



# AVOID THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE SCREENWRITERS MAKE

**Two experienced script readers tell you how to avoid  
the most common mistakes they see over and over**

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from [SellingYourScreenplay.com](http://SellingYourScreenplay.com)

# Avoid The Most Common Mistakes Screenwriters Make

Provided by [SellingYourScreenplay.com](http://SellingYourScreenplay.com)

In this guide two of our top readers provide valuable insight into the most common mistakes they see screenwriters make. Both of these readers have read hundreds of screenplays, so their input is invaluable for anyone looking to submit their screenplay to a production company, agent, or manager.

Both readers are available to review your scripts through the [SYS Script Analysis service](#).

Nancy W's top 5 mistakes are:

## 1. Meet The Players

Character introductions are a unique opportunity to stamp a character's circumstances, personality, and quirks onto the brains of your audience. Treat character intros like the foundation on which to build their entire arc. Introduce each character through unique behavior; show us how they each deal with their world in their own special ways. I read so many scripts where characters show up and start talking about the plot, rushing past this crucial moment of introduction. Find a unique way to introduce us to each of your main characters, and we'll be excited to spend 90+ pages with them.

## 2. Charge!

It's in our blood as moviegoers to want to watch a protagonist go on a transformational journey. No matter how brave or meek your character, we want to watch someone ACTIVE, whether his or her actions involve breaking out of prison or simply standing up to a crappy boss. But frequently scripts are all about things happening *to* a character, or others explaining everything to the protagonist. We want to watch someone figure things out and make decisions, so keep your main character active!

## 3. Whose Scene Is It?

When scenes don't have a clear point-of-view, readers have no one to guide us through the story. We feel disconnected, which means we feel *bored*, no matter how great the action or dialogue. Write every scene from a specific point-of-view, so that your readers are grounded with a character at all times. The point-of-view will likely belong to your protagonist, though some scenes may happen without them. Visualize the scene from one character's point of view when you're writing; let us see what they see and feel what they feel.

## 4. Devil's In The Details

Every script, even the talkiest of dramedies, needs a VILLAIN. We know the great movie villains, but not every villain needs to be a Wicked Witch. The basic definition of an antagonist is a character who *stands in the way of your protagonist achieving his or her goal*. The antagonist doesn't need to be evil, or even a bad dude – they just need to have an opposing goal to that of your protagonist, and a plan for how they will prevail. Then, they fight to the death! Or at least to the unexpected yet inevitable conclusion of your story... big drama or not, every movie needs a "bad guy."

## 5. Read Between The Lines

I read a LOT of scripts in which characters always say exactly what's on their minds. This is called "on the nose" dialogue... and it's not good. Think about how real people communicate – they lie, they fib, they obfuscate, they flatter, they manipulate... Movie dialogue has to be all that and more. This is called *subtext* – when people say one thing but mean another – and it will take your script to the next level.

Hint: great actors love subtext.

## Steve D's top 5 mistakes are:

### 1. Flashback Abuse

Unfortunately, flashbacks typically hurt the pacing of a story more than they help it. If your story opens up with a man sitting on the beach and then a flashback immediately occurs, you have already lost your audience. Ask yourself "Have I built enough momentum or trajectory to keep people interested in the present timeline before I jump backwards?" If not much has happened in your script, do not employ flashbacks just yet. When in doubt, stick with a chronological presentation. This format might not feel as flashy and stylish, but it shows that the writer has confidence in their narrative when they do not attempt to dress it up with a needlessly complicated presentation.

### 2. Copyrighted Material Is Included

When a script says "They take out their iPhone," producers will instantly begin to calculate the licensing fees for iPhones and add them into the potential budget. Licensing big name products or concepts is expensive, and it will automatically increase the perceived budget by astronomical amounts. Before you submit your material, make sure you've reverted your "iPhones" to "phones," your "Starbucks" to "coffee," and as much as it might pain you to do so, make sure you remove your suggested soundtrack choices unless they are absolutely necessary to the telling of the story.

### 3. Camera or Editing Directions Are Included

Placing camera or editing directions such as pans or slow motion suggestions into a script can be detrimental to the chance of it being picked up. These decisions, while fun to imagine, are not the job of a screenwriter in the spec phase, but rather, they are the job of a potential cinematographer, director, or editor when and if the film goes into production. When a producer or developer see a script that is heavy on camera directions, they may feel that the writer is stepping on the toes of some of the other potential future team members.

### 4. Uneven Script Texture

Developers and producers will often judge a script by flipping through it and checking the aesthetic balance of action and dialogue. If they see an imbalance of these elements, they might decide to pass on the script right off the bat, as the cinematic rhythm of action and dialogue is of the utmost importance. To avoid this issue, occasionally go back, review the last few pages you have written, and ask yourself if they *look* like a script. If they contain huge, blocky sections of action or pages consisting of nothing but dialogue, your script texture may be in need of some reformatting.

#### 5. The Protagonist Does Not Grow or Change Throughout the Story

Writers often forget to include easily identifiable moments that showcase how the protagonist is being changed by their journey. A lack of character growth essentially makes it feel as if the story was not important enough to make an impact in the protagonist's life. After you write your final lines, look back on your work and ask yourself if the protagonist seems as though they have gone through a noticeable arc over the course of the events. If the answer is no, go back and define his their personal journey a bit more thoroughly.

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