. Every one of your characters needs a unique personality and voice.

19 Asking Family Members for Feedback

It can make you feel good. It can validate your concept. It can give you hope. It can also allow you to write poorly. This is a business, and it is both cold and harsh. Your mom will definitely be more interested and much kinder than a producer! It will not help you become a better screenwriter or sell your screenplay. GET PROFESSIONAL FEEDBACK.

20 Run On Action

And then he walked down the street and into the building and then up the stairs and into the apartment and then he saw the blood and then he ran into the bedroom and found the producer lying on the floor and then he picked up the screenplay and he read the first page and he saw the never-ending string of run-on action descriptions and then grabbed the producer's gun and then shot himself, too.

21 Diary or Countdown Format

Creating sequential time or date scenes, like a daily diary or time countdown, has been so overused that it is almost impossible to sell. If you must use this technique, it had better be critical to the story. In general, it should be used only for historical or "docudrama" stories. Or, better yet, not at all!

22 Extraneous Scenes and Meaningless Action

It is very unlikely that a scene about making and eating a sandwich for lunch matters. If the sandwich is poisoned and the character nearly dies, then maybe. But not many people will care that the protagonist ate lunch. Every scene and every action must have a significant purpose and consequence for the story.

23 Excessively Poetic Writing

A screenplay is the written expression of action. Poetry is a stylized and figurative expression of ideas. It is very difficult to explain action using figurative language. Doing so will mark you as an amateur. Be prosaic in your language. Just do not be boring!

24 Insignificant Consequences

Would you care about this movie? "Ride the Bear" is the story of a college graduate who cannot find his car keys. How about this one? "Ride the Bear" is the story of a college graduate who cannot find a job and contemplates suicide as the only way out of his crushing debt.

In screenwriting, consequences are critical to making producers, and eventually audiences, care about the character and the story.

25 Incorrectly Formatted Screenplays

Screenplay-formatting rules were designed for you and me. We must follow those rules or risk having our screenplays "round-filed." Read that as "this will absolutely happen." Spielberg, no. You and me, yes.

26 Ugly Stilted or Stupid Dialogue

Can you actually write the way people talk? I do not know anyone who talks like this: "I am going to walk to the men's room and use the sink to clean the spaghetti sauce from my hands." It may be grammatically correct, but as dialogue, it stinks.

So, how do real people talk? "I gotta wash my hands," or "I'm gonna go to the can and wash my hands." Unlike formatting rules, there is no official "right" or "wrong" for dialogue. Ask yourself: Would you talk that way? Would someone you know? If the answer is no, do not force your characters to talk that way, either. It is another rookie telltale.

27 Expecting Your Screenplay to Sell

There are an estimated 250,000-plus spec screenplays currently circulating among agents, managers, movie producers, and other buyers. Add at least another 100,000 or more written on contract or commissioned. Then add the number of screenplays rejected each year, perhaps another 250,000. Now estimate the number of feature films made each year. Fifty? One hundred? Let us say even 1,000. Are you seeing a pattern?

So, how do you ever sell your screenplay? Through perseverance, shoe-leather marketing, and networking. But not through writing alone.

28 Excessively Long Scenes

As a general rule, scenes should be no more than one page, or about one minute of film. If the scene is really, really, REALLY important, maybe it can run up to three minutes. If your scenes are too long, you have not written or edited properly. This is another sign to producers that you are a novice.

29 Scene Slugs

It is important to know where a scene takes place. That is the purpose of a scene slug. Write the scene slug, and then let the director create the locale based on their vision. If they want to know more, they will ask. But if the screenwriter tries to control too much, especially a first-time screenwriter, the producer is likely to pass. Producers do not want to work with a prima donna, particularly a first-timer.

Keep in mind that an experienced director will understand what INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT should look like. An exception would be an unusual or exotic location. That is where the scene description or action block comes into play.

30 Too Little or Too Much Action Description

The action and description of a character or scene need to be clear and concise. Think of them as a basic road map for the flow of the scene. The key is finding the right balance between the quality and quantity of that description.

Here are two examples that illustrate the polar opposites of the same mistake. In the scene, our protagonist, John, gets out of bed, walks to the window, and looks out. A hit man on the street fires a gun at John, and the bullet strikes the windowsill.

INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT

John stands up. The window frame explodes.

The description does not explain enough, so the director will not know how to express the intent of the scene. Or, worse yet, will just make something up.

Here is the other extreme:

INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT - DAY

John kicks off his gray blanket, two beige sheets, and his pillow and then jumps up from the double bed. He quickly moves to the partially open window, which is topped by a pull-up, two-inch vinyl blind. He looks out and down at the ground, where he sees trees, bushes, a street, and a black sedan parked across the street. He also sees a man dressed entirely in black and wearing dark sunglasses standing in front of the car. The man points an object toward the window. There is a loud explosion, and John quickly moves away from the window as small white and brown splinters fly from the wooden windowsill into the room.

You may as well describe how each splinter travels through the air, the dimensions of each splinter, how each one lands, and so on. Who knows? Maybe the entire screenplay can be an action sequence for this one scene. You get the idea: WAY TOO MUCH INFORMATION.

A better way:

INT - JOHN'S APARTMENT - DAY

John jumps up from the bed and charges the window.

In the street below, a man dressed entirely in black and wearing dark sunglasses points up toward the window. John leaps back as the wooden frame explodes from a gunshot.

Experience born of watching movies, reading successful screenplays, and getting professional feedback will help you learn how to write the proper amount of description for a given scene.

31 Death by Dialogue

Film is a visual medium. It is all about action and motion. We are not talking about cerebral or intellectual 1960s movies like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" A telltale trait of inexperienced screenwriters is including so much dialogue that it bogs down the pace or kills the intent of the scene.

This is not to say that two characters sitting in a coffee shop cannot have an extended conversation. But if your protagonist is in the middle of a gunfight with the bad guys, she probably will not launch into a long conversation about it with her partner.

Think about the intent of the scene and create the dialogue based on what would be normal in that situation.

32 Meaningless Dialogue

A cousin to "Death by Dialogue" is "Meaningless Dialogue." Rookie writers painfully often fill empty spaces with dialogue that does nothing to move or support the story. Run the scene through your head with and without the dialogue. If you do not miss it, cut it.

33 Saying Rather Than Doing

If your characters reveal more about themselves through dialogue than through their actions, your scene is weak. Show us your characters' mettle through their actions and deeds, not their talk.

34 Narration

The scene opens with a twinkling black star field as the narrator's words scroll up the screen. A deep voice says, "Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away, a small group of intrepid space warriors seeks the evil giant Death Star..."

Do not do it. It is so "last century." You can do the same thing by showing a group of fighter spacecraft streaking through space and then cutting to a close-up of the protagonist asking over the radio, "Anyone picking up the death-ray trails on their heat scanners?"

Use a narrator only if there is no other way, really NO OTHER WAY, to explain the situation. That means almost NEVER! It is a fast track to the round file.

35 Sudden Character Reversals

As in real life, characters need to be relatively consistent in their beliefs, feelings, and, most critically, behaviors. A Catholic nun who walks into a grocery store, pulls a gun, and robs the cashier is probably not believable. Likewise, a famous politician probably will not worship Satan at night. Probably.

That is not to say characters cannot ever be flawed: A cop steals cash from a drug dealer, a pastor cheats on his wife, a librarian likes whips and chains, and so on. Even wild reversals are acceptable if your character is a schizophrenic manic-depressive or gets bitten by a vampire. But, barring unusual circumstances, consistency is the rule.

36 Sudden Plot Twists

Just as with characters, the plot should also be consistent. Unless the story is ABOUT the bizarre turn of events, keep it on an even keel.

Here is an example of what not to do: At the end of the love story, the reunited lovers walk down the wedding aisle. As they approach the minister, he bares his fangs, pounces on the groom, and eats his brain.

Unless there is some reasonable explanation for the twist, it does not belong in the script. Even small but irrelevant twists can hurt the story if they are not logical. Twists can be excellent tools when used properly. Just make sure they make sense.

37 No Screenplay Opener

The fastest way to lose a screenplay reader is to fail to include a great opener. An opener is the very first scene in a screenplay. Examples: A love story opens with two people kissing; a war movie opens with explosions on a battlefield; a murder mystery opens with a body on the coroner's table.

Be sure your opener matches the screenplay's theme or plot. You would not likely start a children's movie with a pile of bloody bodies or an action-adventure movie with little puppies playing in a park.

This is not to say that the opener can NEVER be ironic. Just remember that you have one page to grab a reader's attention. Make it count.

38 The Duh Factor

In the scene, your protagonist shoots the bad guy. As we see the body lying on the floor, the protagonist's wife says, "You shot that bad guy." Then your protagonist says, "Yes, dear, I shot him with the gun I am now holding in my hand." Stating the obvious is a common rookie error and a big reason for getting your screenplay bounced.

I have personally read screenplays in which every single scene includes dialogue describing the scene. It is lazy, it is a shortcut, and it is cheating. There are occasions when a character SHOULD say what will happen or what did happen. Just make sure it is rare and critical to the scene's natural flow and rhythm.

39 Failure to Use Screenwriting Software

There are rules, more rules, and even rules about rules for formatting a screenplay. Do you really want to learn all those rules, or would you prefer to focus on the story?

Do yourself a favor and use proper screenwriting software. If you cannot afford "Final Draft," no problem. Celtx is good, and it is free. There are others, too. The first thing a professional reader will see is formatting errors. As in terminal errors... round-file errors... "no sale" errors. Are you getting the point?

40 Poor Writing

Script readers see hundreds, if not thousands, of screenplays a year. These readers are highly skilled in the proper use of language. They simply do not have time to fool around with poorly written screenplays.

A few typos in an otherwise superbly written screenplay are PROBABLY no big deal. But if the errors are large, noticeable, consistent, or otherwise get in the way of a quick read, your script is dead.

Getting a Leg Up on the Competition

This guide is by no means all-inclusive or comprehensive, nor does it guarantee that your screenplay will get a fair shake. Winning at the screenwriting game is as much about presentation and perseverance as it is about the writing or story. If you can internalize these recommendations and incorporate them into your writing, you will stand head and shoulders above the MAJORITY of other screenwriters, both rookies and seasoned writers.

A well-written screenplay with an interesting story has a far better chance than a killer story that is poorly written. The reader will appreciate that you care about the craft and respect them enough not to waste their time. That is half the battle won.

Screenwriting needs to be an enjoyable avocation because the odds are stacked against your success as a career screenwriter. You can shorten those odds by writing well, following industry norms, and keeping your writing concise and sharp. Producers and other readers will appreciate your professionalism and courtesy, and that is an advantage earned!