

## Karol Griffiths

### Breaking the surface – navigating writers to the Deep... Techniques to vitalise writers and creative authenticity

Baden/Austria, 20 October 2017

I'm very excited to be with you today to talk about the deep voice. For me, it's really one of the most important topics. Any mentor can work with this because that's what we're all trying to harness, the deep voice for writers. I've never spoken about it in this way before. It was a very interesting exercise for me to think about what I do naturally. As with anything like this, you learn so much. I will explain my process to you and then, of course, be open to questions.

Working with any artist on their craft is a huge responsibility. You have to be so gentle and kind and patient. You have to listen a lot and not feel like you need to speak so much. It's about having respect for the writer, for the writing, and for the creative process whether the writer is very new or very experienced. I try to come in the same way with everyone and try to have equal ground for everyone.

One of the ways I can describe my approach to writing could be called "method writing" as it's an organic approach, much like method acting is an organic approach to acting. Like acting, this method involves going back into one's memories or putting oneself into someone else's shoes to get to that strong emotional connection with the inner world of a character and his or her story. The goal is to feel what it's like to live that experience as if it was happening now making the writing more compelling. That's the process, really, going into that deep place of imagination, visualisation, re-enactment. What was it like to be at that place at that time? What would it have been like if you hadn't been there? Like method acting, it's about trying to come as close as you can to a memory or an expression that will lead you to that authentic place, moment, event or relationship.



One of the ways I can describe my approach to writing could be called "method writing" as it's an organic approach, much like method acting is an organic approach to acting. Like acting, this method involves going back into one's memories or putting oneself into someone else's shoes to get to that strong emotional connection with the inner world of a character and his or her story. The goal is to feel what it's like to live that experience as if it was happening now making the writing more compelling. That's the process, really, going into that deep place of imagination, visualisation, re-enactment. What was it like to be at that place at that time? What would it have been like if you hadn't been there? Like method acting, it's about trying to come as close as you can to a memory or an expression that will lead you to that authentic place, moment, event or relationship.

I've been working with writers professionally in various capacities for over twenty years starting out in the theatre. This method has been used in working with playwrights and actors. But I started out in the theatre much, much younger. My uncle was an actor who belonged to an acting troupe on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. I was one of the only kids related to anyone in that troupe so I got cast whenever they needed a child on stage. I wasn't a very good actress, but I was free and so I got to play in all kinds of different plays from Ibsen to light comedies. What it gave me was the experience of hearing people examining all kinds of texts. That's how it started for me.

I remember that I loved hearing the writing spoken out loud, the sounds and rhythms the actors' voices made, the use of language to create feeling, and then watching as those words were married to physical actions that got performed on the stage. That's what we're all doing, isn't it? I didn't always understand what the words meant, but as kids we understand feelings. That's what I got from those plays; I remember that. Those emotions are what all of us want to connect to when we're trying to connect to the deep voice. It's what we're striving for.

Once the story bug bit me, I never looked back. I wanted to work with writing in some way. In college, against my very practical father's wishes – he wanted me to be a computer scientist – I studied theatre and dramaturgy. It was the only thing I thought I would enjoy doing. I was very lucky because I went to a very good drama school and we had very experienced teachers. At school I worked with both seasoned and beginning writers, working deeply with the text and learning how that text gets translated into action. It's different from film, but the basics are the same. I also learned how audiences react to that writing and the words.

After graduating, I had the good fortune of working with the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, a very method theatre. It was John Malkovich's company so it was all about being rebellious. For all their performances, they had this tradition of giving a free ticket and a meal to war veterans the night before the first preview of all of their shows. This was for homeless people also, so all kinds of people got to come to the theatre for free. It created a very different environment than an audience of theatre ticket buyers. It was a terrifying experience - I'd never seen anything like it because it became an interactive event. They were questioning the actors as they were reciting their dialogue. They were having conversations among themselves. Some would stand on chairs and yell at what was going on onstage. Usually when we go to the theatre, it's all very polite. But here there was this completely raw reaction because they didn't have this kind of perception of how one has to behave in the theatre.

There was an elderly vet character in the play. At some point, the landlady's menacing husband returns after being away, and he's being mean to his wife. The whole audience started yelling at the vet, "*Take care of that! Brothers in arms, brothers in arms!*" It was so strange to see, but it made me more sensitised to the power writers have. After the show there was a question and answer session. Every one of the vets stayed to talk to the playwright. They asked great questions, wanting to understand why he'd made certain choices. Most of them said they enjoyed the play, but many insisted it needed a new ending because the ending was just too upsetting. [laughter] But they were all so delighted to be there. It was really a fascinating experience.

Later over drinks, we learned that Veterans' Night was considered a rite of passage with anyone new working with the company. It happened almost every time and the actors just loved it. They would never stop doing it because it's a pure expression of what an audience is getting. They can really gauge how a play is working. They really counted on that kind of truth. It was incredibly intense for the playwright as well.

All this ties into exercises that I'm going to share with you about creativity and getting to the deep voice. It's about experiencing the deep voice in your life. We have to recognise all the multiple

voices we can use and to know when we're going into a deep voice when we work with writers. Many of these voices will be authentic and true. But then you also have the presentational voices, and these are the voices from which we try to break free. They are about pretence, not the core of what we're going for when we're trying to find the truth in a script or a story, whether it's telling it, or writing it, or acting it.

After *Steppenwolf*, I went back to New York to do more theatre, and ended up doing a play with a wonderful actress named Francis McDormand. When the production ended, Fran told me that her boyfriend had a small film company, and asked if I'd like to come work there. I hadn't ever thought about doing film. I always thought I would stay in the theatre. But I've also never really had a life plan. She told me I'd be perfect and they wouldn't care if I had no film experience.

I didn't know Joel and Ethan Coen or that working for them would alter the direction of my life... But I met them and ended up working quite a few years for them. I always say that I've had a lot of luck in my career. But I believe that it's also always about creating our own luck by not shying away from incredible opportunities, like the one I took coming to Austria to speak to you. That's true when you're working with new writers. If there's anything that feels right, you just have to go with it. We use that inner voice every day in making decisions.

My time working with the Coen brothers was fantastic and educational, particularly when it came to learning how to work with writers. Working with them and watching them create was amazing. We spent hours and hours in there. They keep to a very strict writing schedule and seldom veer away from it, which happens to be a trait that the most successful writers I have worked with all have in common. They honour their writing time. Unless something unusual happens, they stick to a schedule. For example, writing from 10 to 5 today with an hour break. Nothing interrupts the writing. Always pay attention to how writers treat their writing time. If they're not going to put in the time, they're not going to go deep. I work with writers on their writing but also on developing a writing process. They go hand in hand.

There wasn't really a lot of film production in New York at the time. The Coen brothers were very generous, however, in giving me the opportunity to meet other filmmakers working in New York such as John Sayles. One of the most interesting aspects of working with the Coens is how visual they are. I've never worked with writers who are as visual. Joel, especially, thinks in pictures – using different angles and elements to discover what the inner voice wants to express.

The other thing that is remarkable about them is their inexhaustible desire to get it right, and by "right" I mean what they felt was right, not what the audience would want to see. They will sit for hours and hours examining every beat of their script in every scene, every motivation, every character, and every sentence. They're so aware of where the beats are and where the silences should be in the material. That was the overall lesson for me – how much work it takes and how intense the process is. They'd read all the dialogue out loud. They would tirelessly ask the "what if" questions. I'm not sure you'll know the references to the films, but the questions would be something like, What if *The Dude* only drank White Russians? What if Walter is serious about observing Shabbat, the Jewish holy day, in *The Big Lebowski*? What if Buzz, the elevator operator has a great idea for Hudsucker Industries, but Norville steals it? "You know, for kids."

These ideas came from the "what if" exercises and made it into the films... They're little gold nuggets in the script. So I suppose the greatest lesson I've learned is to be patient because the craft of screenwriting takes time, and the thorough investigation of every element and aspect of the script. It's not the only way it's done, but it's the best way that I have found.

Writers are not always that patient; they want results yesterday. I recently had a newer and very concerned writer come to me to complain that he had notes on his first draft. I found that

astounding! Really? What did you expect? He mentioned Damien Chazelle – and said that he was also hoping for overnight success... BUT *Whiplash* took Damien over a year to write - I explained that overnight success is just a matter of perception. It's not to be taken literally. It's nice to dream about the possibility of success overnight - but chances are you're going to have to work for a few years... In my experience, "overnight success" is not a real thing.

Our job as mentors is to help guide writers through this process, and to formulate these methods to create the writing practice that suits them. I took many different methods that I've learned over the years, and have used them in my work with writers. For anyone who watched Louise this afternoon asking all the questions, that's how it done. That's the beginning, the tip of the iceberg of helping writers go into deep voice. We, mentors, have to go into deep voice to ask the right questions. And that wasn't something I was consciously aware of until I watched Louise. We do it automatically – through careful, and deep examination. Investigating the forensics of the story... Some of it is intellectual, but the deep voice and the intellect have to be connected. That was really fascinating to witness today.

In asking questions, we're leading writers to finding their own answers (and learning to question themselves) because the answers should come directly from them. When you're working professionally for a network, studio, or production, we all know how complicated notes in development can be. The process of script development in this industry can easily become a confusing maze. Everyone involved in the process has an opinion or an agenda; multiple agendas, multiple opinions with different things at stake. As professionals, screenwriters must cope with coming up with the answers to navigate through all those notes while staying true to what they want to write. In order to do that, they have to have strength, a solid grasp of their own voice.

In a meeting when loads of different ideas are coming at the writer, they may all sound good. But back alone with the script; it can be hard to tell what in the world happened. What is to be done with all of those notes? Because before we get to product, there's process. That process comes in stages. There is the training, learning the basic craft and developing voice. Then comes going deeper and being able to differentiate between outside voices and one's own inner voice. Writers need to have that confidence in place before they can sit down to produce product. Writers come to us in varying stages of readiness. They either have that experience or they don't but we have to work with them in that capacity. Whatever the situation, we have to help them remember the process before focusing entirely on the product. That's a big element in the beginning. Writers must be comfortable with, and learn to trust their own creativity first, so that they are prepared to tackle all those notes with authority, precision and hopefully good humour.

I'm frequently asked if creativity can be taught and I believe it can be, yes. I believe most everyone here believes that, which is why we're here. It's a muscle and it needs to be exercised. Hopefully this is starting to help you understand what I mean when I say deep voice. When I say deep voice, I am referring to the authentic voice of the writer, the true voice. It's the voice that comes from the gut and yes, it's eventually connected to the intellect but it starts in a deeper place, that introspective, reflective voice filled with feeling and purpose. It's the reason why writers write. The deep voice can only come when the writer is deeply connected to what they're writing regardless of genre or tone. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about a silly comedy or something more serious. It has to be connected to authentic expression.

But writers are not always consciously aware of why they are motivated to tell a particular story. The first question I ask a writer is, "Why this story?" Many times the writer doesn't have any idea. Something triggered it – a conversation, an event, a relationship, whatever it was. They have to work their way out of this inspiration and build it and let it grow through this authentic process. Writers don't always know what that is. But if you can discover how the idea came about, that's the beginning of the conversation. You're asking them to go back in their memory. You start with the

trigger for the story, and that will start you on your path towards voice. A lot of you might do this naturally, but when you can analyse it through asking these questions, it forces you to start at the beginning. Why this story? You don't know? Okay, then what brought this story to your mind?

It's not a criticism but just an observation about writers that they might not know why they need to tell a story. Don't dismiss it to mean they don't know what they're doing. Conversely, if a writer has too many answers, I get nervous because that means it's all coming from the head. I get nervous when it's too easy. When they don't have the answers that could be a very good sign because then there's room to grow and to explore.

In our business, unlike a lot of other art forms, creativity has to connect with reason. They have to coexist. A project that we're doing has to work in terms of many other things that occur collaboratively in film and television where there are all these other considerations. Again, I'm talking about the time before we get to the product. Creativity, at that point, needs to flow freely and not be curtailed too much quite yet. Eventually, yes, you'll have to since there will be budgets and other restrictions. But the journey always *begins* with the writer tapping into their internal creative source. It's akin to having the luxury to rehearse when you make a film. When I started in film, there were always rehearsals. Now, you're lucky if you get a table read. It still does happen. I hear that Ken Loach still has lots of rehearsal time. There's a lot to be gained by that. I encourage that whenever it's possible. People are expected to produce, produce, produce. Maybe that's not so true here in Europe. I hope that's not true. But it probably is --- because it involves money.

But going back to process and the questions: Why this particular story? Was it an image, a feeling, a moral issue? If the answer is simply that they have been commissioned to write the script and it's about collecting a pay cheque, you know you're in trouble. If you are in that situation where there's nothing at stake for the writer except that, you have to find something that they care about in the story. Having just financial motivation will never bring about good writing. It will be empty. Hopefully they wouldn't have taken the job if they had absolutely nothing to say, but it happens. It certainly happens in Hollywood. You see it all the time – people getting a lot of money to phone in some crazy story that makes no sense. But I think most of us are not in this business to do that. Most of us want to be working on great projects that move us, that inform us about life, and inspire us. Most writers didn't get into this business to just re-write someone else's story and get a pay cheque.

After asking those initial questions comes the next layer. This brings up questions such as: Whose story is this? What do they want? What do they need? What is preventing them from getting it? What conflict is driving the story? Once those basic questions are answered, then we start going back and forth and finding out how the answers to those questions are supporting the writing. What are the rules of the world being created?

What I want to say at this point is that every writer is going to have his or her own method. As mentors, we have to work with the methods he or she is working with. For example, I work with a writer who does everything on Excel spreadsheets. That is just crazy to me. He sends me these spreadsheets. He loves the little boxes that do all these things. [laughter] But I have to work with him like this because to him, that's how he visualises everything. So I work with him his way.

It's important when you're working with writers that you remember not everyone works the same way you do. They have their own language. As long as there is common ground and you can meet there and understand one another, that's all that matters. Visualising can be an Excel spreadsheet. It wouldn't be for me, but I've seen it done.

So I'll use an example of something he and I worked on together. As usual, I started by asking, "Why this story?" He's writing a science fiction drama, and he tells me he isn't sure why he wants to

write it, but he thinks it would be interesting to explore this idea of having super powers. Okay, not the most unique idea, but it's something he wanted to explore. But what he was interested in was exploring the downsides of having super powers. What *are* the downsides of having super powers? There is isolation, lack of boundaries, having too much power over others – those kinds of things – in other words, the limitations we human beings have and all the different sides to what that means. The movies about people with super powers are so popular because we, as human beings, feel powerless a lot of the time.

We dug further and after lengthy discussions, he came to realise that he's questioning his mortality, questioning life after death – things we all dwell on and perhaps worry about. We came to realise really important issues for him in the context of this story. He's dealing with those based on a real experience of someone in his family dying. This event triggered all these ideas about life and death and what he can and cannot control.

You go back to those multitudes of questions. I've written a book with a chapter called "Asking the Right Questions", and it contains lists and lists of questions. One thing leads to another with these questions. Most of the answers that are going to be useful for the writing itself are about how the characters' journeys in stories work based on the answers to these questions. It's really the characters' point of view that determines how we travel through the story. We start with the writer's feelings and then move into the characterisations.

We really don't care about plot. It's the people in the story that we care about. Asking questions is the key to unlocking the essence and purpose of the characters in the story. This is the basis for all of my work. The great thing about asking questions as a mentor is that it's not an invasive process. It's a respectful process that allows the writer to come up with his or her own answers and not be overly influenced by you and your opinions. You can guide your questions in certain ways, but still it's their process and it's meant to get them to incorporate their answers to these questions in the writing. Answering my questions enables the writer to go deeper. It gently reveals where things are unclear, where the holes in the fabric of the story are and where greater attention to detail is required. It drives the writer to explore alternative possibilities, to create backstory for the characters, their motivational drives, to reflect on the questions of theme, and to make decisions that are rooted in logical, truthful, organic foundations. These answers come over time through this process, which is constant exploring and layering, exploring and layering. Every choice the writer makes for a character has a consequence for the story and for the characters. Those consequences need to support the theme and the overall story.

This is why it's so essential to prepare this kind of work before meeting with a writer. You circle the idea of the story and try to figure out what the writer is trying to do. What are the impressions of what you've read or heard, and what questions stem organically from those impressions? That's where you have to start. It's very logical. The interesting thing about the creative process, unlike life where we think very linearly and straightforwardly, is that creativity works in a more circular way. I will ask writers to imagine being a bird – flying high above the landscape, circling over the story they wish to tell. Without judgment or preconceived notions - simply look down and observe the area. Get a sense of the colours, tones, and shapes of the world below.

What do you see? Are you flying over a crowded beach --- or a deserted cityscape? What sounds do you hear? Are you watching young couple swimming in sea, the sounds of waves crashing onto the shore? Or are you following a white Bronco as it races along the California freeway with a procession of police cars trailing behind? What is the weather like?

Are you feeling anxious or relaxed watching the images unfold?

What creatures/events/images are you aware of?

Notice which elements stand out, and how they make you feel.

Where are you being guided?

It's about having that bird's eye view so that they can decide where to dig in deeper.

A back-and-forth dialogue happens as the inception of the idea begins to form. Then an incubation period, the writer then writes the idea or story down in an impressionistic way. I will follow this up by offering over exercises that will get them to start pulling together answers to the story questions. Writing a synopsis/premise line will really help. I usually suggest a premise line because it's more detailed than the kind of synopsis you would send to a producer – which is often merely a list of plot points. A premise line is a useful tool for the writer. “When this happens to this character, such and such happens and they feel this way or that and such and such is a result... etc.” You're having the writer distil down the strongest images, beats, themes, conflicts of the story, along with its emotional arc. The premise line then becomes the compass for the writer – helping them stay on track. (Or else help guide them to how they might need to change things).

Continue by asking more questions. Can they think about these things from the character's point of view? What is the character doing that supports the theme? You keep peeling the layers of the onion away. Once a writer goes through this process a couple of times, he or she will start to do this without you. That's really the goal – to get the writer to start asking these questions. It accelerates the work process eventually so that they can get to the product. The long process I'm describing is the training. If the writer can start with this thought process very early on the journey in writing their script, the amount of time and energy that gets saved is significant. And as the process becomes more natural, it tends to become easier. Occasionally, a story will be harder to unearth – that can be particularly true for personal stories or stories based on true events or needing research, but as a basic rule, this is how it all starts.

The key to making the script and the writing stronger is through their voice. So, let's talk specifically about voice then. Finding a unique voice is the Holy Grail for producers. We all have unique voices if only we can reach them. I studied with a writing coach in California for many years who is a poet, playwright and screenwriter. Jack Grapes had a philosophy that all writing, no matter the format, is a form of poetry. It took me a long time to absorb what he meant, but I've come to understand that it's quite simple... any genuine, or deeply truthful expression is in essence, a kind of poem. The importance is – getting to the heart of something true...

What are the techniques one can use to get there? Or where to begin? Even though I'm working on a screenplay with a writer, I will have them do prose exercises, which is also something I learned from Jack. I'll ask them to write a two-page document telling me the story, almost like a bedtime story. As they're writing this, I'll ask them to write it as if they are speaking. In other words, to write how they talk, stripping away all of the writerly aspects that we put on when we want to sound literary. Trying to sound literary – is the kiss of death to authenticity. But writing like you speak gets you comfortable with your own syntax, speech patterns, the true voice.

One exercise to grasping the true voice is asking the writer to write about an event that happened recently. Then I ask them to tell me about the experience. I'll record them telling me... Then we'll compare the differences between what is written and what was spoken. Nine times out of ten we'll hear the authentic voice when they're speaking – not when they were writing... From an early age, we learn to try to appear smart when we write; we put airs on to sound clever... to show that we have the facility to play with language. But when we're talking those airs usually disappear. Getting to the deep voice is a matter of eliminating those airs/mannerisms. This way of telling story is a direct link to how the dialogue might be written. So there are two lessons for the price of one right there. [laughter]

As I mentioned before, we all have multiple authentic voices – the reporter or the narrator is the voice that is not emotionally engaged. There is the voice from the head that's all about frenetic energy/ informing- the handing over of information. Then there's the ultimate goal of the deep voice that comes from the gut – and many voices in between. All of them can be authentic and work together in a bigger piece of writing such as a screenplay.

Another exercise I learned from Jack Grapes was that when the prose are written, you start to look for what he called transformation lines. If you say that you went to a writers' convention and "I did this and I did that", you start to highlight those lines that contain "I" in them. Sentences that contain 'I' are a doorway into character. We look at all of the "I" sentences in that paragraph and start examining what hides beneath that initial layer. If in the prose it says, "I am tired" we want to know how that makes the character feel. A method actor would say, "I'm tired", and then ask: "Why am I so tired? "I'm tired because... I didn't sleep last night", or "I'm working too hard", and that can segue into a monologue that works toward the transformation to deep feelings. "I'm tired because I was up all night. I'm the only one in my house that works because" – because, because, because, whatever it is. Working through the "I" sentences leads to the inner world of the character – as well as, specific images and moments.

Before I open up to questions I'd like to share a few more exercises that you can do. They're not all involving the words themselves. One exercise that I love, is asking the writer to make a map of the world of their story. What you do is - get a giant piece of paper and have the writer map draw a blueprint of what the story world looks like. If you're writing *Game of Thrones*, that map is going to be huge! If you're writing a script like *Room*, the map of that world is going to be mostly inside that one room. Maybe there's a window? Maybe not. Doing this explores the spatial relationships that impact the characters. It's really fantastic, especially when boredom or frustration sets in for the writer, it's really helpful to move outside of the words. A mood board is a similar idea, or making a collage of a key scene. If you haven't tried the map, please do. You won't believe how great it is. It's so much fun and so interesting to see how the writer is working towards constructing the world. To make sense of the world in this way can be a huge breakthrough in the process because it makes things feel real and visibly tangible to the writer.

Sometimes you will work with a writer who will tell you that he or she doesn't know how to visualise. But then I'll ask them: Well, can you remember things? [laughter] What were you wearing at your wedding? Or, who was your first kiss? If you can remember things, you can visualise. Talk them through their memories, because that's all visualisation is – tapping into memory. I'll also ask writers to create a list of all the images they can imagine that might be in their story – this can be locations, costumes, props, moments in scenes... anything that strikes them. This is another way of helping them to express what's inside their head. By getting it out they begin to connect to the story on a visceral, physical level.

I will have them write character descriptions - sometimes in the voices of their characters, as the character might talk. Just as you have them write the action the way they talk, character descriptions can be written in the character's distinct voice.

I give writers writing prompts that involve specific areas or elements of their script. One example might be if there is a scene, say in a courtroom, and the writer is stuck. Sometimes it's helpful for them to write a scene we know won't end up in the script to get to some important development issues in the story. For example, if the courtroom scene is about a divorce case, I might ask the writer to write an argument they had, or to write the scene when they decided to call it quits – so that tone of the dialogue, their voices and how they're relating to one another is clear. Because then when they write the courtroom scene, the characters will have strong points of view and probably come across as more three-dimensional.

I recently worked with a big television writer in the UK who told me that he never thinks or worries about backstory or character histories. We were in conversation in front of a lot of writing students and I was a little concerned by his statement. I thought it was poor advice and I had to think quickly - what question could I ask him to get the answer that I needed to put these writers back on track? I asked him what he did when an actor asks him a question about their character's history. And he said, "I tell them." I knew I had him there... Because how can you tell them if you haven't plotted it



out? Which was my next question... “Well, how do you tell them if you don’t have backstory? Do you make it up on the spot?” “No!” he said, “I just know it. It’s in here,” he tapped the side of his head. I said: “So the bottom line is that you *do* write backstory. You have to. That’s how it works.” He laughed, admitting that he does but not as intensely as he used to. Because he’s such an experienced writer, the process has become second nature to him – but he still needs to know the answer to all the questions.

We’re running out of time – but if you want to talk to me more in depth about the exercises, I’m more than happy to do so in private and share whatever I know with you. Thank you.

So are there any questions I can answer?

AUDIENCE Yes, please talk more about the methods. [laughter]

K. GRIFFITHS Okay, well, we start with and ask the “what if” questions a hundred million times. But as a mentor, you do have to be careful with the “what ifs” and make sure it’s the writer coming up with the ideas. It’s best to ask the writer to come up with those “what if” questions in his or her own words. For example, if in a chase scene there are various ways it might go... and you want the writer to think about the possibilities - you might simply ask – “Who is chasing whom? Are the characters running *away* or *towards* something? What kind of chase is this? It can be that broad – the point is to get them to think of the options.

I definitely recommend having the writer write scenes or dialogue that won’t be in the script that can inform character and influence story. That’s a major one and I use it a lot.

If a writer comes to me having already written a first draft but it’s not working, I will often ask them to go through that draft – reviewing it for scene intentions. I will honour the fact that they’ve accomplished writing a full draft. But then I’ll have him go scene by scene and pick out all the intentions that are happening in the story. What has to be shown? What has to be said? What has to be emotionally felt in the scene? Every scene needs to have a purpose – and often looking at it from that point of view will help reshape the piece. How many scenes don’t have a clear intention? Maybe it’s just in there because it’s cool or commercial, whatever the justification is. There should be multiple intentions, multiple layers, in each scene. So, we’ll look at how each scene does or doesn’t move the story forward.

Sometimes I’ll suggest a beat sheet, but that means different things to different people. Please understand that when you’re working with a writer they may define a term differently than you might. So you need to clarify that you’re both talking about the same thing. Part of our job as mentors is making sure we’re speaking the same language and that we understand each other. So a beat sheet can mean writing down beat by beat what we see on screen. The opening image. Then what? Then what? It can also mean what is happening to the main character emotionally – beat by beat. These can be discussed and defined in many ways... just make sure you are clear with each other what the intentions are.

I will also have writers read scripts - not in order to emulate them, but to learn from them. Read scripts, watch movies, and write synopses about what they watch. This helps them learn to distil down the story. We all have different impressions and when you compare your synopsis against what’s been written about the same film, it might be very, very different. Through this exercise we can learn different aspects of how story is viewed... and observe how the writer accomplished, or failed to accomplish getting their idea across. This helps writers grasp how important it is to make sure the elements within their scripts are clear.

For that same reason, I will often write a synopsis/premise line for my client’s projects. I will share it with them to ensure that I understand what they are trying to put across in their script and to show them, how I view their story. I ask if that is what they were envisioning? Am I seeing what they have intended an audience to see? Doing this exercise ensures that we are starting off on the right foot –

# SOURCES 2

SCREENWRITING | DEVELOPMENT  
NETWORKING | TRAINING

working towards the writer's desired direction - together. It infuses trust - we need to trust one another in order to work - together. It's important to assure the writer that you are examining their work carefully (thoughtfully) and trying to get to the core of what he or she is trying to say. As mentors, we also need to go into the deep voice to find out what the writer's intentions are.

Sometimes, just for fun, I'll ask them to write down all the worst ideas they have and get that over with. Often what they think is a worst idea is not that bad. But it takes some pressure off. It's another way to explore themes. It's so much, isn't it? It's a lot of information.

The final thing I'll say tonight is another lesson I learned from Jack Grapes. He would often say that talent is the biggest obstacle writers (artists) have. Depending on talent will only get them so far.

Most accomplished writers will admit that writing the second script can prove much harder than the first, especially if their first one was a success. Writers can become afraid of being a one-hit wonder. But establishing a working practice helps steady the nerves, keeping them working and focused. Of course there will always be a bit of luck involved, but if there's a method to the writer's madness – chances are the luck will be good. Then they will be prepared, they will have the skills that will guide and serve them through an entire career. Inspiration doesn't always come when you call - sometimes you have to go to it.

Thanks again to all of you for listening.

APPLAUSE