

The Script Savant Newsletter

#004

YOUR FIRST DOZEN PAGES ISN'T AWESOME

Susan Sontag

The story must strike a nerve in me - My heart should start pounding when I hear the first line in my head - I start trembling at the risk

When it comes to screenwriting, you only have, so much time, so many pages, so you don't have the luxury to meander, and this is especially true in your first dozen pages. You must maximize script economy and move the story forward immediately because you've only got about a dozen pages to accomplish a few major components:

The below analysis demonstrates what's important in the first dozen pages of your script for the reader to want to continue reading.

black type – what's important?

red type – why?

You Can See The Analysis Of First Dozen Pages Of My Script 'P.E.T.A. – People Eating Tasty Animals' In My eBook [https://thescriptsavant.com/pdf/The Art Of The Screenplay.pdf](https://thescriptsavant.com/pdf/The_Art_Of_The_Screenplay.pdf)

Make An Emotional Connection With The Protagonist And Other Main Characters

Make an emotional connection?

if we can't connect emotionally with a character, then we don't care what happens to them – they are not real to us, and what happens to them doesn't matter to us - they are no more connected to us than a rock – and your story is dead. Our characters need to be interesting and do interesting things

In What World Does Your Story Take Place In

When does the story take place – future, modern, period piece, etc.

the reader wants to know as soon as possible when in time does the story take place - these are normally clues, which the reader hones in on – if the writer isn't clear enough and the reader guesses wrong they are irritated and blame the writer for their confusion

What physical location – where are we – what country, at sea, outer space, etc.

the reader wants to know what physical location the story takes place in. This is done by clues that again the reader must often interpret in the action/description (i.e., 'Paris Café,' 'overlooking the crescent Earth just rising,' 'nothing but a gray sea as far as the horizon.'

Paint a picture of where we are

so we can visualize our location

Did any event in the story recently take place that propels the story forward?

every James Bond movie has an amazing opening sequence that tells the reader that they are in for an exciting adventure ride

Introduce The Main Characters

How do we relate to the characters - our first impression? Why should we care about them? What defines them. What's their gender? What's their age? What special traits set them apart? Keep their description concise but enough to visualize them.

the reader wants to connect as quickly as possible with each character introduced and how they figure into the story – the first is through their name, if given a Proper Name then the reader assumes they are significant and immediately looks for other clues, so we can relate to them – such as their gender, age, special qualities or talents. These ideally are given to the reader in the action/description block when the character is first introduced. There's few things that pisses off a reader more than finding a dozen-plus pages later that the character that they thought was a man turns out to be a woman, or that a character the reader assumed was twenty turns out to be in their seventies. The final way to relate to a character is by the actions and dialogue they use – ideally, the dialogue would be unique for each character. Also, readers don't like to wander through large blocks of character description or spare description that reveals nothing interesting about the character. (e.g., The MAN was handsome - boring)

Establish The Genre

Make it clear so we can adjust our expectations on how the story might unfold.

when a person goes to the movie, they already know what genre they are to expect, because they have read the logline and probably seen the trailer. But if a reader doesn't know, they get clues from the title and opening pages. They need to be oriented to the genre(s) as quickly as possible, to see if the story matches the genre expectations (by a dozen pages - comedy, sci-fi, action, drama, romance, fantasy, etc., or combination

Create Conflict

quickly draw the reader into the story. Often referred to as 'the inciting incident.'

have some significant event happen that leaves a question with the reader that they wish to discover the answer to. Don't have any scenes that would bore the reader to death

Introduce A Mystery

Introduce questions that the reader wants answers to

have some event happen or dialogue which leads to a series of questions the reader desperately wishes to know the answer to

Create Suspense

Have the reader worry about what is about to happen

suspense is the state of being excited, anxious, and/or uncertain about what may happen - worry equals suspense - the reader usually knows as much or more than the reader

Create Your Unique Voice

Show the unique personality of your characters in action and dialogue

each writer has a unique stamp of how they convey a story, their writing style, which captures the reader's attention and imagination – (i.e., dry humor, irony, sarcastic, just the facts, etc.)

Introduce The Theme/Message You're Trying To Advance

What is the core story about?

have an event take place early that demonstrates the theme of the story

What point are you trying to advance?

have the reader quickly interpret what idea you want to put across

Connect The Story To The Logline

Does the story appear to match up with the logline the reader read?

if the reader read the logline, they are curious if what they read so far agrees

Give the reader what they signed up for.

make sure your story conveys the genre(s) that the reader is expecting.

Use Proper Formatting, Spelling, And Grammar

Show the reader you know what you are doing. Nothing is worse than sloppy spelling, grammar, or failing to follow the accepted screenwriting rules.

the reader is always looking ways to skim through the screenplay – bad spelling and grammar tells the reader that the story is probably also sloppy and therefore, can be ignored.

Avoid Overwriting

Don't bury the reader in massive blocks of action or dialogue.

a reader can only digest a few lines (max 4) at a time before it starts getting confusing and they start skimming - if a reader doesn't soak in every single word, then you are beginning to lose them

Make 'white space' your friend.

to keep the reader from being tempted to skim action lines, break them up often with 'white space', blank line between action - dense text invites the reader to skim which disconnects the reader from the story

Make it an easy read

an easy read usually consists of short active sentences. Usually one idea per sentence - there's a rhythm to the words - low number of abstract words

Don't Be BORING – Seize The Reader's Emotions

Force the reader to care about what's happening and promises of what will happen.

if you have fascinating characters which are constantly surprising you by their dialogue and action then you can pretty much forget all the rules – a reader wants to follow them around to see what they'll get up to even if it deviates from the storyline

Don't bore the reader with ordinary people doing tedious, dull things that don't advance the story and encourages the reader to skip over or quit reading.

avoid any dialogue or action we've seen before - avoid Small-Talk/Chit-Chat - keep

Exposition/Informational dialogue to a minimum - avoid On-The-Nose dialogue that the reader can predict - use a lot of Oblique and Subtext dialogue

Summary: When it comes to screenwriting, you only have, so much time, so many pages, so you don't have the luxury to meander. You must maximize script economy and move the story forward immediately or risk losing your reader.

Note: *There is no absolute order in which these guidelines are applied.*

Why: The longer you wait to capture the reader the greater the chance they will gloss over or stop reading your script.

PDF VERSIONS OF NEWSLETTERS

How To Pitch Your Story

https://thescriptsavant.com/newsletters/TheScriptSavant_Newsletter_001.pdf

Mastering Creativity In Storytelling

https://thescriptsavant.com/newsletters/TheScriptSavant_Newsletter_002.pdf

The Art Of Collaboration

https://thescriptsavant.com/newsletters/TheScriptSavant_Newsletter_003.pdf

Your First Dozen Pages Isn't Awesome

https://thescriptsavant.com/newsletters/TheScriptSavant_Newsletter_004.pdf

The Script Savant

<https://thescriptsavant.com>