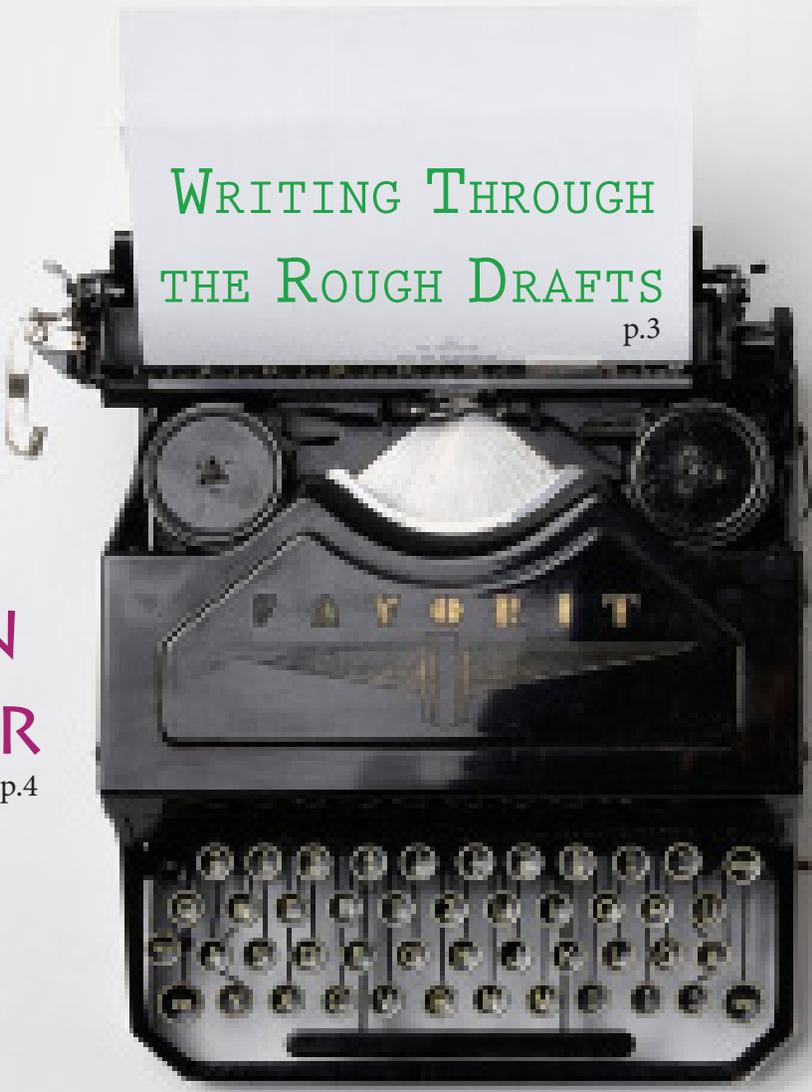


THE BLACK LIST

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WRITING THROUGH THE ROUGH DRAFTS

Whether you're writing prose or a screenplay, generally the beginning is easy. An idea gets you excited to start and pushes you through the first section, but it always seems to lose steam along the way. It seems that all writers will eventually face that inevitable moment when the idea is no longer as exciting, writing seems more like work than play, and we may even wonder why we ever started. We have a name for this: writer's block.

Writer's block can be debilitating, but there's something important to remember—the only goal for your first draft is to *get it done*. Seriously, that's all that matters for this first write-through of your idea. There's a reason we call these *rough* drafts. So with that in mind, here are some ideas to help you conquer writer's block and get that first draft written.

THE MUSCLE APPROACH

The first idea we would suggest is to force your way through the block like the Hulk taking down a building wall. Writer's block is often the manifestation of your brain throwing a tantrum, saying things like "I don't want to do this anymore," "It isn't fun like it was at first," "I'm tired of writing," etc. In that case, face your mind down the same way you would a toddler; make it a battle of your willpower versus poutiness and just write. Write even if you're not excited. Write even if it's bad. Just write. If you start to feel down, remind yourself that you're just getting the words down for now and you can fix them later. But you can't fix a blank page—so just keep writing.

THE BRIBERY APPROACH

If muscling your way through doesn't work or isn't your style, we suggest bribery. Recognize the complaints your mind is sending you as valid and make a deal with your inner creative force. Promise yourself you'll keep writing after a short break. Then step away from the computer or notebook. Get some ice cream, make some brownies, or watch a favorite show. Walk your dog, spend an hour at the gym, or do the dishes. Whatever works to distract your mind and rejuvenate your creativity is a worthwhile bribe. This approach can be very helpful, but it has its dangers—make sure you keep your promise and come back to writing. Don't just use the break as an excuse to get out of work.

THE CHANGE-OF-PACE APPROACH

The third idea we'll suggest is stepping away from your project temporarily and working on something else. This approach usually works best if the writer's block comes from a plot or character problem you don't know how to fix. (How can my character tackle this problem? How do I get the story to the next step? etc.) Let the questions simmer in the back of your mind. Your conscious mind is worn out from attacking the problem, so let your subconscious find a solution. Meanwhile, devote your creative efforts to a different screenplay or story. If the project you've been working on is no longer exciting to you or has worn you out, it can help to return to a previous idea and give it some love. Come back to your initial project after a day or two and see if the block is easier to solve. Sometimes all it takes is a change of pace to get you re-excited about your story.

These are only a few possible approaches out of hundreds, but maybe they'll spark an idea for something that is uniquely you and appropriate to your writing style. No matter what method you use to work through writer's block, the important thing is to never give up on a first draft just because it is difficult. Remember that the important thing is just to finish and write through that rough draft! ■



A STUDY IN CHARACTER



Every story belongs to someone. Things don't just happen; they happen *to* people, and they are caused *by* people. The more invested we are in a character, the more we enjoy their story. So as a writer, creating memorable characters is an essential step in the writing process. But “memorable” doesn't just mean they dress like a unicorn—it doesn't mean they're so outlandish they're unforgettable. It means they're realistic and we as an audience can connect with them.

That's a daunting task, to make a character who seems like a real person. Real people are flawed, contradictory, and complex. Sometimes the people in our lives can feel impossible to understand. Or sometimes they can seem so normal we wonder how we could model a character after them and have that character be memorable. If the process feels overwhelming, we have something to help you start. We've considered some of our favorite characters and made a list of ten traits that we think made them so *real*. After reading, you can evaluate your own characters; if they're lacking some of these traits, examine what you can add to make them stronger

GOALS

Everyone has something they want. If I think of the people in my life, my mom recently lost her job, so she wants to find one that will allow her enough money to take care of herself and her aging mother. She and my grandma both have healthcare concerns, so she also needs either enough money to pay for health insurance or a job that provides it. My dad is a wandering vagabond with a gambling addiction; he can never keep a car, home, or job for long. What he's looking for is his saving break. My best friend desperately wants to have a boyfriend. *Everyone* has something that they want, and in writing, this is the basis of story: we have *someone* who wants *something* and they take certain steps to achieve it. That's all a story is. So when you're creating realistic characters, the first thing you need to consider is what does your character want most? What is their goal in life? After you know their goal, figure out how far they are willing to go to achieve it. What methods are they willing to stoop to? The stronger the desire is, the more your character will be willing to sacrifice and move from their comfort zone to get it, and the better your story will be.

PASSION

Said Joss Whedon, “Passion. It lies in all of us . . . and though unwanted, unbidden, it will stir, open its jaws, and howl. . . . Passion rules us all. And we obey. What other choice do we have? Passion is

the source of our finest moments. The joy of love, the clarity of hatred, the ecstasy of grief. It hurts sometimes more than we can bear. If we could live without passion, maybe we'd know some kind of peace. But we would be hollow. Empty rooms, shuttered and dank.” We all have passions that drive us. Generally, they are where our goals derive from and what drives us to achieve them. An apathetic character will never sway an audience, and they can never carry a story. So figure out what your character is passionate about.

STRENGTH

Everyone has something they're good at. It could be a physical skill like playing sports or carving figurines, or it could be an emotional skill like strong leadership or connecting with children. After you know what your character is passionate about, figure out what they're skilled at. Your character's talents will probably tie directly into how they go about achieving their goal.

CONTRADICTION

People are complex, and part of that complexity comes from contradictions. No one is straightforward and easy to read. People who are very organized and clean in their office space could have an inability to organize their time. A student with terrible grades could be a very sharp critical thinker. A businessman who doesn't care about money could nevertheless be very caught up in his job. Contradictions are what bring people to life and make them interesting. They can also keep your characters from becoming boring.

TRAUMA

This may be an uncomfortable idea, but trauma is a big part of what shapes our identities. Trauma (whether small or serious) can influence how we deal with people, how we plan our lives, or how we react to situations. I have a friend who was insulted once by a substitute teacher. Even though it was a one-time event and she'd had plenty of



other good teachers, it made her more hesitant to be the first person to voice an opinion. My grandma had to raise her first child when she was still a teenager and her husband was in the army; it made her incredibly strict with her oldest son, who in turn was too lax with his own children. One of my coworkers had to drive his pregnant mom to the hospital as a teenager because his dad was away for work. It was scary enough for him that he decided he would never have kids (which he changed his mind about after he got married years later). What traumatic experiences have affected your character in the past? How do those experiences influence the way they act now?

WEAKNESS

Just like everyone has something they're good at, everyone also has something they're *bad* at. Maybe they joke too much and can't take things seriously when they should. Maybe they can't communicate well with others. Maybe they're afraid of humiliation or responsibility. Maybe they cling too much to the people they love. The possibilities are endless, but just as a character's strength will help a character achieve their goal, their weakness should be an obstacle to it.

ENVIRONMENT

There's a common saying that we're all products of our environments. I won't say it isn't true; our environments definitely shape us. A person's "environment" consists of many things. To consider a few:

How they were raised: The environment someone was raised in could include if they had both parents or not. If they had both parents, were they raised by a parent or did both parents work? Were there influential grandparents or relatives in the picture? Did they have siblings? Did they get along with their siblings? Did they go to school early? Did they have good friends? Did they get bullied?

Where they live: Are they a "city girl" or a "country girl" or some neutral middle ground? Have they always lived in this country? Do they have neighbors close by and is the community close knit? Do they live in a location that attracts tourists? Do they have any exposure to the outside world or is this place all they've known in life? Do they live in a safe neighborhood or a dangerous one? Does their community have an attitude of tolerance or is there racial or religious prejudice?

Economic status: This goes beyond if your character is rich or poor. If they're rich, are they rich in the style where they have tons of material possessions or in a style where they travel a lot and get to live the experiences they want? Are they one among many in a rich neighborhood or the rich outlier in a normal neighborhood? Are they only

rich in comparison to their surroundings? (For instance, I grew up in a home with a single mother who worked at Walmart, so I thought my neighbor on the hill was really rich because his house had three floors and mine only had one.) If they're poor, are they poor enough they live in fear of bills and where their next meal will come from? Are they poor in a way where they have what they need but not many extras they want? Are they only poor compared to the rest of their family or neighborhood? If they're a middle class, is that only by comparison to their surroundings? There can also be a disconnect between what a character's true (or societal) economic status is and what they feel it

is (someone who feels rich because they've improved their circumstances or someone who feels poor because they can't have everything they want).

VOICE

When you imagine your close friends and family members speaking in your mind, they'll all sound a bit different even if they come from the same area and have the same accent. A person's unique voice is not just formed from a special accent or dialect (although that can be a big part of it). Our voice is influenced by our education level—a janitor without a high school education will sound different from a Ph.D. scientist. (That being said, a Ph.D. janitor will also sound different from a janitor without a high school education.) Our voice is influenced by the social circles we try to fit in with. It's influenced by the impression we try to give (if we care what people



think or want to drive people away). Our voice is also influenced by favorite things to say. I have a friend whose favorite word is “glorious.” If there’s any way he can use “glorious” in a sentence, he will: It’s not just good weather or a special event, it’s “a glorious day.” I have another friend who learned Japanese in college and loves to pepper her speech with short Japanese phrases. Your characters will have a voice unique to them, and they should be distinguishable from other people in your story.

As a note for this one: Crafting a unique voice can be very hard before a story is written. Try to form an idea of what this character might sound like and what might make them unique, but also write out the conversations they’re part of and pay attention to what works and what doesn’t as you write. Voices tend to emerge the more time we spend writing about a single character, so don’t stress if it isn’t easy to distinguish right away. Just keep this idea in your mind.

APPEARANCE

This tends to come first on lists of how to create characters, and I hate that because I believe it encourages writers to focus on the superficial instead of creating characters that are realistic and be-

lievable. But that’s my process and opinion; I believe a character’s appearance is easy for me to determine after I know their personality. If that doesn’t work for you, that’s okay too. Maybe you need to figure out what they look like, and then you’ll begin to understand who they are, what they want, and what their personality is like. Either way, at some point in the process, you do need to determine what your character looks like. Are they tall? Small for their age, maybe? Do they have long hair they like to keep styled or is it short? Are they part of a majority ethnicity or a minority? There are many things to consider in appearance.

NAME

I saved this for last because a name is almost a cherry on top for character creation. Some people like to choose character names that have special meanings or backgrounds and others just choose names they like. Whichever method you prefer, just choose a good name that suits your character, genre, and setting.

We hope these ten attributes for realistic character have helped you bring your own characters to life! The next time you watch a favorite movie, see if the characters have any other attributes you love. ■



AND ACTION: The Transformation of Screenplay to Film



Seeing the big screen alight with color and motion makes for a thrilling moment—even more thrilling if you can claim the story on screen as your own invention. It’s every screenwriter’s dream. But how does the filmmaking process actually work? If your place has always been behind the laptop dealing in black and white words, you might know little about how a movie is made, so if you’re curious, here’s the process in a nutshell:

Concept and Proposal

The first step in the making of a film is to get an idea. That sounds familiar, doesn’t it? A director or producer may have a story idea that they write into a screenplay themselves, or they may hire a screenwriter (possibly a team) to write the idea for them. If they don’t have a project lined up, they’ll buy a promising script from a screenwriter (yay, us!). They propose the idea and a production plan for the upcoming film to producers—the people who agree to give them the money to make it. Once the proposal gets accepted, the film moves forward into pre-production.

Pre-production

In pre-production, the director will assemble his team of creative minds: a director of photography, a lighting and sound crew, a first director, etc. By reading through the script, they’ll decide how many locations they need and whether to pay people to film in certain locations or to build their own sets. They’ll decide what tone different scenes should have and how to manipulate the lighting to achieve that tone. They’ll decide on color palettes, choosing colors for each character that convey that character’s personality. Actors are hired, costumes are made, and a filming schedule is finalized—it’s a very busy time in which every part of the film has to be prepared and

accounted for. Then they move on to the part of filmmaking we’re most familiar with—production.

Production

This is the meat of the movie. This is when the director and cameramen and actors and production crew head out to location and begin shooting. Depending on the length and complexity of the film, production can last anywhere from a few days (for independent films) to several months (for James Cameron). Rather than shooting scenes chronologically, filming is usually done based on locations. The crew will film every scene that takes place in one location before moving on to the next, even if that means shooting the end of the film before the beginning. After they have all the footage completed, the team moves on to post-production.

Post-production

We generally think of production as the making of a movie, but it’s actually in post-production that the story comes together. In post, editors will cut the scenes into their chronological order, choose the best takes, and ensure seamless transitions between scenes. The audio team will make sure the audio for the movie matches the action and that it’s clear of unwanted background noise. The music director will add background music. A marketing team will make an advertising plan that includes trailers, payment to theaters, promotional posters, etc. Post can be a scary time because bad editing or bad marketing can ruin even the best of movies.

We hope you’ve enjoyed this little peek into the world of filmmaking. The process is very complex, and we encourage you to keep learning about it as much as you can. ■

THE NEXT STEP:

2017 Screenwriting Competitions

Once you have a completed screenplay, you want it to go somewhere. You write screenplays to make movies! So if you're looking for a place where agents and producers can read your scripts (whether feature-length, short, or TV), here's a list of screenplay competitions, entry fees, and deadlines for 2017.

Slamdance Screenplay Competition

Early Entry: Late February – Mid April
Regular Entry: Mid April – Mid June
Late Entry: Mid June – Late July
Withoutabox Extended Deadline: Late July
Fees range \$25 – \$90 and vary according to genre and entry date.

BlueCat Screenplay Competition

Call For Entries: Mid June (\$55)
Early Entry: Early September (\$60)
Regular Entry: Mid October (\$60)
Final Deadline: Mid November (\$70)

Finish Line Script Competition

Early: February 17th (\$40)
Regular: April 28 (\$45)
Late: June 13th (\$45)
Final Re-submissions: June 30
Quarter-Finalists Drafts Due: July 28

Script Pipeline Screenwriting Contest

SCREENWRITING CONTEST
Early: March 1 (\$50)
Regular: May 1 (\$55)
TV WRITING CONTEST
Early: March 1 (\$50)
Regular: May 1 (\$55)

Austin Screenwriting Competition

FEATURE SCREENPLAY
Early: March 31 (\$45)
Regular: April 20 (\$55)
Late: May 15 (\$70)
SHORT SCREENPLAY
Early: March 31 (\$35)
Regular: April 20 (\$45)
Late: May 16 (\$60)

TrackingB Feature and TV Script Contest

FEATURE CONTEST
Early Entry: July 30 (\$95)
Late Entry: September 4 (\$110)
Really Late Entry: October 9 (\$125)
TV SCRIPT CONTEST
Early Entry: January 22 (\$89)
Late Entry: February 26 (\$99)
Really Late Entry: April 11 (\$109)

Scriptapalooza

Early Entry: January 6 (\$45)
First Entry: February 1 (\$50)
Regular Entry: March 10 (\$55)
Late Entry: April 17 (\$60)
Final Entry: May 1 (\$65)

Academy Nicholl Fellowship

Early Entry: March 7 (\$45)
Regular Entry: April 10 (\$60)
Late Entry: May 1 (\$85)

PAGE International Screenwriting Awards

Early Entry: January 17 (\$39)
Regular Entry: February 17 (\$49)
Late Entry: March 17 (\$59)
Last Minute: April 17 (\$69)

