1. KNOW YOUR MEDIUM AND FORMAT

If it's visual (TV, film), use pictures. If it's acoustic (radio), use sound. It sounds obvious - but it's often the case that we don't quite know what medium a script is for, and it's often the case that writers use visual directions in a radio script or make their TV script read like a stage play.

You need to CHOOSE THE RIGHT FORM for your story - not vice versa. When you have what you feel is a good idea, ask yourself these questions: What's the best place for this story to come to life? Which medium will best express the story you want to tell?

A script is a BLUEPRINT for a subsequent production process in which writers will not necessarily be heavily involved. A drama or comedy script has no literary merit or value in its own right. A script is there to be MADE.

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN. A reader can only go by what's in your script, so if there is something you want to say, say it clearly in dramatic/comic action. Writers sometimes say 'your reader didn't understand what my script was about'. But often it's that the writer hasn't been clear.

ONLY WRITE WHAT AN ACTOR CAN SHOW. Parentheses in the script where the writer explains the characters backstory, feelings and opinions are pointless. If there's something you need to express, then show it through the action and dialogue - through what an actor can play.

DON'T DIRECT FROM THE PAGE. Unless you are a writer-director, it's better to keep technical directions to a minimum. We don't need to know it's a tracking shot, dolly shot or smash cut - write the beats of what happens in the action of a scene, and leave the directorial stuff to the director.

When you know the medium and form, make us ENGAGE WITH THE FORM - and see if you can explore, challenge and subvert it. It takes practice and craft to master a form - if a writer can do that and then take it to the next level, they are the kind of writer in which producers will be interested.

So be INTELLIGENT. Be BOLD. And above all, be CLEAR.

2. GET THE STORY GOING

Not getting the story going is a big problem with many of the scripts I have read. You need to **know your story** - and then be bold with it. By 'know your story', I mean know what it is you are trying to do, what effect you are trying to have on an audience. It often seems from their scripts that writers aren't sure, or perhaps just lack the faith to make a firm decision and go with it. But the clearer are about what you want the story to do, the easier it will be to know how to get the story going.

Hook the attention from the outset. Reel us in straight away. Don't wait. Yes, the kind and genre of story you are telling will determine the tone and manner in which you do this. But you still need to do it. The more multi-stranded your story, and the larger the cast of characters, the harder this will be. But FIVE DAYS is an excellent example where a TV serial opening very quietly but surely and deliberately draws you in through seemingly episodic but precisely chosen moments.

Hit the ground running. This doesn't mean start with an action sequence. It means, start your story on page one. It's often very useful and effective to cut straight into the action, to open in the middle of an event, conflict or moment.

And the best way to do this is to **show characters in action**. Again, not an action sequence. But actively being themselves, making decisions, being active - doing things. And doing small things is 'action' so long as they are significant things that express the character and feed into the story that follows.

Try not to consciously **preface**, **set up** or **introduce** the characters and world. If you are showing your characters in engaging action - whether it's a sitcom, feature film or radio drama - then we are getting to know your characters and world in the best way possible. But if you are easing us into the characters and world before or outside the action of the main story, then they just won't hook the attention so well.

Beware obvious exposition and backstory. Audiences are much more capable of piecing together information. If it's important in the

story, then it should come out in the story. Don't shoe-horn information in - find an action, conflict or incident that shows it.

3. COHERENCE:

A major problem with a great many scripts is that the piece as a whole simply **doesn't hang together**. There might be brilliant characters, dialogue, scenes, ideas ad infinitum, but if they don't cohere into a whole, then your script won't hit the mark. The key to this is to **know your world and story**. (Preferably before you start turning an idea into script form.) This clarity needs to come early on. So make it clear what your world is, and what is the story you are telling. There's an adage (perhaps more myth than truth) that when the writers of *Twins* sat down each day to write, they would turn to one another and say: "What are we writing?" The answer was: "It's about twins who look nothing like each other!" With that always in mind, they were able to stay focused.

The other thing you need to know is your **genre and tone**. New writers frequently collide various genres and tones. Sometime they claim to be reinventing genre - or are refusing to be limited by it. But you need to be able to master a form to do this - and often it's more likely because they're not sure or clear. Genre isn't a bad thing. Genre is how we decide as an audience whether it's the kind of thing we thing we'd like to see. So use genre. Be clear about what your 'show' is. Then you can challenge, play, subvert it.

Give us a focused way in. A big problem can be the desire to give the audience a snapshot of all aspects of the world at the start. But remember *Shameless* - a 'gang show' about a wild family squashed into a very small house. Episode one starts away from the place in which it will be set for the rest of series. Writers often **try to do too much** in their opening ten pages. But you don't need to set up every storyline, every strand and every character straight away. Again, find a focused way in so that you can then open back out again.

Beware beguiling distractions. It's easy to write characters, dialogue, scenes that you love. But do they need to be there and do they help cohere the opening of your script? What you leave out is as important as what you put in. And it's very hard to un-write or cut things that you

like. So try to have a clear sense of what needs to be there before you start writing.

4. CHARACTER IS EVERYTHING

I could have started with this. It's the beginning, middle and end of what makes or breaks a great script - and a great writer. You can have everything else, but if you don't create **strong, vivid, compelling characters** then you ultimately have very little.

We need to **engage with your characters on an emotional level**. We don't need to like them. We can even despise them. But they must have a human, emotional life. Even if they are a robot - there's humanity in Arnie's Terminator and Wall-E. Frank Gallagher is a disaster of a father who does terrible things for terrible reasons, but there are enough human shaped chinks in his armour to make us engage with him - for example, when Debbie is being pressurised into losing her virginity, he melts, realising she is still his little girl.

We have to **want to spend time with your characters**. We need to understand their desires, soak up their energy, feel their pain, fear for them. The vicarious thrill in wondering what Frank Gallagher or Richard III will do next is just as important as wondering whether two romantic leads will in fact get together at the end, or whether Tom Hanks will get Private Ryan home, or whether David Brent will ever realise just how embarassingly bad a boss he really is.

To be hooked by your characters, we need to feel compelled to **go on their journey with them**. It sounds neat and tidy, but if we don't know what they want, then we won't care about what they have to do to get it, and enjoy the ups and downs of them doing so. Give them a journey to go on - whether that's Basil Fawlty fending off the hotel inspector or Sam trying to get back to 2007 in **Life on Mars**.

The crucial thing, therefore, is to **make them active**. Passive, reactive characters just don't hook us. The problem with many scripts we receive is that the central character doesn't drive the story forward. If we know what they want, and see them having to make decisions and take action

to get it, then you set up a dynamic and momentum with your character and their story.

If you're ever stuck with your character in a scene, sequence or plot point, then try asking these questions of them: What do they want by the end of this scene? What do they want when they wake up the next morning? What do they want in a years time? And what do they want by the end of their life? They might not know or fully realise all the answers, but it will give you a way into your character, and help give them a life that is perhaps outside the action of your story, but crucial to who they are in any given moment.

And of course, they need to be **individuals rather than cliches and stereotypes**. So invest time in working out - and then showing - what it is that makes them truly distinct and unlike any other character we've ever met. They may have an archetypal quality to them - but what else do they bring to the archetype?

A useful way to clarify what makes them an individual, is to try to **look at the world they are in from their point of view** - and therefore allow the audience to do the same. Show us their window on the world. Allow us to see their desires, insights, feelings, opinions, prejudices, fears and misunderstandings from their own point of view. If you can do that, then the character and the world they inhabit will be much richer.

5. EMOTION

The strength of your characters, and our emotional engagement with them, will make an idea stand or fall. Without this glue of empathy between character and audience, you ultimately have very little. You might have form and content, but you won't have something meaningful. And this is still true for the craziest of comedies as it is for the deepest of tragedies - **if we don't feel emotion, then we don't feel anything**.

A mistake often made is that writers have a big idea, a concept, a conceit, a world/universe they want to explore. They then set about creating suitable characters through which they can do this. But given the power of genre and archetypes in storytelling, it's very very rare that a writer will come up with a wholly original concept or conceit that has in no way been shown or explored before. And unfortunately, it's very very common for writers to come up with stereotypical, two-dimensional characters that fill out an idea. If you want to explore a concept, you need to do it through the strength of your characters and our emotional connection with them, otherwise what you will have is a cold, cerebral, intellectual conceit that has no emotional impact, and therefore no real impact at all. *Memento* is a complex and sophisticated essay on memory, time, and the meaning of action within a temporal vacuum. But really, it is the tale of one man trying to work out how to live his life day to day, moment to moment, with a unique condition that appears to take him further and further away from what he has lost in his life, while never allowing him to forget the pain of it. The first is a concept. The second is a story with emotional impact.

Great stories, and great scripts, should always aspire to **have a real, physical, emotional effect** on an audience. It's what I've seen/heard referred to as the 'squelch principle'. Put another way, and depending on what kind of story you are telling, it should be so poignant it makes us cry real tears, so funny it makes us laugh so hard we develop a painful

stitch, so scary it makes us nearly wet ourselves, so excruciating it makes us sweat, so embarrassing it makes us want to shrivel up, so thrilling it makes our heart beat at twice it's usual speed. It should be so effective that it makes us feel real, powerful emotions - so good it makes us 'squelch'.

And why is all of this true? Because **great stories, whatever the genre and tone, matter on a human level**. Stories are about people; people need stories. Humanity developed the storytelling gene so that it could laugh, cry, love, fear, hate and hope for characters, and, by extension, humanity itself. Your script needs to make us laugh, cry, love, fear, hate and hope.

6. SURPRISE

cliche and predictability kills story. That doesn't mean to say that you shouldn't be seeding anticipation and expectation of what might happen - and for them to make coherent sense. But if what happens feels consistently and thoroughly obvious, expected and anticipated, then there's little to keep the audience hooked.

What do I mean by surprise? Well, I don't really mean axe-wielding maniacs jumping out from the shadows -What I do mean is for you the writer to do something surprising with your idea, story, characters, scenes - and for your characters to surprise the audience, and to surprise themselves.

There's probably **a finite number of story archetypes** , although opinion will differ about exactly how many and what we might call them. Things like tragedy, comedy, history, love story, rite-of-passage, epic/journey, which form the fundament of what stories tend to ultimately, essentially be. From there, the big question is - what do you do with an archetype? What is your particular setting/context? What is your fresh take on it? What is your unique perspective? What is your original touch that will set this apart, even though the archetype stills sits at the heart of it?

A favourite example of mine is ***O Brother Where Art Thou?*** by the Coen brothers. On one level, it is a relatively straight forward version of Homer's Odyssey, which is itself an archetypal epic journey - it has an Odysseus figure, it has Penelope and her suitor, it has the physical journey, the sirens, the cyclops and so on. On another level, it places them within the specific context of the American deep south in the early 20th century, with Blue Grass music and an expanse of land to traverse rather than an ocean of sea (though there is a deluge of water at the end). On another, crazier level, it turns Odysseus into the Three Stooges, and makes them comic prison escapees rather than victorious

warrior heroes. And all because the Coen brothers thought the story was "funny". No-one but them could possibly have read, understood and re-imagined the archetype in this way. It drips with their idiosyncrasies and unique take on the world.

Have you seen your basic idea before? What's different and surprising about your version? What will you do to make the archetype your own? Surprising an audience (and reader) is crucial at this level.

Your characters must surprise the audience. By this, I don't mean suddenly change (do something wholly out of character), or throw in something crucial about themselves that we didn't know (reveal a big secret half way through), or have something crucial thrown at them from nowhere (aliens suddenly kidnap them half way through what has previously been a naturalistic rite-of passage tale). These kinds of things are when the story fails - when you are coming up with a shock for the sake of it, rather than generating a surprise out of the richness of the world and conflicts you have created. Some of the best surprises are when the character surprises themselves - by facing a demon or achieving a goal or resisting a temptation or sticking to their guns when they never really truly believed they could do so. Surprise should make sense in your story - not work against it.

Surprise is also about **staying ahead of the audience**. Audiences are very sophisticated in their understanding of genre, formats and structure. So there's an art to staying ahead of the game. At the heart of this is anticipating what they might expect, and rather than turning that entirely on its head, to tweak it so that perhaps just one element or detail is unexpected. All the better if that detail is something connected to or driven by the character, that develops our relationship with the character, rather than just a play on the plot/structure.

To take a very famous scene towards the end of **Chinatown**, where Evelyn's deep dark secret is revealed: But when the truth comes it is a shock to him. The surprise in this scene isn't just the 'reveal', but it is Jake's reaction - to instantly, instinctively help Evelyn and her daughter escape, even though it can hardly do him any good (and, tragically, it doesn't). He does it simply because it is the right thing to do. For a man who has preferred to take the easy route - to do simple PI jobs rather

than police Chinatown, this impulse is a huge step forward and a true, character revealing surprise. For Jake in the scene, this is a moment where he truly surprises himself. For us watching, it is not what we expected going into the scene. That's why it's a great surprise, in a great story.

7. STRUCTURE

Whole books have been written about this, so it feels foolhardy to try to tackle it in one blog. But I'm going to keep it focused and simple. In other words: **story *is* structure**. They are inextricably linked. A great story cannot be separated out from the manner in which it is told, structured, shaped - *constructed*. Every choice you make about where a scene goes, what goes before it, what follows it, why it's important for your characters, is structure.

For your script to hit the mark straight away, you need to **begin the story in the right place**. This is much easier said than done. Because in order to begin in the right place, you need to be clear and sure about what your story is, who is driving it forward, where it is going, and what tone you intend to set from the off. Far too many scripts waste precious time setting up the story and world, glimpsing characters, waiting for the story to start, and this poor structuring is normally a signal that the writer hasn't confidently decided what they are doing and where they are going. It's ok to be undecided in your first, exploratory draft - but not in the one you send out for consideration.

Beginning in the right place is about **knowing where you are going**. And your story must be going somewhere. There must be an imperative to keep reading, to keep watching/listening. There should be an end point. Many aspiring writers feel hemmed in by this - but many successful writers will often know their ending and know what they are working towards. It's this ultimate direction that can give you the momentum to get there.

How you get there will determine how effective and original your story is. The key thing, however you choose to get from A to Z, is that there is a **dynamic, significant, dramatic purpose** for each act, sequence, story beat, scene and moment along the way. If it isn't there for a

compelling reason, then it doesn't need to be there - and will only hold the story back if you don't cut it. You need to be focused, precise and meaningful in how you select which elements will tell your story. This is the essence of successful structuring. Whether it's a guns blazing action movie or a quiet, subtly drawn character drama, each scene must be there for the right reason for your story.

And again, understanding what the right reason is, comes back down to **knowing your story**, knowing what it is and what effect you want it to have. **Memento** is the story of a man who can't form new memories and appears to be chasing an elusive past that haunts him; the complex interplay between linear and non-linear narrative strands which at a crucial point meet is the perfect structure to contain, effect and express this story. **Billy Elliott** is the story of a boy who dares to be who he desperately wants to be in the face of opposition from his family, his background/class, the world around him, and himself; a straightforward, linear, classic hero's journey narrative is exactly the best way to bring that story to life.

The better you understand and the clearer you are about the tone, the genre and the kind of story you are telling, the more naturally will the structure present itself. Because story **is** structure.

8. EXPOSITION AND EXPRESSION

Or in other words: **dialogue**. In truth, i think it's almost impossible to teach or learn how to have an ear for characters and their voices. It's perfectly possible to learn how to edit it, improve it, polish it up and make it leap off the page - but only if you have that instinct to hear it and voice it in the first place.

I've read a lot of scripts where the structure is tight, the story is right, the genre and tone spot on etc - BUT where the dialogue is wooden and without life and personality. And I've read scripts where the structure is loose, the story quite confused and all sorts of things are wrong with it - but where the characters step off the page immediately because the writer has really caught their voice. In truth, i think i'd generally rather have the latter kind of script. Because it really takes a true writer to do the latter.

Strong dialogue expresses character. It isn't just words - it breathes life into character. It gives them lines, sayings and sentiments that we remember for life and want to say back to people in order to impress them at parties, in the playground, in the office. (Around BBC Television Centre and Broadcasting House there are numerous walls and screens with great quotes from great characters - because the currency of that great dialogue is so strong.)

The converse of this, therefore, is that **poor dialogue is there purely and simply to relate and explain information** for the purpose of plot and story exposition. If this is the sole purpose of your dialogue, then you need to do something else with it - or something else with the scene. Often, expository dialogue tends to mask the fact that there is no real drama in a scene - so if you can find a push and pull, a conflict, a beat of story for your scene, then there will be a better dramatic reason

for the dialogue to be there. Even better, the more ways you can find to put information across through action and story, the more your dialogue will be the sole domain and medium of your characters expressing themselves.

It sounds obvious - but **real people don't tell each other things they already know in obvious ways**, and neither should your characters. Real people also don't always say what they mean, don't always mean what they say, and don't always know what they mean and what they mean to say when they open their mouths to speak. Ordinary conversation isn't dramatic dialogue - but good dialogue should at least be able to take on board the idiosyncrasies and complexities of real, ordinary people when they try to (or try not to) express themselves. Real people say the best lines that most writers could never conjure up, which is why many writers happily steal from real people.

Subtext is just about the hardest thing you as a writer will need to master. Because subtext is what is being said and expressed beyond, behind, below and in spite of the words actually spoken. Subtext is the silent language that people use when words either don't say enough or say too much. Subtext is story and character that can't simply be vocalised. If you can work meaningful subtext into a scene, then you are doing something really quite special.

9. PASSION

It's not an easy thing to explain, but one of the most important things we are looking for is that true, **unquenchable desire in the writer to tell their story**. You can tell very quickly when the writer really means it - and you can tell just as easily when they are just going through the motions. If you don't truly care about the story you are telling, then why should we? Of course, passionately believing in your story is unfortunately not going to make the script work all by itself - but I think it's an indispensable part of why we get excited about any given writer.

But what do I mean by '**passion**'? Well, I mean: does your idea and story keep you up at night? Have the characters and their stories really got under your skin? And have you got under theirs? Do you feel compelled to write? Does it feel like your story is already writing itself in your head without you putting pen to paper or finger to keyboard? Do you believe your take on an idea has never quite been seen before and needs to be seen by an audience? If you don't feel any of these things, then you need to ask yourself whether it's worth persisting with an idea.

What I also mean is: **don't try to be expedient**. An extremely common question we hear is: what do you want, what are you looking for? What we're looking for is a great writer who does the kinds of things that I've been exploring in these blog posts. What we're looking for is something we've never seen before. You can waste a lot of time and energy trying to write the kind of script that you think you ought to write because you believe/hope/assume it will get you to whatever next stage you want to be at. But you can't be this calculating. If a script is simply there to be expedient, then it's likely it will never really, truly impress anybody.

What I also mean is: **don't try to second guess what people want**. Because you will almost certainly get it wrong. If people in the industry

were crystal clear about they want, then life would be so much easier - but it would also so much less interesting. The truth is, we are waiting to be hit between the eyes and in the solar plexus with something that genuinely surprises us. Because if it can surprise someone who is being constantly bombarded with ideas and scripts, then there's a decent chance it will surprise an audience. And that is what we really, truly want

10. BE YOURSELF

People have commented on the **passion** instalment how they were pleased to see it there as it's the kind of thing you don't usually get in script writing books etc. I think being yourself is just as important. Writersroom is primarily in the market for finding people to develop. If we find a great script that goes on to be made, then that's brilliant. And it can happen. But the most important thing is to find original voices and writers we believe can go on to great things. And the only way to do this is for you the writer to **be yourself**.

We want an **individual voice**. A distinct voice. A writer with something to say and an original, surprising, unique way of saying it. By this, I don't mean wacky and unconventional for the sake of it; I mean a writer whose passion for an idea, for characters, for a subject, for the need to write, whose understanding of the important of stories and storytelling, literally drips off the page.

It's hard to express and define precisely what this 'thing' actually is, but one way of describing it is **a writer who has written a script that no other writer you know would have written the same way** - has tackled an idea, imagined a world, voiced a character, engaged my attention in ways that no-one else would.

Crucial in this is to **make sure you are not 'sub'-anybody**. Of course, you will have writing heroes and heroines, people whose style you love, whose very individuality you wish to emulate in your way. But it's unfortunately far too frequent that I find myself reading a stage play that is sub-Beckett/Pinter/Kane, or a film that is sub-Charlie Kaufman, or a TV script that is sub-Paul Abbott etc etc etc. It can take a while and will certainly take a lot of hard work, but you need to learn how to **follow your own instincts and forge your own path**.

There are a great many writers out there. Some have more and less experience, and most are trying to break through. The last thing anyone in the industry wants is an automaton that simply churns out scripts. It may be that for a variety of reasons and circumstances, a finished production/episode can seem like it's emanated from the metallic hand of a robot. But it's almost certainly the case that at an early stage in the process a writer has been commissioned because someone somewhere is genuinely excited about them and believes they will deliver something special. At worst, they will commission someone they know can deliver on the evidence of their success in the past. At every stage, you commission **an individual rather than a machine**.

So, you need to invest time, energy, thought and work in what it is that's unique about you and what you have to offer. And then you need to make your scripts somehow express that you-ness. Because when all's said and done, when I've run through all the things - idea, world, characters, coherence, structure, dialogue, surprise etc etc etc - that figure in my thinking, I'm usually left with a gut instinct about whether any given writer simply makes me want to send that email or make that call and say: **when can you come in for a chat?**