

Your Coverage and You

by Jason Hallock

Overview

You're a busy Hollywood executive who receives upwards of twenty-five submissions a week. You've got spec screenplays, writing samples, novels with Academy Award potential. You've also got screenings, lunches, story meetings, pitch sessions, and that pesky broken dash light on your Mercedes. You don't have time to do it all, so you hire a Reader—*ahem*, "Story Analyst"—to help separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff.

Ah, script reading. What a glamorous job. You, too, can sit at home all day listening to election coverage and eating bonbons, while simply reading your way to financial security. Hardly. Actually, you're usually on PVT (Pacific Vampire Time), swilling coffee and trying to figure out yet another nice way of saying "hopelessly banal." What follows are a few tips to make that long and rocky path a little easier.

First, a few things you already know...

WHAT COVERAGE IS FOR

An article in *Variety* once equated readers to Cerberus, the three-headed dog which guarded the gates of Hades. It's a fitting, but flawed, analogy. The first duty of the Reader isn't so much to keep bad material out as it is to flag material that should be read.

Secondly, good coverage should make the executive feel like they've practically read the material themselves. This means a succinct, effective synopsis that, when possible, reflects the tone of the narrative, in addition to a concise, informative comments section that highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the material.

Finally, here's a big lecture about good writing. You absolutely cannot critique someone else's writing if you don't take the time to be a good writer yourself. That means no typos, no grammar goofs, and no mismatched homonyms. In sum: "nothing will discredit you're coverage more faster than bad righting."

Super-Secret Tip (a.k.a. "Stating the Obvious"):

- **Rigorous Proofreading** is absolutely essential to writing good coverage.

BASIC FORMAT

Coverage almost always consists of three parts,

1. Cover page
2. Synopsis
3. Comments section

1. THE COVER PAGE

This is your first chance to impress your audience. It's also the place where you lay down your whole argument for or against the material in question. Everything that follows should be expanding upon the arguments laid out here, not defining new arguments.

Cover pages differ from company to company. In addition to basic information like title, author, submission data, etc., they also have a couple of vitally important opportunities for you to communicate with your audience: the **logline**, and the **comment summary**.

- **Logline:** This is that one-sentence story summary that you see in *TV Guide*. Don't underestimate its importance. If you're having serious trouble describing the essence of the story in one sentence, it is often the first indication that you may not have a movie on your hands.
- **Comment Summary:** This is your whole argument for or against the piece in a nutshell. This is the place where you want to draw your comparisons to other films of similar tone and content. In particular, this is the point at which you want to take your stand. Whoever reads your coverage should know your exact opinion about the material just by reading this paragraph.

Some cover pages (like those at AMG) will include grids, a visual representation of character and story quality, etc. The grids are a helpful way of putting your thoughts together before you begin writing your comments section. (We'll talk more about comments shortly.) Always make sure that your grids agree with what you say in the comments section.

Super-Secret Tip (a.k.a. "Stating the Obvious"):

- Remember those introductory paragraphs you wrote in that odious freshman composition class? The comment summary is the same thing. Sorry.

2. SYNOPSIS

It's hard work to retell a good story in two to three pages. It's harder still to rehash a bad one. Nevertheless, good coverage will do just that, practically giving people the sense that they've read the work themselves.

An effective synopsis is both brief and thorough. It's got to include all the important information about the plot as well as the characters. That means not only when and how the terrorists get hold of their briefcase nuke, but also what it means personally for the hero when she disarms the bomb at the end and rescues her ruggedly handsome love interest. It does not mean talking about the quality of the sunset during the couple's first kiss—unless the colors in the sky provide a vital clue to how much longer New York City will exist before the fall of a horrific nuclear winter.

As if this weren't enough to remember, it's important to think about the flow of the synopsis. Nothing will put an audience to sleep faster than a laundry list of facts without any narrative energy. Use the author's strengths to your advantage. If there is a slow disclosure storyline, consider meting out your information in similar increments to give a sense of the material's ability to generate suspense. If there is a complicated backstory, take a paragraph to explain it concisely, making sure to include all the pertinent data. Use the author's weaknesses to your advantage as well, by not taking a lot of pages to torture your audience with a nonsensical plot.

Super-Secret Tips (a.k.a. "Stating the Obvious"):

- Use basic transitional words to keep things flowing and organized in your own writing.
- "Meanwhile" can help you unite disparate but important subplots without trying to follow them blow-by-blow
- "Next," "Suddenly," and "As if all this wasn't bad enough," are useful tools to keep things moving quickly.
- Cut to the chase in action sequences; don't belabor the point with a discussion of the new supersonic jet fighter's superlative abilities unless they pertain directly to the plot.

3. COMMENTS

Take a stand. It's your call: yes; no; maybe. It's your job to evaluate the material and proffer an opinion, and that means no waffling. Your coverage does no one any good if it can't take a stand.

On average, there are more than a dozen scripts a day registered at the WGA. If you read the trades, you know how few get bought, and what an infinitesimal portion actually go on to get made. The more scripts you read, the more you'll be dismayed to find that they invariably fail for the same reasons: slow; predictable; weak characters; too familiar.

These "easy passes" are the easiest scripts to cover, but be careful. It's one thing to say a script is weak, and another to prove it. That's what your follow-up paragraphs are for. Use them to delineate what it is about the characters and story structure that led to your conclusions. Be thoughtful in your examples, and avoid being catty. Sadly, none of us are as clever as we think, and you never know whose nephew wrote the screenplay.

Projects that are easy to recommend are easy to write up, but also require the exact same kind of careful articulation. Just like a good trailer, don't set up expectations that the material can't deliver. It's great to get excited about a project, but keep in mind that it may look different to you after a night of eco-terrorists threatening to poison earth's water supply than it will to someone who's just seen *American Beauty*.

Perhaps the toughest kind of comments to write are those for projects that are right on the edge. Maybe it's a familiar serial killer thriller with a somewhat innovative twist. Maybe it's a poignant art-house project that in all likelihood no one will go see.

Whatever the case, follow the exact same procedure as you would with any other piece of material: outline your arguments for and against in the opening paragraph, then expand on your opinions in the paragraphs that follow. As always, be careful to form cogent, cohesive points of view that convey exactly how you feel about the submission.

Most importantly, as with anything in life, KNOW THINE AUDIENCE. Different executives, producers, and studios have dramatically different needs. Someone with a yen for action fare may be more interested in an effects-laden piece about a global rutabaga blight and the karate chopping female scientist who can stop it than one might think (but probably not if it's just rutabagas). Similarly, if you're evaluating a piece for a management or talent-driven company, your primary concern is the quality of the role(s) in question. Make sure there are indelible screen moments for your star before getting too enthusiastic.

Just as different rules apply for different genres, be mindful of different formats. It used to be that features were bigger, TV was smaller. Now epics like *Merlin* have changed a lot of the rules in that department. There's a great call for epics that are actually too large for just two hours, in addition to the still-steady demand for women-in-jeopardy-night.

Finally, a word about book coverage. Years ago during Oscar time, *Premiere* reported an interesting statistic: more than three-quarters of the movies that have won the Academy Award for Best Picture were based on books. With more room for character development (and—cattiness alert—a traditionally higher degree of literacy), books remain an excellent source of fodder. However, they aren't especially helpful if they are deeply introspective and devoid of the lush visuals an adaptation requires. Also keep in mind that traditionally “bad” books (i.e. those that are plot-driven and eschew a “literary” sensibility) often make good movies. *Die Hard* started as a book, and over the years Elmore Leonard has developed quite a cottage industry.

Super-Secret Tips (a.k.a. “Stating the Obvious”):

- “If you don't have something nice to say...” think of something anyway. The person who received the material eventually has to write a pass letter or get on the phone with the agent, manager, or the writer in question, and needs something more than one-sidedness.
- Clear, concise writing is the absolute key to success. It makes your take easy to comprehend, and even if someone disagrees (Gasp!), they can understand how you reached your conclusions.
- If you get stuck for what to say next, go back to your grids. They serve as an extremely effective outline of what you need to say in your comments.

MISCELLANY

This is the moment you've all been waiting for: when I pretend to reveal my innermost secrets while really just talking about my pet peeves.

- Be clear and concise.
- Proofread!
- When reading books, it is helpful to take notes as you go. Write down the correct spelling of characters' names, ages, occupations, etc., and give yourself one-sentence summaries of plot action that you can refer to when writing up the piece later. This is a big time-saver.
- For scripts, dog-ear important pages with character stats or major plot points. It's also helpful to type up a brief outline in your word processing document to keep from switching back and forth between script and keyboard.
- Proofread!
- Avoid use of the first-person whenever possible. It makes your coverage more formal and authoritative.
- Beware "The Homophones of Death!" (a.k.a. "THOD!"): peal & peel; it's & its; you're & your; their, there & they're; pores & pours; and many, many others. Nothing will make you look dumber faster than inserting the wrong word.
- Also beware the \$16 word. Don't outsmart yourself and make your arguments obtuse. Conversely, too many \$0.16 words aren't terribly impressive. Use your judgment as you try to develop your individual writing style.
- Proofread!

Now, get out there and take the LSAT!