

WHERE SCREENPLAY IDEAS COME FROM

And what do we keep?

THE PROBLEM THIS CHAPTER SOLVES

Most screenplays that fail have already failed before page one. The writing is competent, the dialogue is fine, and the second act collapses anyway, because the idea was never tested.

Testing an idea takes about two hours. Writing an untested one takes about a year.

WHAT THIS COVERS

The vocabulary. Where ideas are actually found. How to run a brainstorm. The five tests an idea has to pass before it earns a draft.

FOUR WORDS THAT GET CONFUSED

Each rung more specific than the last

01 IDEA

Raw material, with no obligation to be dramatic. A man who cleans crime scenes for a living. A city that has run out of water. Nothing in an idea obliges a next scene.

02 CONCEPT

An idea shaped into a situation containing conflict. The man cleans a scene and recognises the victim. A detective discovers the drought was manufactured. The situation now produces events.

03 PREMISE

A concept with a protagonist attached, expressed as a dramatic problem: who wants something, what they want, what stands in the way, what failure costs. A strong concept with no premise gives you a world and no engine.

04 LOGLINE

The premise compressed for transmission. It exists to make a stranger read ninety pages, and it is a diagnostic tool as much as a sales one. Writers who cannot write the logline usually cannot write the second act either, because both failures have the same cause.

WHERE IDEAS ARE ACTUALLY FOUND

If you are dry, you are usually drawing from one source only

01 PERSONAL OBSESSION

Not your life, but the pressure your life put on you, transposed and escalated. A man finds his father's old yearbook and wonders whether they would have been friends at the same age.

02 RESEARCH

Reading outside film supplies texture and plot at once, and gives you material other writers have not read. A detective story built on the water politics of a real city feels larger than its case because it is.

03 NEWS AND TRUE EVENTS

A situation that already holds attention, missing only a protagonist with a want. The discipline is to find the twenty four hours that contain the change and ignore the rest of the life.

04 ADAPTATION

A novel, a play, a short story, an article. The question is not what to include, but what single dramatic problem the material can carry.

WHERE IDEAS ARE ACTUALLY FOUND

If you are dry, you are usually drawing from one source only

05 COLLISION AND INVERSION

Two familiar elements forced together read as new while staying legible: a monster film built with the rhythm of a shark thriller and relocated to a spacecraft. Or take a story the audience knows and reverse its polarity, so that the family who must accept the visitor becomes the threat.

06 THE WHAT IF

A single counterfactual, worked out with discipline. What if a man's life were a television programme and he alone did not know.

07 CHARACTER FIRST

Build from a contradiction: someone who wants two incompatible things and will be forced to choose.

08 IMAGE AND CONSTRAINT

A picture you cannot shake, interrogated until it yields a situation. Or a limitation chosen before the story: one room, one night, real time. Limitation is a generator, not a restriction, and it produces ideas that are original and financeable at the same time.

HOW TO RUN A BRAINSTORM

Two phases, never at once

Generation and selection are separate activities. Phase one is generation, where quantity is the only measure and nothing is judged. Phase two is selection, ideally on a different day, where everything is judged.

ALONE

Timed and written. Twenty minutes, a target number, no editing, no deleting, no stopping to consider whether something is good. Set the target high enough to force you past the obvious: thirty what if questions, or twenty pairings. The first ten will be things you already thought of. The value is in the last five.

IN A GROUP

In a group, the same rule applies with one addition: nobody evaluates anyone else's contribution during generation, including with a face. Groups produce range and unexpected combinations, and they collapse the moment one person starts filtering. Keep the group small, write everything on a visible surface, and let people build on each other's lines. Then send everyone away and select alone, because selection by committee produces the least offensive idea rather than the strongest one.

- Keep the group small and write everything on a visible surface.
- Let people build on each other's lines rather than defend their own.
- Then send everyone away and select alone. Selection by committee produces the least offensive idea, not the strongest one.

EITHER WAY

Record everything, including the bad ones. A discarded idea from one session frequently becomes the antagonist, the setting or the second act of another.

THE FIVE TESTS

Run them on every idea, in writing

01 IS THERE A PROTAGONIST WITH A VISIBLE WANT?

Something a camera can photograph them getting or failing to get. Wanting to understand herself is a need, not a want, and needs are served through wants.

02 IS THE OPPOSITION ACTIVE?

Ask what the antagonist wants, and whether their version of the film would be coherent. If not, the second act will sag.

03 ARE THE STAKES CONCRETE?

Complete this sentence: If the protagonist fails, this specific thing happens to this specific person. If you cannot complete that sentence, the premise is unfinished.

04 IS THERE A STORY ENGINE?

Something that obliges scenes to keep occurring: an investigation, a countdown, a siege, a lie that must be maintained. Test it by naming twenty scenes the premise demands. If the list dies at eight, you have a first act.

05 IS AN ENDING IMPLIED?

Not the ending itself, but the question it will answer. Does she tell the truth. Do they get out. A premise with no question produces a script that stops rather than ends.

A LOGLINE THAT WORKS

The standard construction: when [inciting incident], a [protagonist by function, not name] must [goal] before [deadline], or [specific consequence].

WORKED EXAMPLE

When a great white shark begins killing swimmers days before the summer season, a police chief who is terrified of water must convince a town that needs the tourist money to close its beaches, and then go out on the water himself to kill it.

BEFORE YOU WRITE A PAGE

Ten items. Two hours.

The following should exist in a document:

- A one line concept containing a collision.
- A protagonist with a filmable want.
- An antagonist whose own film would make sense.
- A completed stakes sentence.
- A named story engine.
- Twenty obliged scenes.
- An ending question.
- A logline under sixty words.
- Two honest comparables.
- An answer to why you are the person to write it.

The alternative is finding the same information out in month five of a first draft.

THE FULL CHAPTER

The deep dive edition of Chapter One expands this into a complete working method:

- Eight sources, each with produced examples and an applied exercise.
- Techniques that produce material whether or not you are inspired: the what if ladder, forced collision, the constraint box, systematic trawling, etc.
- The five tests demonstrated on a failing idea until it passes.
- The full anatomy of the logline, and the ways a logline fails.
- Pressure testing: why this, why now, why me, form, comparables, scale.
- Eight failure modes, with diagnostics and repairs.
- A worked example from one paragraph to a tested premise in under two hours.
- An informational summary of rights, options, public domain and real people.
- A worked example taking one paragraph from a trade magazine to a tested premise in under two hours.
- A glossary and a reading list.