

The Writing Process: Beware fluency *

**a lot of this applies to parallel narrative (multiple story structures) but any comment assuming one protagonist is often inapplicable to parallel narrative. For the meaning of Mentor Antagonist see my book "Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen"*

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Just some quick thoughts. First of all, I do hope you remember that the only reason I can be useful about areas where you're having trouble is that I personally have had writing problems in the same places. And of course, it's always easier to be objective about somebody's else's work than about your own.

As ever, it's fascinating to see other writers work - the differences and the similarities. I'm struck by the similarities in problems that we all have, and the inbuilt problems of particular story types. So here are some thoughts about the early stages of the writing process that at best could be useful, at worst will at least give you another two minutes reprieve before getting back to work (which can't be bad).

1. The writing process is so much a matter of chipping away - then making breakthroughs at unexpected moments. People assume that fluency automatically means inspiration. Not necessarily.. When a new project - genuinely new - is really fast flowing at the initial stage, be aware it might be coming so easily because it's a cliché, or superficial, or silly (although this is not always the case - sometimes it's marvellous - but do check to see that what you have is genuinely original) .
2. The planning process is so much a matter of logic trying to impose a shape on material from your unconscious. The logical side of your mind keeps trying to find a scenario to demonstrate the impulses, images, emotions and vague bits of scenes that are coming from your unconscious, but it doesn't always do it right the first time. For example, you might have a sense that your protagonist needs to feel threatened, so you'll invent a whole plot about the protag. being pursued by an assassin. But maybe the idea is better served by a different, more subtle threat - a disease or obsessive jealousy - with the "assassin" a doctor or a rival in love. The trick here (insofar as there is one) is to keep asking yourself, "what is attracting me to this idea . What am I trying to do here? Is this plot going to give me the chance to explore what I want to explore? Do I know what I want to explore? *What is this film about?* " It's very easy to keep working on a plot because it was the first one that occurred to you. There is nothing holy about the plot. If it's not letting you do what you want, change it. Remember, the plot is a parable, essentially. It's a story that carries a message or demonstrates an idea. Work out the idea or the message, and inventing a scenario to carry it is easy (but working out the idea can be really hard!) I must say, I'm always struck, looking at my own early drafts and notes, of how many of the eventual plot components are there, but in a garbled form or with a different focus.
3. Ways to pick that the plot isn't working. First of all, a sense of boredom with it. Or a sense of being stuck. First question. Have I really got a plot here? (often you're just playing with the characters' normality) Second question. When I ask myself what is this film 'about' am I getting an answer that gives me two characters in a relationship? If so, the bit of the story that is presenting is the relationship line (very very common, particularly if you start from a character idea) and you perhaps don't have an action line that will permit you to take the characters where you want them to go. Clue here: have I got any conflict? Have I got a problem, a goal and a journey for the protagonist? Another useful question. What events would really put my protagonist on the line? For example, if you want to write about a faithful loving couple whose marriage breaks up, list as many events as you can that would force them to that point - realising that the first ideas are liable to be clichéd.

4. Another way to pick that the plot isn't right is that your protagonist disappears as soon as you hit the first act turning point. This is really common! You find yourself writing about other people. Be aware, though, that the second act is usually where relationships start to be explored, so you might, for example, find that you start exploring your protag's partner. This is fine, as long as the exploration of the partner is linked to the protagonist's journey (as in *True Lies*, *Being John Malkovich* etc). Here, the partner is making the protag's journey more difficult - so the protagonist is still involved. There is a problem when the plot simply forgets the protag and goes off to follow other characters. A question you should also ask in this instance is: have I got the right protagonist?
5. Good rule of thumb to check that you are following the protagonist: when you are writing the nine point structure chart, does every point start with the protagonist's name? For example, are you writing "Protagonist arrives home to find that the house has been robbed" rather than "Fred robs protagonist's house". If you are making Protagonist the subject of the sentence, you are inside their perspective on the event. If you are making Fred the subject of the sentence, you are inside Fred's head. **THIS IS ONLY A RULE OF THUMB.** The point is that you need to see events from the Protagonist's point of view in this classic structure.
6. Yet another way to pick that the plot isn't working is that the protagonist is too passive. If your character is simply reacting to other people's action, this is not strong enough. But be aware that you might have a mentor antagonist plot on your hands. In that case, the mentor antagonist has to make **BIG UNPREDICTABLE TROUBLE ALL THE TIME** for the protag. This means they must **DO THINGS** that lead the protag into terrible difficulties but educate them in some profound way.
7. Just generally, ask yourself "whose story is this?" and be aware that sometimes making a character the antagonist gives you more scope to keep them interesting (antags are seen from the outside, so can be mysterious, unknowable and threatening). Do note that if you are doing a buddy movie or any kind, it's best to make one buddy the protag and one the antag for the purposes of the relationship - otherwise you have no conflict within the relationship and you end up with Tweedledum and Tweedledee.