Have a talk with your Hollywood Screenwriter. The writer will assist you in setting tone, figuring out your theme, your characters, and the general milieu of the story you want to tell. He will also give you a crash course on how to pitch your idea

I have already had this conversation with my screenwriting mentor.

Explain the problem with only “writing what you know”. How will you, as the screenwriter, go about creating stories that exist outside your realm of experience?

The problem with “writing what you know” is that the stories, topics and characters that come out of the author’s knowledge, memory and consciousness will become repetitive and boring. However, as a screenwriter, it is possible to overcome that using imagination: screenwriters ask “what if?” and come up with premises that can dig in to the deeper mind for imagining possibilities, building new worlds and can be taken from trivial things such as newspaper clippings and magazine articles and even other stories and characters. Peter Benchley was inspired by a newspaper headline; his novel eventually led to defining the Summer Blockbuster genre in Hollywood. The genesis was a newspaper headline! This film was Jaws.

Explain what makes a fantastical story believable.

The biggest factor in making fantastical stories believable is the ability to understand people well. The screenwriter has to dig deep in to his research to be able to understand his people/characters very well. He has to dig deep enough to find the basic, raw humanity in them. To answer the question, what makes our common humanities, will be able to draw the audiences to the theater every weekend. Take Avatar, for example: the audience didn’t flock to the theaters only for the special effects and the world that James Cameron created. Take Star Wars: no one goes just to watch the special effects and the spaceships. People flock again and again to these films because they love the humanity in the characters that have universal aspects in them. In Avatar, Jake wants to walk again. He wants to be independent. In Star Wars, we see a clear distinction between good and evil; the latter was called the Dark Side. The Dark Side personification was the father of our hero: how is our hero to react now? What if we all found out that our fathers were evil? The answer to that question is what draws people to the theater every single weekend. That makes fantastic stories even more relatable and believable.

What tools are needed to write “believable” characters?

The tools required to write believable characters come from the basic characterizations that we make of fellow humans. These basic notions help us understand what drives the character. Jealousy? Fighting? Sleazy, depressed, lonely, jumpy, self-deprecating, timid, mean-spirited, arrogant? Perhaps, the character is a mix-and-match of these characteristics. There are infinite possibilities. One big thing to take in to consideration is their family background: what type of house did they grow up in? Do they carry the sins of their father? The more the screenwriter spends on reading, writing, spending time talking and listening to people from various backgrounds, the greater is the understanding of human nature. One big thing to include in this list is: travel. By traveling on foot (as if it is a pilgrimage), one learns a lot about the experience of a foreigner. It opens eyes and ears to new worlds. Those experiences can be brought in when creating fresh, interesting characters and they can be believable. Simple characteristics such as jealousy, fighting, sleazy, depressed, lonely, jumpy, self-deprecating, timid, mean-spirited and arrogant will have deeper meanings and more dimensions.

How do you move a story idea beyond a simple spectacle?

Spectacle, although not simple to achieve, is one of the bigger problems with films in Hollywood these days. Spectacles by themselves do not make great stories and characters. To move beyond the spectacles, the screenwriter needs to create characters with motivations that everyone can relate to. Simply put, the biggest filmmakers tend to answer the question “how”. How do we present the hero? How is the journey shown? Well, that’s a mistake. That’ll result in a spectacle. By answering “how”, the auteur only asks what to show on the screen. But the characters also need to have big arcs, and need to go on a journey that every audience member can get a reaction out of. The characters should make choices that will make the audiences jaws drop.

What ingredients are necessary to create a compelling story?

The motivation behind the events, actions and turning points in a story, is the biggest ingredient behind a compelling story. The bigger and more important question is “why”. Why is the character motivated to make certain choices? Why is the story and the journey of our hero and heroine going in this particular direction? Where do they come from and why do they want to go to another place? That will provide the subtext of the film. That will provide answers for what the characters a) wants b) needs. Take Django Unchained, for example. His journey is easily relatable: he wants to rescue his wife. What are his needs? Freedom! It’s that simple. After these basic questions are answered about why the characters want what they want, Tarantino tackles “how”. How do we show Django’s journey? By setting up the story in the Antebellum South, where achieving freedom for a “negro” would have been impossible to think of in those days. Now the audience knows what’s at stake and why it is difficult. They root for Django. It also what makes the story hard to swallow. It makes the audience’s jaw drop. But there’s more: what about creating the most despicable villain in history? Monsieur Candy might be the most inhumane character Tarantino has ever written: probably worse than Hans Landa from Inglorious Basterds. The antagonist is driving the story. His motivations are important, too. Note that at several points in the story, the audience knows about the character’s backstory: Candy’s dad, Hilda’s upbringing by a German nanny, Dr Schultz’ German ancestry and his belief system in slavery. Therefore, Tarantino was able to write a beautiful, Oscar-winning screenplay by first asking “why” for all of his characters.

Explain the difference between “inner” and “outer” focus of a story

The outer story involves the events and characters that we hope will engage the audience. The inner focus of a story is how you arrange the order of a story’s elements to create a movement towards some resolution. Understanding what the audience wants from the story is the key. Take Imitation Game, for instance. The outer story involves: World War II, decoding Enigma to win World War II, smart scientists in England, and a gay man. The inner story involves: the manifestation of Christopher as a character, the arrangement of the narration in such a way, as to show the true motivations of Alan Turing, we go from the present, flash-back to World War II, and flash-back even further to Turin’s childhood. The biggest motivation for Turing’s mindset is not revealed until the resolution/climax of the film. After seeing it, we are thrown back in to the narration because now we understand why Turing called his machine Christopher. We understand why Turing is the way he is with his work, with his woman, with his colleagues, and his puzzles. And then we are thrown back in to the outer story in the end-credits: the persecution of gays throughout history. Can you imagine a world without computers? Well, if Turing didn’t do what he did, we might have been living in a different world. That’s what the story shows us by beautifully seaming the outer and inner focus of a story.

What is the biggest mistake beginning writers make? Why is it a problem?

The biggest mistake beginning screenwriters make is to write their screenplay like a novel. It’s not a novel and is not even similar to a novel. Novels end up setting up the scene, the surroundings, explaining the characterizations. Screenplays don’t do that. Screenplays have action, turning points, a brief description of the setting and finally, dialog. The reader should be able to enthusiastically turn the page and should be able to visually sense the story unfold in his/her mind. Novels can’t do that, but screenplays can. It is a problem because film is a collaborative medium, while novel isn’t. In the novel, the author, director, production designer and the actor is the author. But in film, each of these artists should be able to bring their own experience and depth. The screenwriter should be able to leave room in the screenplay for that to happen. The screenwriter should be compromising to let others on the set blossom, as well. Brief descriptions of the setting and action should be sufficient; several paragraphs of description will not work. Then put in dialog. It should be remember that the screenplay is a blueprint and a blueprint only. Do not put camera angles, or visual grammar or editing grammar in there. The other artists such as editor, cameraman and production designers will be able to bring their sensibilities to the film. The screenwriter and director ought to listen to them and their expertise. It is also important to remember that the film is first made on the paper. It is made first, for the reader. If the screenwriter cannot convince the reader, then it is not possible to make it in to a film.

What are the structural elements of a script?

In addition to the mainstream 3-act structure, there are other structural elements in a script, which include plot, character, setting, time, dialog and pace. Often, a script will fail to work because it lacks the bloodstream of the story: one of these elements. At other times, these elements are not placed properly. The sequence of these structural elements will help decide if the script will get converted in to a film. Adaptation was a beautiful film about adapting a prior-written work in to a screenplay. The prior written story was about flowers. How do you make a film about flowers? This film shows us how the Oscar-winning Charlie Kaufman (for Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind) adapted the novel, The Orchid Thief by Susan Orlean, in to a film.

Why is it important to predict Hollywood’s upcoming trends?

Being able to predict Hollywood’s upcoming trends is a way to stay ahead of the curve. If Hollywood is looking for stories set in the middle-east, screenwriters who are averse to writing anything about the middle-east will not be able to find any work. This is a way to know and understand the market. Not the audience, but the Hollywood executive machine: what do they want to consume and then sell? Being able to understand their needs will help understand how to get the attention from the proper executive, and the proper agent. Remember that the executives are reading hundreds of scripts every week.

Describe what a synopsis should entail.

The synopsis should be able to tell the entire story in a few pages. It will leave out scene-description and dialog and should still be able to convey and tell the story in a few pages. I t has to pop off the page, should be double-spaced and should be written with more urgency than the script. Set up the story, tell it, and get out again as quickly as possible. Always end the synopsis in a way that leads the development executive to read more. You want anyone to feel excited enough that they will ask for the full screenplay. This should catch the attention of any development executive who will ask for the screenplay.

What is creative discipline? Why is it important?

Creative discipline is the ability to practice every day: get up every day, sit down at the writing desk and work on the story and characters. Stephen King believes one should write four-to-six hours a day. John Updike will write thousand words every day. It is important to be consistent, whatever the method one chooses because only with discipline, practice and hard work, will the small idea develop in to a beautiful story with appealing characters.