

# Common Screenwriting Mistakes and Reader Pet Peeves

by Jim Suthers

Professional readers, producers, and agents have to read hundreds of scripts per year. It's not unusual for them to take home 10-20 scripts to read over a weekend. That's *weekend* — the reader's own personal time. Overwhelmed, his or her goal is to get through that pile of scripts as quickly as possible.

The fastest way to do that is to weed out the obvious clinkers. So, don't give them a reason to stop reading your script on page 1 or 5 or 10 or 30. Avoid these common mistakes that make readers growl, roll their eyes, or set their minds to wandering.

## Character Descriptions

- Keep the description brief and specific (no more than 2-3 lines).
- Avoid describing clothing and hairstyles, unless it's crucial to the story (e.g., Robert Downey Jr.'s armored suit in *IRON MAN*).
- Nearly every character in the movies is "handsome," "pretty" or "drop dead gorgeous." Give the reader a more interesting, unique vision of your character — but avoid describing the physical attributes of a particular actor. (A producer may not be able to get that actor for the movie.)
- Though one should generally avoid "internals" in a screenplay (i.e., inner thoughts of the characters and other things you can't translate into shootable pictures and sounds), character descriptions are the one place where writers can use internals to suggest a character's world view or attitude — and should do so. Give the reader not only a unique and clear visual picture of the character, but of the character's inner life as well.

**“A script should be tight and concise. What people need to remember is agents and development executives do most of their reading on weekends. If a script is boring, I'll put it down and go do my laundry.”**

— **Christine Foster**, Literary Agent  
Shapiro/Lichtman

- Don't forget to give the character a specific age and gender. This information is critical for not only comprehension of the story, but casting and budgeting as well. (I recently read a script that contained several characters with non-gender specific names — like 'Pat' and 'Chris' — and no gender was given. It made for a very confusing read.)

## Location Descriptions

- Keep these brief also (4-5 lines maximum).
- Avoid lists of objects in a room, unless critical to the story. Include only props or set dressing that have an actual role in the story (e.g., the terrorist's map of LAX, the priceless painting we just saw stolen from a museum, or the fireplace from which Santa Claus will soon emerge).
- Research locations with which you're not familiar. Use proper names for authenticity (e.g. describing equipment in a factory, an emergency room, or a martial arts dojo).
- Use descriptive words that not only create a visual picture in the reader's mind, but set the mood as well — though use them sparingly.
- Avoid setting different scenes in the same type of location, one after another. With the possible exception of perhaps *BURIED ALIVE*, very few movies can sustain interest in one type of location for too long. Mix it up with day and night scenes, interiors and exteriors. Too many scenes in one type of location can hypnotize a reader like the center lines on a highway.

## Dialogue

- Avoid obvious exposition in dialogue, especially early in the script. Readers (and audiences) will be less resistant to exposition towards the end of the script. Wait until the reader/audience has invested in the characters enough to care about past events or explanations why they did what they did.
- Avoid having characters explain their motivations — especially while they're acting on that motivation. It's a cheat. You're trying to reveal the character's internal world by having them talk about it — and the reader and the audience will know right away what you're up to. Find other ways to convey the character's motivation. The best way to reveal them is through his or her actions (choices).
- Only discuss events that happened prior to the point where the script story begins if critical to understanding the current story.

**“(My pet peeve is a) lack of natural sounding dialogue, which goes hand in hand with overwritten dialogue and description; less is usually more when writing a screenplay.”**

— **Ken Sherman**, Literary Agent  
Ken Sherman & Associates

- Avoid dialogue that's too "on the nose." People rarely say exactly what they mean. There's almost always subtext. Even when people are being candid, there's still subtext. Indicate the truth and let the audience fill in the gaps or read

*Continued next page...*



## Dialogue, *continued*

between the lines. This is far more interesting than being told outright what to think.

- Visuals are the foundation of storytelling in a screenplay. Dialogue is the “icing on the cake.” Only use dialogue when you can’t convey an idea any other way.
- Don’t write out accents or regional dialects. Simply reveal that the character speaks with an accent in their character description — and let the actor supply the accent or dialect. Written out, they’re just too hard to read.
- Keep slang and vernacular to a minimum — especially if there’s a risk some readers won’t understand what is being said because they’re not be familiar with the slang.
- Avoid having characters preach, pontificate, or wax philosophical — especially two or more characters at once. It tends to read less like characters revealing themselves than it does the writer spouting off *through* the characters. The exception would be a character for which this is a character trait (an annoying character trait). Even then, keep it to a minimum.
- It seems that too many dramatic scripts read like transcripts of therapy sessions — every character freely sharing their inner most fears and desires to anyone who will listen. This is unrealistic. People don’t do that — often not even with people they know well and trust.
- Parentheticals (or “wrylies”): use them very, very sparingly — and only when it would otherwise be unclear what the character’s attitude is for the line (e.g., a line that could be read as sincere or sarcastic — and it’s not clear from the context which attitude is correct.)
- Don’t include action lines in parentheticals (e.g., “Sheila picks up a book and hurls it at Frank.” A statement like this is really an action line and should go below dialogue to the left margin, without parentheses.) The exception is indicating to whom a line is delivered, but only if it’s not clear (and important) to whom a line is spoken.

- Avoid having characters talk to themselves — particularly about things we can already see for ourselves. Soliloquies are for the theater, not film.
- Avoid repetition in dialogue — especially characters repeating back what another character has just said. It’s a waste of time.
- Avoid having characters talk about things we have just seen. Don’t show *and* tell. If a character must discuss a previous scene, focus only on their reaction to what has taken place or how that action has changed the character or the course of the story.
- Avoid voice-overs, especially long voice-overs that endeavor to tell us the entire story. It’s a cheat. The craft of screenwriting challenges writers to present the story *visually*, in pictures. Film is a visual medium. Use voice-over only as an absolute last resort.
- Break up long dialogue passages with meaningful action lines that advance the story or indicate character. Dialogue blocks should rarely be any more than 3 or 4 lines long. Nothing turns a reader off faster than a dialogue block that runs half a page. Break it up — or, better yet, cut it down to the absolute bare bones.
- Give each character a distinct voice; his or her own personal rhythm, word choice, and style of speaking. Readers often complain that all the characters in a script sound alike. If you give each character a distinct attitude and design them for maximum potential conflict between one another, this problem often takes care of itself.
- Cut “chit chat” and introductions. Come into a scene later to avoid the dull conventions of social interaction. Get to the meat of the scene as quickly as possible. The audience will fill in the rest.
- Avoid the use of ellipses (...) in dialogue. Let the actor figure out how to sound hesitant, confused or embarrassed. Simply state the character’s attitude in the description. If the proper context has been established, you can trust a trained actor to put pauses and stutters in all the right places.

- Cut clever banter if it doesn’t further the story or reveal specific details about the characters. Banter is, in my opinion, an unfortunate by-product of writers raised on a diet of too many TV sitcoms. It usually reads as contrived and does little more than reveal “the wizard hiding behind the curtain” (the writer).

**“ Improper script format — including excessive use of ellipses— really doesn’t go over well here. And big blocks of dialogue for one character are unrealistic. People don’t really talk that way.”**

— Jennifer Galloway, Creative Executive  
Castle Rock

## Action Lines

- Avoid internals (e.g. “Joe ponders his fate,” “Sheila enters, Joe’s half sister, who has been married and divorced five times.”) The movie audience doesn’t have the script in its hands. If the information can’t be photographed or recorded, leave it out. If the information is critical to the understanding of the story, it must be presented in a way that the audience can witness in the finished film (pictures or sound).
- Avoid over-directing the actors. If the context and emotional state of the character is clear, the reader will fill in the rest. Let the actors decide the best way to physically convey what the character is feeling (e.g., “Joe’s eyes dart back and forth. He takes a step forward and step back. He scratches his head and frowns” should simply read “Joe looks confused.”)
- Keep discussion of actor movements around the set as general (and quick) as possible. (e.g., “Joe navigates his way around the sofa, passes Sheila, opens the door, and exits” should simply read “Joe leaves.”)
- Be specific. Avoid words like “somewhat, slightly, almost.” They blunt the effectiveness of the writing and are unnecessary.
- Don’t repeat information already contained in the slugline.

*Continued on next page..*

## Action Lines, *continued*

- Avoid the use of “we see’s” and “we hear’s.” Just describe what’s happening in present linear time, as it happens. (e.g., “We hear a car pull up in the driveway outside” should read “A car pulls up in the driveway, O.S.”)
- Spell check! (Or get out your dictionary— spell checkers are notorious for missing homonyms.) If it’s not in Webster’s, it probably isn’t a word. Don’t risk it. Find another word. (I’m always amazed by the “new words” coined by novice screenwriters.)
- Always choose the most accurate, descriptive word. (e.g., does the character simply walk? Or do they *saunter*, *swagger* or *shuffle*? Does a character drive a *nail* through a timber, or is it really a *spike*?) Use your thesaurus.
- Break up action line blocks into small paragraphs. Action line paragraphs should rarely be longer than 3 to 4 lines. Anything longer is usually over-written, riddled with unnecessary details or redundant. Cut down to the bare essentials. A page that’s gray with big blocks of description is daunting to a reader. Keep your pages spare, with as much white space as possible.

## Flashbacks

- Avoid unnecessary use of flashbacks (and flash forwards). Movie stories work best when functioning in what the audience understands to be the present moment of the story (whether that present moment is 1860 or 2060.) The present always feels more immediate and, therefore, more powerful.
- Only use flashbacks when it is absolutely critical for the audience to know what happened in the past. They have to be “begging for it.” Wait until that moment when the audience is on the edge of their seat, when the only missing piece to their understanding of the present story is the revelation of what happened in the past.
- If your only reason for including a flashback is to reveal back story or other exposition, cut it. Find some way to weave this information into the present moment of the story.

- Identify flashbacks as flashbacks. Use BEGIN FLASHBACK and END FLASHBACK to make it clear to the reader what’s going on. Since the audience won’t have the script in their hands, it’s even better to also create some sort of visual or audio device to indicate the change in time (some sort of commonality between the present and past scenes — a prop, wardrobe, the character’s intense blue eyes, etc.)

“...writers who use direction — PAN, C.U., PULL BACK — they’re writers, not directors. Let the directors figure that stuff out.”

— Warren Zide, Manager  
Zide Entertainment

## Theme

- A common complaint about scripts is that they don’t seem to be *about* anything. Get clear about the theme of your story. What is your script *about*, really?
- Theme can be described as an argument you wish to make about a particular topic (e.g., “all men are pigs,” “love conquers all,” or “absolute power corrupts absolutely.”)
- Design your story to make the best argument you can for your theme. Then create the counterpoint for that argument — *and make that counterpoint as strong as your initial argument*. That’s how you create the stuff of which drama is made — conflict and tension. This conflict or tension can be dramatic or comedic, depending on the genre of the script.
- The theme is the unifying element of the story, that which holds it together. Without a clear theme, conflicts are hollow or muted and the emotions blunted because they have no context with which the audience can form an opinion and, therefore, buy into your story.
- The theme is that which determines the desires of the characters and, in large part, drives their choices.
- Choose a theme that will resonate strongly with either a wide audience (if it’s a big budget Hollywood type movie) or with a niche audience (if it’s a smaller, indie type movie).

The distribution and marketing people will love you.

- Movies tend to be larger than life. Avoid mundane, pedestrian themes. No audience is going to plunk down up to \$20 of their hard-earned money to see people and situations they can stay at home and experience for free. If you are going to deal with everyday, ordinary people in ordinary situations, there must be some element or aspect of your approach that is fresh and out of the ordinary, or the resulting story will actually be “reportage,” not dramatic story telling.
- Just because a story and characters are realistic, does not automatically mean they’re also dramatic. Drama results from conflict between characters we care about, fighting for what they want. Drama is not an automatic by-product of verisimilitude. Even if “that’s what really happened,” if it’s not dramatic, then it’s not a movie—and audiences will stay home.

## Characterization

- Avoid basing your characters on characters from other movies or TV shows. To do so is usually to derive a secondhand cliché from what is already a cliché. Instead, base characters on real, emotionally rich aspects of your own life and/or others you know.
- Design characters for maximum contrast and potential for conflict. If the characters are too much the same or always agree with one another, the story will be dull, flat, and lifeless. But make sure these contrasts are plausible. Make sure that you can accept that a particular character believes what they believe. Otherwise, this character will come across as forced and unrealistic.
- Make sure your characters have a life before the story begins and while the story is going on. In too many scripts, the characters seem to live in some sort of vacuum. They have no friends, no parents, no job, or anything else outside the narrow view of the story. Don’t belabor these points, but indicate that

*Continued on next page..*



## Characterization, *continued*

this person has a full life outside the parameters of the story.

- Make sure you know this character's world, inside and out. That doesn't mean every bit of it has to be in the script, but everything you do include must be plausible and feel authentic. This is where "write what you know" is good advice, especially for novice writers. If you're not really sure what it's like to be a doctor, a circus performer or a mob hit man, don't try to fudge it. Either write about something else, or do the research needed to better understand this type of person. It will always be apparent if you fail to do so.
- Be clear about which characters are going to change through the course of your story and which will not — and why. Your main characters should always change due to the events of the story (e.g., acquiring wisdom about themselves or the world, or discovering reserves of strength they weren't aware they had, etc.). Some supporting characters are dramatic because they *refuse* to change or haven't the capacity to change. This is frequently true of a tragic character. Whichever you chose, be certain that this *character arc* is the best choice to support your theme.

## Format

- Don't include the hour of the day or passage of time in a slugline. Unless it's shown on screen as a title (or *super*), there is no way the audience will be able to tell if it's "A FEW MINUTES LATER" or "MID-MORNING." If this information is critical to understanding the story, then there must be some indicator, either visually or in the dialogue, to get it across.
- Cut all camera directions (e.g., pan, dolly, tracking shot, close-up, etc.) Camera work is the purview of the director and cinematographer, editing the editor. Don't try to do their jobs for them. It only slows down the read and takes readers out of the story. Instead, simply tell us what and who we're looking at and what is happening.
- Only set a character's name in ALL CAPS the *first time* we see them. Don't use initial caps for minor

**“ I feel it is very unprofessional to submit a script that is improperly formatted; derivative of every big movie out there; and/or full of typos.”**

— Joanne Roberts, Literary Agent  
William Morris

characters (e.g. the Fat Priest, the Bag Boy, or the Annoying Secretary).

- CUT TO's and the use of "more" and "continued" for dialogue that breaks across pages has become passe. Don't break dialogue across pages (most screenwriting software has an option for this). Setting sounds in ALL CAPS has also fallen out of favor.
- Page numbers belong in the upper right corner, set in the same font (12 pt. Courier) as the rest of the text.
- Slug lines are only needed when there is a distinct change of time (day to night or to a later day) or location. Once the larger location is established with a slug, use "mini slugs" to convey specific areas within that location. For example, establish your scene with a slug like INT. JOE'S HOUSE - DAY. If there are scenes in *continuous time* within Joe's house, simply indicate the change by writing a mini-slug that reads BEDROOM, KITCHEN or CUPBOARD UNDER THE STAIRS.
- Slug lines are only for physical locations. A shift of focus to a "CROWD OF PEOPLE" within a scene is not, for instance, a change in location. Simply state "The crowd cheers."
- Make sure all the characters that will be in a scene are indicated as present at the beginning of the scene. Otherwise, it's confusing when they pop up out of nowhere in the middle of a scene. If a character does show up in the middle of the scene, be sure to give them an obvious entrance, so it's clear they have just entered the scene.

## Story

- In a nutshell, this is story: a character wants something, but must get through obstacles in the way of getting what they want. Story is the interplay of these two opposing forces. To create an

interesting, dramatic story, be certain these two elements — the character's desire and the obstacles to that desire — are evenly matched. For the story to have momentum and increase audience interest as it progresses, the obstacles must escalate in difficulty, forcing the character to take greater and greater risks. The climax occurs when the character must take a final action that represents the ultimate risk and is irreversible. The audience should have difficulty imagining any other course of action for the character to take.

- Don't be too easy on your characters. Don't allow problems or conflicts to be resolved too easily or allow them to get what they want with too little difficulty.
- Know the difference between *real life* real and *movie* real. You should always strive for realism and plausibility, but never at the expense of telling an interesting dramatic or comedic story that engages the audience.
- What do audiences want most from a movie? *An emotional experience*. To achieve this, the writer must create characters an audience will relate to and want to root for. And those characters must be in pursuit of goals that are likely to resonate with the intended audience. Put these characters in situations where they must make difficult choices. The audience, putting themselves in the character's shoes, will also feel that tension — and react emotionally to the outcome of his or her choices.
- Make sure the stakes are high enough. Be clear about what the character stands to gain if they succeed; and to *lose* if they *fail* to get what they want. Too many scripts aren't clear about the consequences — emotionally or physically — to the characters in the story.

*Continued on next page...*

**“ What really gets me irritated is when writers don't follow correct script format. That, and misspelled words, immediately say to me the writer is an amateur.”**

— Christine Foster, Literary Agent  
Shapiro/Lichtman

## Story, *continued*

The conflict is flat because we don't know what's at stake (or the consequences for failure); or because the stakes aren't high enough. Getting a bad grade, having a fight with a spouse, or needing a Band Aid for a scratched knee aren't enough. In a movie, it has to be expulsion from school, divorce and loss of everything, or a matter of life and death.

At the very least, the character must have an emotional attachment to an outcome with which the audience will strongly identify — something the audience can deeply relate to their own lives in some way.

- Be careful of unearned emotion. Just because a character bursts into tears or flies into a rage doesn't automatically mean the audience will feel empathy for them. The audience needs to see the circumstances that lead to the tears or rage — and those consequences must be strong enough to elicit the equally strong reaction elicited. This is the difference between pathos and *bathos*. The emotions expressed in pathos are well motivated, *bathos* is under-motivated and, therefore, merely melodramatic and unsatisfying.
- Be clear about your “obligatory scene” — the scene at the end of the movie you've set the audience up to expect. For instance, if a particular antagonist humiliates your protagonist, the audience will expect the protagonist to confront that antagonist spectacularly at the end. Woe be to the screenwriter who violates this expectation.

“My pet peeve is any screenplay over 120 pages — or when a writer reduces the type size to decrease the number of pages.”

— Anya Kochoff, Dir. of Development  
Davis Entertainment

Audiences will pelt the screen with whatever's handy.

- Set-ups and pay-offs. These are story elements that are begun (set up) early in the story, to be resolved (paid off) later in the story. It's like a promise made and a promise fulfilled.
- Never underestimate the power of a reversal. A reversal is an event that goes against the expectations of either the characters in the story or the expectations of the audience. The best reversals surprise *both* characters and audience. This is the basic stuff of keeping scripts fresh, exciting and engaging.

### Final Thoughts

- I repeat, for heaven's sake, please spell check. There is no excuse for misspellings in a script. None.
- Watch out for homonyms: (their – they're, your – you're, bare – bear, etc.) Spell checkers are absolutely no help with these.
- Know the difference between “it's” and “its.”
- Check your grammar and sentence structure. If you're not sure, consult a grammar book (*Woe Is I* by Patricia T. O'Connor is a good one.)
- Keep the subject of your paragraphs at the beginning of the paragraph. For example, “After nearly missing

an elderly woman in a wheelchair, the sports car darts down an alley” should read “The sports car nearly misses an elderly woman in a wheelchair and darts down an alley.” Give us the most important visual information first, details after.

This list is far from comprehensive. It's also not intended as a primer for learning the craft of screenwriting.

It may read like no more than a collection of “rules” and rules, as everyone knows, are made to be broken. Possibly. But I would add “broken by experienced writers who know the rules well and break them very carefully and consciously.”

Writers just love to cite the exceptions to these rules — especially with respect to voice-overs, flashbacks and other stylistic issues. Chances are, if you're reading this, you're not David Koepp, Akiva Goldsman, Shane Black, or Quentin Tarantino. You're probably an unknown writer and, as such, you don't have the reputation or the track record to go messin' with the rules.

At this stage of your career, it behooves you to avoid doing those things that tend to turn off readers. When you become rich and famous, then — by all means — break all the rules you want. Until then, learn the rules and apply them religiously.

I would also encourage you to read as many scripts as you can, noting which aspects work for you and which ones do not — and why. Then apply that insight to your own work.

Most of all, have fun — and best of luck with your writing!

**Jim Suthers** is a writer of several spec screenplays, a produced screenwriter of one feature (*Ring Around the Rosie*, starring Tom Sizemore and Gina Phillips) and one short film (*The Like Girl*, starring Libby Winters, which he also directed). Jim wrote *Common Screenwriting Mistakes and Reader Pet Peeves* while Executive Director of the Minnesota Screenwriters' Workshop in Minneapolis.

© Jim Suthers. Distributed with permission of the author.

Take the Complexity  
out of the  
Screenwriting Process!

movie  
outline

Learn More

SCRIPT IT!

Learn More