

HOW TO GRAB YOUR AUDIENCE

Understanding the psychology of your audience

From Chapter 2 in Make Money Screenwriting by Julian Friedmann

Great writing is about the manipulation of the audience. You need to know exactly what you want them to feel as well as think at every moment. The greater control you have over the audience, the more effective your writing will be.

You won't get it right all the time because the individual members of your audience bring their own emotional baggage to reading or watching a production of what you have written. And that is fine. But it doesn't mean you don't need to have the intention of making them feel and think whatever it is you have decided they should.

And if you ask me what is most lacking in scripts I read, it is making the audience feel, have feelings, whether fear, amusement, passion, excitement, rage, irritation or many others.

Emotional responses to given situations are fairly universal. It used to be thought that they are hardwired into human beings, so the cultural and educational background of the audience is not that important when it comes to emotions. The majority of us are all much the same underneath (except for people called psychopaths). They are not hardwired, but as a generalisation for writers I think it is of use. Chapter 3 does into more detail.

On a global streaming platform, the intellectual and cultural background of your audience is likely to be more varied, more difficult for you to target so, again, as a generalisation emotion is therefore a more effective way of connecting to a wider audience than through the intellect.

Given that writing is usually a solitary process - a writer thinks... types it out, reads it, and moves on the next section of their script or novel - I want to suggest that in addition to being more aware of the importance of grabbing your audience emotionally, you consider one easy way of increasing your chance of achieving that: write with another writer.

This may seem like an unusual solution, but have someone to question what you have written (and you what they write) and I can guarantee that there will almost certainly be an improvement in the writing.

It is often believed – perhaps more in the USA than in Europe – that more than one creative talent will result in a better or more successful film: they tend to use several writers, do many more rewrites, than we do in Europe.

Europe is still the domain of the ‘auteur’, especially the writer-director. As an agent I am always concerned when confronted especially by young writer-directors looking for representation. After all, if they commission themselves to write the script are they expecting to pay themselves? Are they expecting their agent to negotiate between their ego and alter-ego? Which ego pays the commission to the agent?

I usually say that if they believe they are any good as a director they should want to direct better scripts than they can write; and if they believe that they are actually a very good writer then they should want a better director to direct their scripts.

If the writer-director cannot see that the central character is unlikable, difficult to relate to, or difficult to become emotionally involved with, then as a director they are unlikely to point that out.

So as an initial remark on how to grab your audience, I would like to say that writers should always assume that they may be wrong, that a good co-writer, or a good script editor, a good director or even a good agent, might help improve the extent to which the work does grab the audience.

In a writing team each writer should be open to and expect criticism; each or all of the writers should be willing to change what they have written.

In my experience two writers working together usually produce better work than either working on their own. This is not a statistical analysis of a large sample, but it is my experience over many years and a number of writing teams, that writing with another writer will result in better writing.

What do I mean by that? Let me define my terms: if I say, of a glass of wine, that it is a good wine, I am saying something about myself, and perhaps also about the wine. I am saying “I like this wine, and I would like you to like it too.” The second half of that sentence is packed automatically into the first half.

But essentially I am saying something about my relationship to the wine. Similarly when I say a film is good, I am saying how I relate to it.

But, when I say that a film is successful, presumably I mean something else? In my case it is probably that I meant it worked as an investment, and made more money than it cost. Remember a film needs to make 4 to 5 times its actual budget to make any profit.

In both cases you could ask, what is likely to make the film successful and called a 'good' film? Are there objective - or even subjective - criteria we can use? I would like to argue that a film's success depends largely, not entirely, but largely on the extent to which it connects with a wide-enough audience on an emotional level.

I believe that it is the film's ability to make us emotionally engaged that will determine whether the film succeeds or fails.

So, what makes us emotionally engaged while watching a film or TV drama? To simplify it, here are five things that contribute: there are probably a number of other more subtle things, but these five (or at least several of these five) will cover the main bases:

1. believability,
2. accessible characters,
3. likeable characters (even if they are villains),
4. something at stake that we care about and finally
5. the triumph of an individual or group over what appeared to be insurmountable odds.

In literally dozens of books on the craft of screenwriting you will find permutations of these five attributes. One of my favourites is Michael's Hague's *WRITING SCREENPLAYS THAT SELL* because he focuses so clearly on this: "Enable a sympathetic character to overcome a series of increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve a compelling desire." He also is great on the importance of showing rather than telling.

So let's look in a little more detail at each of these criteria that make us emotionally engaged?

Believability: it is much more likely that a member of the audience will relate to or identify with or sympathise with a character they believe in. Generally this means they need to recognise aspects of that character either in themselves or in people they know. You are not likely to easily identify with a triffid, or a robot (unless as in *STAR WARS* the robot is depicted in an anthropomorphic way with very appealing human characteristics, for example C-3PO or R2-D2).

Accessible and likeable characters (even if they are villains or appealing droids): an easy way to help the audience engage is to show how a character relates to other people; and, if they

are caring and funny, we can't but help relate to and identify with them; if - as Aristotle put it - they suffer an undeserved misfortune - we also have little control over feeling a sense of indignation, injustice and empathy.

It is also a good trick to show them in a relationship, because we understand relationships and so can usually identify positively or negatively with a relationship portrayed on screen. We automatically sense how we would relate to the characters, or at least we put ourselves into the shoes of the character we identify with and consider how WE would relate to the other person.

If a woman is being abused by a man, we empathise with her and feel antagonistic towards him. If she is made to suffer even more, we feel terrible on her behalf; and when the abuse is removed - the man is arrested or she kills him - we feel better.

It obviously makes a huge difference if there is something at stake that we care about, which usually occurs because we invest our emotions into the characters and their predicament.

It helps if the structure of the narrative makes us pro-active participants of the film rather than passive spectators. If we see a scene in which two people we know nothing about are having a fight, how can we invest emotionally. We need to know something about them in order for the writer to manipulate our emotions. If we have been led to believe that a character we identify with will be defeated by a character we hate, then when our preferred character succeeds in overcoming the insurmountable odds, we feel great. The key is in how the film has made us feel.

The widows in the Steve McQueen movie remake of the TV series WIDOWS, are about to pull off a robbery. They are going to commit a crime. But the writers - Gillian Flynn, Steve McQueen and Lynda La Plante - make sure each woman is made appealing in some way, through suffering or loss not of their own making, so we root for them despite their criminality. We become involved in wanting them to succeed in pulling off a criminal robbery.

There are many schools of thought when it comes to the best way to write stories, whether for film or television or novels. But there are two dominant schools of thought when it comes to how scriptwriting should be taught, how writers should approach their task.

The dominant one – one which I do not really agree with – is structuralist: it is led ironically by Aristotle, because he can be interpreted to be saying that structure is the all-important model. He can also be interpreted in other ways. Other adherents of structural storytelling are Syd Field, Robert McKee and my friend Chris Vogler.

I don't believe that it is all black and white: certainly McKee and Vogler have sophisticated and subtle analyses of storytelling. But Lajos Egri – not nearly as well known – has a somewhat different approach: he and others believe that character comes out of plot, that structure is not as important as complex and psychologically “sound” characters.

But perhaps unlike the others Egri is more focused on the effect of the storytelling choices on the audience. He gives a wonderful example from Shakespeare where he says that if you took the indecisive character of Hamlet and the decisive character Romeo and swapped them, you would not have the two plays.

As soon as Romeo discovered his uncle was sleeping with his mother he would have killed him, and Hamlet would have delayed and delayed making a decision about Juliet and would still be wandering around the stage after we had all gone home.

So, in stories, what happens happens because of who the characters are. Plot comes out of character. And confront a likeable character with insurmountable odds, and you have a winning formula.

Everyone knows that Drama comes out of conflict; but it is necessary that the audience believes in the characters and the world of the story. Intellectually we know that the world of STAR WARS is not real; but we believe in it because we become emotionally engaged, we strongly desire some characters to overcome the odds and win. But we know it is not a true story despite the fact that we relate to its universal truths about human behaviour.

We can't help but care about Baby Yoda in THE MANDALORIAN, he is so cute. So we are hooked on his journey and the series was an instant hit, driving Disney+ into a serious position on the svod scale.

A dramatic adaptation of a true story – as a feature film or as a documentary – plays as much by the rules of fiction (or “drama” as Aristotle would say) as it does by the rules of documentaries. This is partly because of audience expectations. Yet creative minds will always break rules, so we have had a number of outstanding ‘documentaries’ that have actually been more like a fictional presentation of a true story, I am thinking of TOUCHING THE VOID and the French film ETRE et AVOIR.

Aristotle also said “A credible impossibility is to be preferred to an incredible possibility.” In other words believability trumps (factual) truth.

So what is the difference? I believe it is essentially about how we, the audience, perceive, the film. Do we watch it with the imagination and emotions, or with our analytical brain, and hopefully also with emotions.

Lew Hunter, a well-known American script guru, put it well: in life one thing happens after another; in drama one thing happens because of another. When adapting a story into a film, for example, from a simple idea or newspaper story, remember this.

It is the leap of faith that the imagination makes – with the creative right side of the brain, rather than the analytical understanding made by the left side of the brain, that perhaps distinguishes drama from documentary, since clearly both co-exist in both features and documentaries.

In other words, it is clear that while there are some differences in the way true stories are told, as compared to purely fictional ones, there is not that much significant difference. THE SIMILARITIES ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE DIFFERENCES. Good storytelling is good because it achieves certain effects on the audience, irrespective of the source material.

Once we accept that the relationship in our minds between fact and fiction is so subtle and so close, we can accept that it blurs the distinction between the two when it comes to storytelling – after all different members of the audience will place a different emphasis of different aspects of a film, and this is not something writers or directors have total control over.

Consider for a moment how pictures – still or moving – affect us. Let's take as a very basic example the prehistoric cave paintings in South West France, at Lescaux: no one knows exactly what was meant by the little symbolic figures of people holding spears confronting large animals like mammoth elephants.

But one can guess that the paintings, a kind of single-frame documentary, were actually an inspiration to the real hunters, before they went out into the forests and savannahs to risk their lives to kill large animals, an inspiration to imagine the fear that they would feel when faced with a dangerous animal.

Why would they do this? And what has it to do with writing for cinema or television?

I found this fascinating insight from Richard Walter, Chairman of the Scriptwriting Faculty at UCLA discussing Jacob Bronowski's famous analysis of early cave paintings in his 1973 TV series THE ASCENT OF MAN.

Bronowski suggested that these paintings were one of the ways the primitive hunters, by looking at pictures of threatening animals, were able to learn to cope with the fear that the animals caused the hunters in the real world.

Walter puts this into the context of cinema today:

In the caves' security the hunters could allow their emotions to simulate those experienced in the actual hunt, In complete safety they could wallow in fear. Later, in the hunt, recalling the cave experience they could successfully steel themselves against surrendering to their panic, which, thanks to the caves, was now familiar to them....A film is a life simulator enabling modern men and women to rehearse their emotions, to experience desperate, painful sensations in an environment of total safety. [2/1]

So by rehearsing the fear that they would feel when attacking a large and dangerous wild animal, that feeling of fear became more familiar to them, and thus they were able to control it better when it happened for real. In other words these cave paintings were the first 'cinemas', teaching us to cope with our deepest and least-controllable emotions.

And it did this by getting a picture to stimulate our imaginations so that we actually felt the fear, even though we were safe in the cave, or in the cinema.

Can you make your audience feel the fear, or feel aroused, or be made to laugh? In all those cases it is the emotions in the audience you are tapping into. And when you are creating a TV series bible, or a treatment for a movie, do not lose sight of the importance of making the reader of your document feel fear, or arousal or amusement.

It is not enough to do it in your scripts, you need to do it in your pitch. And if you are not consciously trying to do it, you probably won't succeed. Very experienced writers do seem to do it without thinking about it. But for most of the rest of us we need to be very deliberate: what do I need to do to bring tears to the eyes of the reader and the audience? Or to make them scared or apprehensive?

There are many techniques writers can use to engage the audience: one of the best is 'dramatic irony': you let the audience know that they know more than one of the characters. This immediately makes the audience begin to think pro-actively about what that character - who is in the dark about something - is going to experience or be denied? The audience immediately begins to relate to that character, empathise or identify with them. It never fails.

In an excellent book called *WRITING DRAMA* by a French writer Yves Lavandier, he defines dramatic irony as “the device of giving the spectator an item of information that at least one of the characters in the narrative is unaware of (at least consciously), thus placing the spectator a step ahead of at least one of the characters. It involves three stages: installation, exploitation and resolution.”

Lavandier quotes Hitchcock: “the spectator must find out the truth of a story before the hero”.

He also quotes Billy Wilder: “The spectator is smarter than the film’s hero because the film has let him into its secrets. He derives pleasure from this superiority. (...) But he is not as smart as the film maker who is always one step ahead, always with a surprise up his sleeve.”

I would agree with Wilder, except that it is the writer who should be the smartest and always one step ahead.

This brings me back to the two-writers are better than one suggestion: as a writer you need to know the end; you will know the beginning; when you make up the middle it is with the end in mind. You know how it ends. Your audience doesn't. And in my experience writers who know the end do not always make the process of getting to that end work as well as they can, precisely because in knowing the end they find it hard to imagine the route there as if they - or you the audience - do not know the end.

A second writer can come - *tabula rasa* - to read your outline or script and they can sharpen up the twists and surprises perhaps better than you, the original writer. The message here is if you are working on your own you need to learn to be ruthlessly objective and see the unfolding narrative as if for the very first time.

This is difficult. To finish on dramatic irony, perhaps one of the the best known examples is the suggestion by Hitchcock that if we see a bomb planted in a tent where Hitler is meeting his generals (but none of them know about it) then we can have a very long scene in which they discuss all sorts of things, and our senses and emotions will be on a knife-edge all the time.

Lavandier - whose book is available in French, English, Spanish and Italian, gives numerous examples: In *AMADEUS* we know Salieri is plotting against Mozart but Mozart does not know; in *TITANIC* we know the ocean liner is going to sink but the passengers and crew do not.

And TITANIC offers us another useful tip: the real emotional impact of the narrative was not the fact that the ship sank. The log-line (or one of them) for the film was “It is better to have loved and died than never to have loved at all”, and that was the reason teenage girls were the most avid buyers of tickets to see the film over and over again.

You might think that knowing exactly what happened, the film would not be as pleasurable. In fact some would argue that when it comes to emotional experiences, there is as great a pleasure to be gained by anticipating them, as by experiencing them again.

ANTICIPATION is another key element in engaging us emotionally. And the best source on anticipation is Lajos Egri. His first book - THE ART OF DRAMATIC WRITING - is subtitled “IT’S BASIS IN THE CREATIVE INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN MOTIVES”.

Think about how fundamental that it: writing has as its basis the creative interpretation of human motives. I think that is the best definition of creative writing I have ever seen.

But it is his second book - THE ART OF CREATIVE WRITING - that stands out for me as one of the the best books written on writing. Egri says:

“The first step is to make your reader or viewer identify your character as someone he knows. Step two - if the author can make the audience imagine that what is happening can happen to him, the situation will be permeated with aroused emotion and the viewer will experience a sensation so great that he will feel not as a spectator but as the participant of an exciting drama before him.”

This is the most essential aspect of getting the audience to be emotionally engaged. ARISTOTLE gave us a simple way of remembering it : the three words PITY, FEAR and CATHARSIS.

By PITY he meant getting that identification between audience and character (his example was making the character suffer an undeserved misfortune).

By FEAR he meant that the writer puts the character (with whom the audience now identifies) into greater jeopardy, which causes the audience to feel fear that they have no control over (which Egri describes as the audience becoming ‘a participant of the drama’), and finally...

By CARTHARSIS, Aristotle meant that great wave of feeling good which comes when the character you have identified with and suffered with, is relieved of their suffering and freed from the danger.

What Aristotle didn't know was that the feeling of catharsis resulted from the release of hormones and chemicals into the bloodstream over which we have no control: generally known as 'endorphins' they make us feel better. We also get them from eating chocolate and having sex!

There are many ways of getting to that moment of identification: undeserved misfortune is one, but essentially it is depicting characters having emotions with which we identify. Emotional responses are hardwired into us; psychologist Dylan Evans in a delightful book called *EMOTION, THE SCIENCE OF SENTIMENT*, describes the universality of emotions well: "the basic emotions are hardwired, etched into our neural circuitry by our genes rather than by our culture, part of the basic mental design that is common to all of us." This view is now considered too black and white; the reality is more nuanced.

Egri, some 35 years before Evans' book came out, wrote that "...in writing, as in life, identification must be established through emotion. If the author shows us an unscrupulous individual, he should take it for granted that the reaction should be unfavourable towards the character. The logical question now is whether everyone's reaction will be the same. The answer is, without a doubt, yes....we are dealing here with universal emotions such as love, hate, jealousy, fear or greed."

So Egri is saying you can make many members of the the audience feel the same about a character, by getting them to make an emotional connection. The real point of the difference between an emotional connection and an intellectual or ethical connection is that the former is automatic, the audience just feels it; it doesn't consider it, weigh it up and think about pros and cons.

As Dylan Evans said: emotion is hardwired; that means we don't control it.

Egri goes on to talk at some length about fear: "Fear is a universal emotion and one of the deadliest of all human experiences. But this singular emotion is responsible for man's survival....Emotion is an invisible chain, linking man to man [you must excuse his male centrism which was prevalent in the 1960s] all over the globe. If a murderer is at large (in another country from where we are) and the police are unable to catch the criminal...we feel defenceless, even though an ocean (might) separate us.

The fact is that all emotions are subsidiaries of insecurity (which is closely linked to fear) which in turn happens to be self-preservation, the prime mover of all human conduct. Our

emotions are aroused to the highest pitch whenever - in reality or imagination - our security is endangered.

The American Abraham Maslow outlined a theory of the ‘hierarchy of human needs’: the most basic and essential for our survival - without which there can be no other needs satisfied - are our physiological needs like air, food, water, shelter and sex. The next level, once the most basic were satisfied, was safety and security.

After this are social-belonging, love, esteem and accomplishments and finally the tip of Maslow’s pyramid of needs, self-actualisation and achieving one’s potential.

But if basic survival - the ability to live - is threatened, then we will feel the greatest amount of fear. You may be disappointed if you can’t get into the film school of your choice but have to go to another; you may even feel sad; but your life is not in danger.

So as writers you need to offer us characters who have rich and deep emotional lives that we can relate to and identify with; whose experiences we will feel as sharply as if they were happening to us. And we will thank you.

Remember the subtitle of Egri’s early book: the creative interpretation of human motives. That is what you need to write about; why we do what we do; what makes us killers and lovers; what makes us afraid. The greater your understanding of why people do what they do, the more likely you are to write well.

But do not be in a rush to write the script. It is by far the most difficult format to start telling a story in. Before you can write a script you need to be able to tell a story. And there are easier and safer ways of telling stories than in script format.

Get your story right first, which means presenting us with characters who have lives rich in emotions - all the ones mentioned above - love, hate, anger, fear, disgust and so on - emotions we will all relate to if you write them well.

Then work out what format is most suitable. This doesn’t mean suitable to the story you wish to tell, but suitable to the market: so if it is a returnable TV series know whether there are serial elements or series elements that co-exist with the guest character episodes; if a movie can you tell the story in under 100 minutes? And so on.

We can discuss whether writing for the market is a good thing or not. Personally I think professional writers can write for the market, and I do not agree with purists who say you should never write for the market. If there is a huge success, like the movie GET OUT, you are probably

ill-advised to write a clone of it as by the time yours could go into production, it will be too late. Leave it for another year or two when it could be timely again.

The one thing that almost all great writing achieves is an emotional connection between audience and characters. Being aware of the importance of that is the first step in being able to grab your audience. And once you succeed in grabbing them, they will come back for more.

And as professional writers you will find producers want you to write for them, since you have managed to do that one thing so many writers find so difficult.

I would now like to go into more detail on the importance and understanding of manipulating your audience: you need to make micro-choices all the time as writers: each individual word is chosen for a reason; each beat is there for a reason, each scene must have a purpose, and of course, each character also is there for a reason.

And the fundamental game being played between you the writer and us the audience is a guessing game: it is sometimes described with the words “what happens next?”

You are trying to ensure that the members of the audience are in a constant state of anticipation, trying to guess what happens next; you are leading us in a direction and - if you are good at what you are doing - you will frequently surprise us, but always with something that we believe, that we buy into.

The written word, the moving image, on a screen, have the effect they do because we function in particular ways. If you don't think about it, you are unlikely to touch the right buttons.

The importance of anticipation can be seen in the culture of primitive, pre-literate societies. Primitive peoples may have had simplistic language; they may not even have had the use of fire. But their minds were probably not that different from ours.

When they painted images of bison or mammoth elephants on cave walls, they were creating their version of movies - except the pictures did not move. Instead people moved, they danced before the images of the scary animals that they had to kill in order to survive.

Remember Jacob Bronowski's analysis of the early cave paintings? He suggested that these paintings were one of the ways the primitive hunters, by looking at pictures of threatening animals, were able to learn to cope with the fear that the animals caused the hunters in the real world.

And let me repeat the wonderful advice from Richard Walter, who puts this into the context of cinema today: “In the caves’ security the hunters could allow their emotions to simulate those experienced in the actual hunt, In complete safety they could wallow in fear. Later, in the hunt, recalling the cave experience they could successfully steel themselves against surrendering to their panic, which, thanks to the caves, was now familiar to them....A film is a life simulator enabling modern men and women to rehearse their emotions, to experience desperate, painful sensations in an environment of total safety.”

That encapsulates how cinema, theatre and books work. They manipulate us and it is the writers who decide exactly how to carry out that manipulation.

From a completely different source, we can see the same thing about human behaviour, in the world of music. These parallels exist in areas other than our usage of words and pictures.

You know how the structure of beginning-middle-end relates albeit simplistically to our awareness of the immediate past, the present and the immediate future.

Aristotle, as you know, analysed audience involvement with drama in three stages:
PITY, FEAR and CATHARSIS

I think that it is worth explaining this in more detail, because once you see how the reader of your Bible or script or pitch document or novel might relate to what you have written, or the viewer of your film might be affected by what they see and hear, you will automatically think more manipulatively as you select what to put into your work, and you will probably write more effectively. In order to get them to be in a state of anticipation, you have to be manipulative.

So how does music confirm this? Music creates one of its most dominant effects on listeners by virtue of the repetitive nature of the notes, the phrasing...the themes. Listen to a piece - popular or classical - that you know well, and you will find that you are anticipating virtually every note. You are ‘hearing’ it in your mind’s ear before it is played. I am not talking about modern atonal music. Think, for instance, of a Beethoven Sonata, or ABBA, Elton John or The Beatles or Cole Porter - that ages me!

If there is a scratch on the record, or the CD jumps, you notice immediately. However, if you listen to a piece of music that you have never heard before, you will be anticipating the notes even though you do not know the piece. Perhaps you won’t guess them all, but you will guess a surprising number of them.

In other words, you will be anticipating sequences of notes that you do not know, perhaps only one note ahead of the music as it is being played. And your enjoyment is undoubtedly related to the intensity of your anticipation.

Anticipation in movies and TV drama and in novels is one part of what makes it enjoyable for audiences, particularly the surprises and reversals that they were not able to predict. Anticipation is the key ingredient that keeps audiences involved, as long as they have been able to identify with and invest emotionally in the characters in the first place.

In the programme notes for a wonderful series of Beethoven Sonatas played by Maurizio Pollini, I noticed the following:

‘(Beethoven’s) preference for ‘happy endings’ is not by any means a tendency towards kitsch, but rather a musical style akin to Schiller’s philosophy of suffering, struggle and overcoming.’

Tallis Barker - who wrote the programme notes - could also have quoted Aristotle:

PITY/ FEAR/ CATHARSIS

Or the traditional three acts:

BEGINNING / MIDDLE / END.

Do you begin to see the pattern?

To finish this examination of the audience for your treatment or film, I want to go into a little more detail on Aristotle’s theory of drama as I think it remains the best explanation to date. Then I want to look at the physiology and psychology of emotion in audiences, because Aristotle may have laid the foundations for the analysis of drama, and he may have given an objective description of why audiences appear to benefit from watching drama, but he did not explain what happens physiologically, and why successful drama is addictive.

ARISTOTLE

Let’s dig a bit deeper into Aristotle. In his book *ARISTOTLE IN HOLLYWOOD*, Ari Hiltunen, who was a Finnish television buyer, looks at why Hollywood movies are internationally successful, and whether Aristotle’s theory that drama, constructed in a certain way, always works, can be related to Hollywood’s dominance of the world’s cinemas.

Aristotle, in his book *THE POETICS*, argues that ancient myths and stories were able to bring about a certain kind of emotional experience in spectators. He called this “oikeois hedone”, which translates as “the proper pleasure”.

In other words, a good story, well told, brings about pleasure. As Ari Hiltunen says: “why would we otherwise go to the movies or read fiction? We can even say that the pleasure is the object in itself and the story is the means to bring about that pleasure. The more pleasure a story can bring about, the better and more popular is the story.”

Aristotle goes on to explain that the plot structure is the mechanics by which the audience is given experiences that cause them pleasure. And Aristotle’s simple formulation of this is PITY....FEAR....CATHARSIS

Make the audience feel pity for a character and they identify with that character.

Then make the audience experience increasing amounts of fear for the character, and the audience feels increasing fear....

Finally, release the audience from the tension of anticipating the terrible things that are going to happen to that character, and the audience feels great.

In case you think that Aristotle can’t be the only evidence for this theory, Hiltunen also examines the work of Russian Folklorist Vladimir Propp, who wrote a book with the daunting title MORPHOLOGY OF THE FOLKTALE. He analysed over 200 folktales and discovered, apparently to his surprise, a common story-pattern to all of them.

And in Joseph Campbell’s book THE HERO OF A THOUSAND FACES, the same theory is substantiated. Campbell is, like Aristotle, not easy to read. But I recommend Chris Vogler’s excellent book on Joseph Campbell and mythology and storytelling : THE WRITER’S JOURNEY.

‘Overcoming’ or ‘catharsis’ is Beethoven’s preference for ‘happy endings’. It is the happy ending that audiences have always shown preference for. A happy ending is not better, a sad ending is not worse, than the other. They are different. Don’t select one without realising what you are doing, and without knowing why you are doing it.

This is the final piece in the jigsaw puzzle, to explain what happens to the audience when you get them into a state of high anticipation.

What actually happens with Aristotle’s PITY / FEAR / CATHARSIS is that nerve cells in the area of the brain that deal with the basic emotions - such as pleasure, fear and anger - receive electrical impulses from other cells and prompt the release of a chemical known as phenylethylamine.

This is also known as the happiness drug, one of whose derivatives is what we call speed. When this reaches other cells in the brain, negative thoughts are to some extent inhibited, while positive and relaxing thoughts are encouraged.

Watching a movie can therefore bring about a feeling of elation and well-being. The actual cause of the feelings is chemical. The body releases these chemicals under circumstances that you - as writers and producers and directors - control. Understand your audience and you control them.

“The plot structure gives the audience experiences that cause them pleasure...” : it is perverse that we choose to get this pleasure by being scared in thrillers and horror films; we seek fear and simulated pain and tension in order to experience the release from that tension. We use the cinema and books and television to have experiences vicariously, to rehearse for life.

It is in the safety of our version of the primitive cave or cinema that we learn to deal with life. You as writers have a part to play in that. Give us - the audience - experiences that we need, and that we want. The big question is how do you know what we want, and how do you separate that from what you want to discover, about yourself and your own life.

At some point you have to be clear whom you are writing for. And the process of writing treatments is partly to slow you down enough so that you focus in a concentrated way on this, and on what will make your intended audience react the way you want them to.

That’s why the industry needs treatments. That’s why in Hollywood, more time and more money and more effort goes into storytelling than we apply over here.

To reject Hollywood and American story-techniques because we don’t like the values in their stories, is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Europe is sometimes snobbish about American movies, partly because they occupy over 80% of our screens.

One example of this was the opening episode of the BBC TV serial *LES MISERABLES* - written by perhaps the most distinguished adapter of novels in the UK, Andrew Davies (who adapted the novel *HOUSE OF CARDS* for the BBC).

The character *JEAN VALJEAN*, in prison for 20 years for stealing a loaf of bread (was there ever as much undeserved misfortune) on his release is given hospitality in a Church by a priest, whereupon he promptly steals some silver. He is caught by the gendarmerie and brought back. To our surprise the Priest says “You forgot the silver candlesticks”, implying that he knew

Valjean had stolen the silver but pretended he took it by agreement, so the police have to let him go.

He then steals a small coin from a boy; has second thoughts and we know he has been changed by the kindness of the priest and plans to make good his recent criminality.

So we were in a state of anticipation over and over: would he really steal from the kind priest; will he go off and sell the silver candlesticks; will he return the young boy's coin?

Well, we had to wait for the next episode and most viewers decided to do that. But the next episode wasn't as good as the first so a proportion of the audience - me included - didn't feel compelled to watch to the end of the series. Audiences are fickle and vote with their feet.

I would now like to look at the importance of your idea for a film or TV drama: how do you know if it is a good one, if it is going to get you a deal?

The reality is that a good piece of writing won't always get you a deal, but if it is good it is likely to get you hired to do something else.

Long before you begin to write a script or a novel, you can make an attempt to investigate whether or not the idea you have chosen - or been asked to work on - is really a good idea for the intended drama or film or book.

There are a number of simple questions that you can ask yourself at any stage of the development of an idea - it can be during the development or writing. It can be as you begin to create your characters, or develop the plot or storyline, to make sure that you have a theme or that there is some subtext - so that your story is about something deeper that will touch audiences.

There are also obvious differences between large budget cinema scripts and smaller budget television drama scripts. However, whatever medium or format you are writing for, you can ensure that the script is as rich as possible, and these questions can be asked by the writer, dramaturg, commissioning editor or producer.

If you have answers to most of these questions, if the idea has the potential to contain most of these points, it will have the potential to work as really good drama. I know that this is a somewhat arbitrary and artificial exercise, but nevertheless it is a good one.

Most stories for film or television drama or novels have similarities. They all have characters (some more central than others), they usually have an antagonist (which can be a

character or say a natural disaster such as earthquake or tornado or the government), they all involve a plot or action of some sort.

They also usually have a beginning, a middle and an end.

There are ten key elements you can use as a check on your story (this is arbitrary, there can be more or you can use fewer):

- central character/s
- supporting characters
- an antagonist/villain

Related to these three are several questions:

- castability
- are there strong and emotional relationships within the characters?
- does the main action involve the central character?
- does this character resolve the main action?

The 4th key element is what is the opening scenario (also known as the hook)?

- is this a powerful and memorable scene?
- does it intrigue and make the reader/audience want to know what happens next?

The 5th is what is the theme?

- is this theme something easy to relate to ('everyone wants to be loved' or justice will triumph or order will be restored).

Remember, this is also subtext.

The 6th is the central conflict (action) and tension (which need not be action):

- is there an A and B (and C) story?
- how do they relate to each other?
- are each of the stories structured (3 acts)?
- can the main story be told visually?
- are there some big set pieces (important for a cinema film)?

The 7th is the central relationship (emotion):

- does this get resolved at the end of the film?

The 8th is the crisis:

- this need only involve one of the storylines

9 is a climax, and

10 is a resolution

Do you know what you want the audience to be thinking and feeling as they leave the cinema?

Have you worked backwards from the ending to make sure that everything you have planted has been paid off (and that you have led effectively up to your endings)?

THE ENDING: the crisis/climax/resolution should draw together all the storylines – A,B and C – neatly. The B and C can effectively resolve the A (or some other permutation).

There are many other aspects to a story or script, such as point of view, which can make what you are writing more subtle. Comedy follows different rules sometimes; as does ensemble drama. But developing character backstories and motivation is essential for three-dimensional characters.

Many years ago I published a screenwriting magazine, and we did an article by Laurie Hutzler, who writes very well on emotion: the article was headed REACHING WORLD-WIDE AUDIENCES and suggested that the greatest challenge in storytelling is to reveal the universal in the personal.

The most powerful stories depict an individual culture, society or community with all of its idiosyncrasies, distinctiveness and peculiarities described in rich detail.

Then, within that narrow setting or milieu, these stories go on to explore the universal human emotions at work within the lives of the characters.

Hutzler, whose books include HOW TO EVALUATE STORIES and whose website is EmotionalToolbox.com describes the key points in the article she wrote for ScriptWriter Magazine:

- great stories speak first to our emotions
- great stories speak to the universal human condition
- great stories put emotion first and structure second
- great stories put emotions in conflict
- great stories disrupt the status quo
- great stories clarify the audience's emotional focus

She says that order or structure is an organisational principle that pulls us through a story from beginning to end, but it is our emotional experience that makes films memorable.

The more precise a story is in delineating a particular culture, tradition or ethos, the more likely it is to be successful with the wider world audience. That is the great paradox of storytelling. You can best reach the universal through the personal.

Another way of putting some of this is the old truism that the plot should come out of the characters, in other words what happens happens because of who the characters are.

So having some understanding of what causes our emotional engagement with the characters in a screenplay, and carefully making sure that we do become emotionally engaged, will benefit your writing.

It is not the idea for a story that is important; it is the way that that story is told.

Note 2/1. R. Walter, Chair of the Scriptwriting Faculty, UCLA, in his book SCREENWRITING (Plume/Penguin 1988)

This chapter is from Volume 1 in MAKING MONEY SCREENWRITING

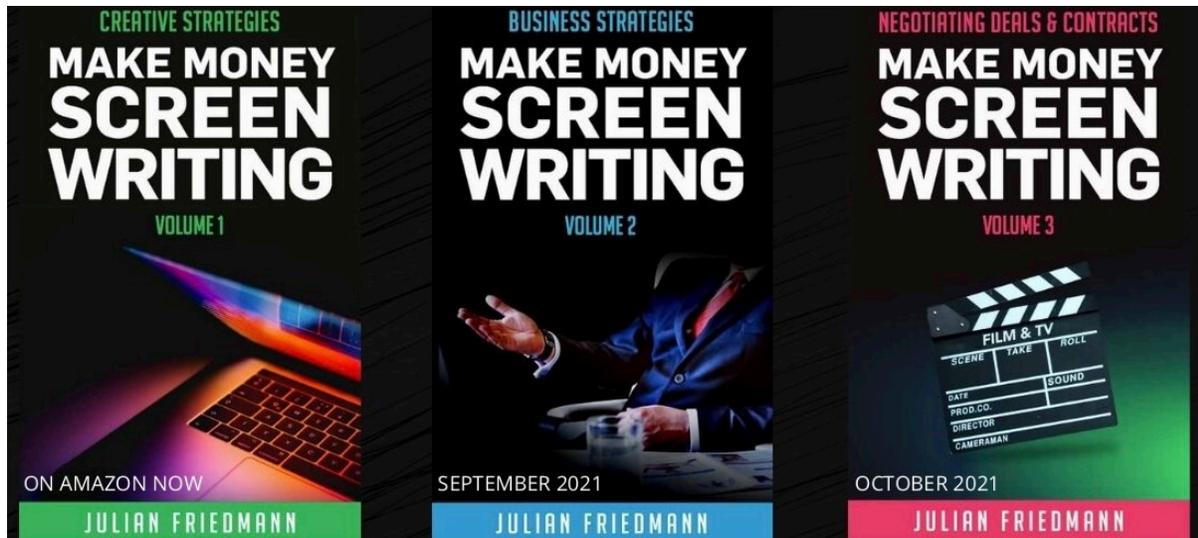
Julian Friedmann is co-owner of the [Blake Friedmann Literary Agency](#) and was the publisher of ScriptWriter magazine, which became the premiere magazine for screenwriters in the UK and Europe. At the agency, he represents both book and scriptwriters and also acts as Executive Producer for and with clients.

Julian is the author of the [Make Money Screenwriting](#) series (an updated version of the previous How to Make Money Scriptwriting), co-author of [The Insider's Guide to Writing for Television](#), and editor of two volumes on Writing Long-Running Television series.

He has taught at universities and film schools all over the world. He designed the MA in Television Scriptwriting at De Montfort University, and PILOTS (for developing long-running television series) for the EU MEDIA Programme.

He has been on both Emmy and Grierson Juries and is Senior Advisor to the London Screenwriting Festival. His TEDx talk on the mystery of storytelling has been viewed over 900,000 times.

www.makemoneyscreenwriting.com



There are three books, the first of which – CREATIVE STRATEGIES – is [available now on Amazon](#), both in print and Kindle formats. This volume is focussed on the creative strategies writers can adopt to increase their chances of selecting ideas and approaching the execution in a way to make it accessible to a wide market. It includes an understanding of the audience, of the streamers, writing treatments and bibles as well as the tricks to write successful adaptations. The subsequent books deal with writers as business people: how do you actually make a living from your writing and finally, to the negotiating of deals and contracts. Negotiating a deal is not the same as negotiating a contract.

Each of the books can be read on its own, but each does take the process to the next steps.