

# Getting Your Script Read -- and Sold

## 5 Mistakes Every Screenwriter Should Avoid (and Why You Might Be Making Them)

FADE TO BLACK. For a screenwriter, there's nothing that quite compares to the feeling you get when you type those last three words. It can be a short-lived euphoria. Because once you've done enough fist pumping and strutting to make Rocky Balboa seem reserved, the next thing that probably pops into your mind is, \*What now?\*

A search on the Internet shows many pitching sites with tons of other aspiring writers out there, all asking the same question. And for every ten new writers who come out swinging with a spec script, there is one poor industry professional who is, more likely than not, doing his best bob-and-weave to sidestep them. Maybe we're overeager, or simply too green. For some of us, we're too dazzled by the idea of earning a six-figure-plus paycheck to honestly assess whether or not we have the chops to be a screenwriter to begin with.

So when it comes to shopping a spec script, we tumble into the same pitfalls that claimed the careers of other aspiring writers, making five common mistakes that often jeopardize our chances of getting that big break. But if you've got a well-crafted screenplay and can identify and avoid these mistakes, you have a fighting chance of getting your material read and, ultimately, sold. Back to your corners, Writers. We've got some strategizing to do.

### The Five Common Mistakes

1. Hying it up
2. Leaving your hat in the ring
3. Hanging on the ropes
4. Letting your gym membership expire
5. You're a pretender, not a contender

#### Mistake #1: Hying it up

**What it is:** This mistake is all about the hype -- who's got what, who's selling what, who's making what. As an unknown screenwriter, chances are there's not a lot of hype going on around you -- yet. In the absence of hype, writers can be tempted to over-embellish the facts when it comes to presenting themselves, and this can be a big mistake.

When I first began shopping a spec script, I lived three thousand miles east of Los Angeles, and desperately wanted to find a way to get my foot in the door. I don't know why, but one day, I decided it'd be a good career move to call a producer I wanted to read me, and leave a voicemail that basically said, Sorry I missed your call, I'll try you again later. Seeing as I had a three-hour advantage, I knew I would get her voicemail (my passing acquaintance with math helped tremendously in this first, crucial step). Once I got her on the phone, I reasoned, I'd so dazzle her with my pitch that if she suspected I had duped her, she'd let it slide.

All good, right? Except she never called me in the first place. And, thankfully, she never called me back. By the time the sun was up in Santa Monica, I came to my senses and decided not to make that follow-up call. I simply couldn't go through with the deception.

**Why you might be doing it:** When people tell a white lie, or embellish the facts, it's often done out of fear of rejection. And in this industry, rejection deals the knock-out punch to aspiring screenwriters on a daily basis. Some psychologists believe that lying aids in protecting our self esteem. In a May 2006 LiveScience.com report entitled, "Why We Lie," writer Robin Lloyd observes that lying helps us "to look good both to ourselves and others."

This self-preservation is understandable. If there's a 99 percent chance you're going to get a no when you query an industry pro (or worse, no response at all), who could blame you for wanting to find a way to get to yes by whatever means possible? Don't be that writer. If you want a career in this business, don't lie about who you are, what you've done, where you've gone to school, who you know, etc. Present yourself as honest, hard-working, and trustworthy. In other words, be the kind of person you'd want to do business with.

**Righting the wrong:** If you've written a great spec, it won't matter that you're new on the circuit. When querying an industry pro, simply present yourself as a new writer with what you feel is a great story on your hands, and ask if you can send over a copy of your script. If you've got what that industry pro is looking for, your material will speak for itself, and you'll find the hype finds you.

### **Mistake #2: Leaving your hat in the ring**

**What it is:** This mistake stems from not following up with an industry pro after you've submitted your work for their consideration. Susan Lockwood, a screenwriter from Southern California with optioned material, learned early on that not following up can sometimes mean missing out on other opportunities to further your career. But Lockwood often found making that call too daunting. "At the time, I just didn't want to hear another 'no,'" she recalls. "Too bad, because 'no' sometimes leads to 'but what else have you got?'"

**Why you might be doing it:** Like Lockwood, writers might not follow up with interested industry pros because the rejection they fear in this round *when someone has actually taken the time to read your script* can be brutal. Fear of rejection at this stage in the game can often stop a writer dead in his tracks. Don't be that writer.

In their new book, "Ladies Who Launch: Embracing Entrepreneurship and Creativity as a Lifestyle," authors Victoria Colligan and Beth Schoenfeldt reflect on this career-crippling response. "Everyone gets stuck for a variety of reasons," write Colligan and Schoenfeldt. "They may be paralyzed by fear or lack motivation. Beyond the fear is also the knowledge that, if someone wants your script, the phone will ring."

If you don't hear back right away, however, don't assume the worst. In fact, industry professionals are inundated with requests to read new material, even as they juggle other projects in various stages of development.

Case in point: Recently, an A-list screenwriter and producer who blogs anonymously as Unk, The Unknown Screenwriter (see [www.unknownscreenwriter.com](http://www.unknownscreenwriter.com) for invaluable information and tips on the trade), shared with me that last year alone, he spent an estimated seven work weeks reading and writing coverage for scripts, all of which his company passed on. No matter how busy, most industry professionals will take the time to respond to your polite follow-up phone call or email. This is a call you make no sooner than two to four weeks after submitting your script, and gives you another chance to present yourself as someone who's considerate and professional, leaving the door open for other opportunities that may come along.

**Righting the wrong:** How best to avoid leaving your hat in the ring? "Do the thing you dread the most first," advise Colligan and Schoenfeldt. "Make that phone call, craft that email, and schedule that meeting! [it] may move you in a new direction, even one you did not expect. And remember to take every pass in stride, moving on with the knowledge that you're now one step closer to a 'yes.'"

### **Mistake #3: Hanging on the ropes**

**What it is:** A fighter hanging on the ropes is not a pretty sight. Bloodied and beaten, but too dumb or proud to give up, the boxer works to steady himself as he summons whatever's left to get back into the ring. As a new screenwriter, shopping a spec around town can seem just as unforgiving, and many don't

know when to head back to the corner for a much-needed break (or even career CPR). But it's ill advised to continue shopping a script whose shelf life has (at least temporarily) expired.

**Why you might be doing it:** Shopping a spec script is often viewed as a numbers game: cast a wide enough net, and someone's bound to nibble. We've all heard stories of award-winning writers who, on the verge of throwing in the towel, decided to make one last sales call — the call, in fact, that finally got things rolling. It's hard to know when to keep sparring, and when to step back. In this instance, a brief time-out and a consultation with your coach (or whoever you trust to tell it to you straight) will do wonders for your self-esteem, and might provide fresh insight into why your script's not selling.

**Righting the wrong:** Get off the ropes, kid. If your script has made the rounds and it's not looking good, take a break, and evaluate where things stand. If an industry pro turned down the script but took the time to give you notes, pull those out and give them a read *and serious consideration*. Over the years, Unk and his producing partners have occasionally provided writers with well-considered notes. "At times, we see a possible 'diamond in the rough,' he observes. "And when that happens, we attempt to communicate this with the writer, [telling him or her] 'if you're willing to take some notes and willing to give it another couple of shots, we're willing to read it again.' To his amazement, however, Unk reports that he has never had a writer take him up on his offer.

Don't be that writer. Roll your sleeves up. Take the notes. Go back to your corner, and start again. In Unk's case, his company left the door open for those few writers to walk back through, when the time was right. If such an offer presents itself to you, take it! Notes like the ones Unk volunteered show that an industry pro took time from his very busy day to thoroughly evaluate your project's potential and provide input based on his experience. Honor this commitment to your efforts by giving the notes the consideration they deserve.

#### **Mistake #4: Letting your gym membership expire**

**What it is:** When a boxer steps into the ring, he or she needs to be in top condition. This means putting time in at the gym, working, sweating, finessing, and then getting up the next day to do it all over again. The wise writer, no matter how accomplished, knows that the training never stops. That's because, like a professional boxer, every new script must be nimble, cut, and ready to go a few dozen rounds with the heavies.

For whatever reason, unseasoned writers often neglect this fundamental part of the screenwriting process. Don't be that writer. Jen Frankel, a produced screenwriter, playwright, novelist, and the Director of Development for Wildcard Pictures, observes that a writer's technical prowess on the page is the first thing she looks for when considering a script. "Nothing prejudices me more quickly against a writer than bad grammar, spelling, or punctuation," she says. "Format must also be clean and clear and adhere, more than anything else, to a desire for readability and visual sense.

**Why you might be doing it:** Beyond talent, good writing results from two training essentials: the technical training a writer will seek in a structured setting (i.e., the classroom, an online seminar, a CD or DVD program), and what he or she takes away from recreational, reflective reading. Training in a classroom setting can be expensive, and reading demands time and attention, two rare commodities in our fast-paced, technology-crammed lives. Without the proper training, however, a script will fall flat.

As Frankel states, "[These] are the first things I look for in a script: good writing, which means technically good before I even start to consider the merits of the ideas, and good form. A script that veers too far from acceptable in either area, she warns, "is going to have an uphill climb to impress me.

**Righting the wrong:** Learn your craft. Take a class. Read a book on the dos and don'ts of screenwriting. Study other scripts. Commit to finishing one work of fiction and non-fiction once a month. And don't just read for enjoyment. Examine sentence structure, word choice, pacing — anything that will help you get inside the author's mind and creative space. Become a student of the written word, and you might find

yourself mastering the art of storytelling.

**Mistake #5: You're a pretender, not a contender**

**What it is:** Just as it sounds, this mistake is made by those whose abilities lay outside of the screenwriting ring but who, out of ignorance or sheer determination, continue to slug away. Mistakes one through four presumed a certain aptitude for the art of storytelling and the craft of screenwriting, which could very well lead to a successful career in the movie business if a writer steers clear of certain common slip ups. This last mistake makes no such presumption, and for many with screenwriting aspirations, it can be a devastating reality.

Yet it's a hot button among industry professionals, and so deserves examination. "In reality, 99 percent of all scripts we read are not worth the time, Unk says, and is a major reason why industry pros refuse to read unsolicited material. "We want to find screenplays worthy of investing a small fortune. We want to read stories that knock us out of our chairs, he says, but "it just doesn't happen.

**Why you might be doing it:** When a movie is brilliantly executed, with stirring actor performances, breathtaking cinematography, a flawless score, and a beautiful story line, it comes across as effortless. Factor in the six- and seven-figure incomes that those in the industry command, and to the aspiring screenwriter, selling a script looks like easy money. Don't be that screenwriter. In fact, if you don't have the chops, it might be time to seriously consider hanging up the gloves and exploring other creative outlets.

**Righting the wrong:** No matter where you find yourself in your journey as an aspiring screenwriter, feedback from a reliable source will always be your best indicator of whether or not you should even be in the ring. Every good screenwriter has in his or her corner an advocate -- someone who calls things as he sees them, and isn't afraid to tell it straight. This person isn't a cheerleader, but a coach, teacher, professional writer, industry executive -- someone who has first-hand knowledge of what it takes to succeed as a writer and who sees potential in your work.

I have been fortunate to have coaches in my corner who volunteer their time and expertise to help me advance. I'm not there yet, but the success I have experienced, and the people who have taken me this far, are reason enough to stay in the ring, even when the odds are against me. Wherever you are in the process, now is a good time to step out of the ring and take stock of where things stand. Consider the five mistakes outlined here, honestly assess your aptitude, and see where you can improve on your technique. Then, when you're ready to make your next pitch, expect your finessed approach to knock 'em dead... in a good way.

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**About the author:** Pamela Schott is a published writer whose work has appeared in newspapers and magazines across the country and on the Internet. An aspiring screenwriter whose work has been developed by executives at major production companies, Pamela has made every mistake in the book, but only once. Most recently, she launched My Visual Pitch .com (<http://myvisualpitch.com>), an online resource for unsigned screenwriters, independent filmmakers, and musicians looking to sell their work.