

NOW WRITE! SCREENWRITING SAMPLE EXERCISE

The Almighty Verb

by Beth Serlin

Powerful cinema stories—we all want to write them. Our brains run amok with premises and plot twists, characters by the dozen, structural mayhem—it's enough to drive a poor writer batty. Lucky for us there's a single word that elevates storytelling and breathes life into our screenplays. It's one of the most effective fundamentals in a writer's toolbox but also the one most overlooked: I give you the almighty verb.

When we think of cinema stories we think of action. The verb takes center stage when writing action, which really means movement toward an objective or, more specifically, movement toward a character's objective. Why then do so many writers employ the dullest verbs in the book? A perfectly good scene can be hijacked by "He takes the gun from his pocket and goes into the 7-Eleven." Armed with proper verbs, you can transform the mundane into a memorable visual moment that reveals character: "He fumbles the gun from his pocket and trips into the 7-Eleven." Now we've got a sense of this guy's inexperience and reluctance, which creates automatic tension before anything even happens. What's more, we abide by screenwriting's one and only rule: Don't be boring. If someone would rather feather dust his bookshelf than read your screen direction, you've essentially lost the "screen" before the "play" even begins. After slugging through development of an original idea with unique characters and sizzling dialogue, why belittle all that effort with some version of the most hackneyed, dog-eared verb in the English language: to be? Remember, this verb didn't work out so well for Hamlet either.

So what can we do to suck in and rivet our readers? We want them spellbound, ignoring the phone, the doorbell, the urge to go to the bathroom, because they can't wait to see what happens next. The answer is deceptively simple: Find verbs that contain emotional connotation and can stand alone, without needing adjectives to qualify their existence.

These almighty verbs evoke tone, atmosphere and feeling. They excel at externalizing the internal landscape of a character. Different images spring to mind when your hero darts, struts or slithers across a room versus when she or he moves across it. Specificity makes a verb potent and therefore more efficient. This is critical for the screenplay form that has as much white space as black marks on the page and thus requires that every word propel the story forward. I always remind my students (and myself): The picture that paints a thousand words is written with the fewest. Almighty verbs help make this happen, and you can too by creating a personal Writer's Thesaurus.

EXERCISE

Zeroing in on almighty verbs requires a simple, mindful practice: the creation of a personal Writer's Thesaurus. This essential reference will help transform boring verbs into brilliant ones. Start with the ten dulllest verbs you can think of. My current favorites are: to enter, to exit, to look, to walk, to sit, to hit, to move quickly, to get, to stand, to think. For each of yours, find ten almighty verbs that mean the same but evoke specific emotion. Every time you come across an interesting verb, add it to your list. Consciously practice using these verbs, and before long the list will become second nature.

No matter what kind of story you weave, the journey to create a captivating screenplay may detour into the land of nod. With a personal Writer's Thesaurus in your first aid kit, you can easily “wake up” your writing and keep your reader turning the pages.