

The Best Scriptwriting Software: A pencil?

Perhaps that's not as crazy as it sounds...I was chatting to some people at the weekend about the best scriptwriting software. Of course, scriptwriting software is a fabulous tool for typing up the finished draft. But if you use it to compose at the keyboard without a plan, you are risking writing significantly below your best.

The worry for me about scriptwriting software is that, if used at the wrong time, it can rob the writer of the precious early sketches of scenes and character. It can encourage the notion that good writing is about fluency and about getting an instantly perfect script. So that a good writer is one who sits down and the script pours immaculately off the page with no previous planning. In fact, good writing, like any art, is about selection and control. Good writing is actually about resisting fluency. It is about resisting writing the first thing that comes into your head because the first thing that comes into your head is liable to be a cliché, or irrelevant or a repetition. If you are a good natural writer you will have fluency. That's why you became a writer. But if you sit down and write in a linear way, starting out with a vague idea and running with it, it's like building a house without a plan. You risk completing the lower storey then finding you've forgotten to put in the front door.

People will be saying that sitting down and writing at will is a great imagination booster. The problem is that once you have written a scene you marry it. What's more, when you write on the run, you're functioning on adrenalin and you tend to lose your critical faculty. Even worse, if you have any talent at all, any scene you write is liable to be an okay scene, indeed, probably quite a good scene, and people will tell you so.

It's at this point that you have to get over your own talent. Right, your scene is good. You are good. The point is, not whether the scene is good of itself, but whether it has a function in pulling the script towards the climax, in creating an overall story, in developing character, in taking the audience precisely where you want them to go.

Don't let your talent drag you all over place like a little man with a big dog.

And particularly, don't write your precious script with half your mind concentrating on where on the keyboard is the letter 'y'. To those who want to use writing as a creativity trigger, fine, brainstorm ideas on the page. Just don't start typing dialogue and real scenes because you'll find it very hard to escape them.

Before you write, plan your script. Writing starts not with typing the first scene heading, but with pages of notes, with character charts, with questions, with research, with the plots broken down into index cards on a table so that you can monitor the dramatic build and cut the flab. Writing of scenes will come a long

way down the line, and writing of scenes, even if you know what is to happen in them, will be difficult, because you want to pack as much as possible into each scene. The technical difficulties involved in constructing even an individual scene are massive – dialogue, subtext, backstory, exposition, setting. A good idea to get to know your characters is to write a scene that puts them in a situation that isn't in the script - and see how they behave and talk. That way you pick up their speech patterns and world view without starting to write the script before you're ready.

So do I really suggest writing in pen? I hate to say it, but yes, if you're not a touch typist, because you need all your mind on the writing. You don't want to be inhibited from changing things by the fact that it takes you three hours to type a page. If you are a touch typist, keep all of your first tries at a speech or a scene by putting them into a different font or font size, or keeping them in brackets. You'll be surprised how often the original lines, even if raw and wrong, will be a memory trigger or a clue.

The bottom line here is that writers are like artists –lots of sketches, lot of sweat, lots work trying to pin down the ideas prior to starting on the final canvas. So that the final canvas that looks so spontaneous and effortless is actually the result of a huge amount of hard slog.

All of which goes to show, I suppose, that writing is a dirty business.

With best wishes

Linda

PS If you can't touch-type, learn. Really. In that final type up it will save you hours.
