

Rewriting Hero *Last*

by Marilyn Horowitz



10 Ways To Perfect Your Screenplay

ABOVE: **Mark Hamill** as Luke Skywalker, **Carrie Fisher** as Princess Leia Organa and **Harrison Ford** as Han Solo in *Star Wars*, written by George Lucas. **William H. Macy** as Bernie Looztz in *The Cooler*, written by Frank Hannah & Wayne Kramer.

Writers consult with me when a script they think is perfect hasn't sold. One of the biggest problems I have found in "completed" screenplays is that even if the plot is good, the main character is often flat.

Writers tend to take their heroes and heroines for granted and assume that the original character development they did is still working. Ironically, your hero is often the least-developed character in your screenplay because you used his want/need to drive the plot. The nuances of his emotional journey are often lost in the process of writing, yet that is what a viable screenplay should be about.

The trick is how to pick up any dropped threads without having to reweave the rich tapestry that is your script. As we writers know, characters, especially main ones, have a pesky way of changing on us while we're rewriting them.

So if the feedback you're getting is "Close,

but no cigar," taking time out to retool your hero can be just what is needed.

"Rewriting hero last" means going back and examining your main character as if you've never seen him before, asking yourself the five questions found later in this article and doing the five exercises. This is a surefire way to give your scripts a new richness whether you're rewriting for a producer or rewriting your very first spec screenplay.

But, before we begin, let's define what a hero is. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, a hero is:

1. In mythology and legend, a man, often of divine ancestry, who is endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for his bold exploits and favored by the gods.

2. A person noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his or her life: *soldiers and nurses who were heroes in an unpopular war.*

3. A person noted for special achievement in a particular field: *the heroes of medicine.*

Let's redefine hero simply to mean: the person whose story you are telling, male or female.

The hero is the only person who can be the center of your story because you have chosen to write about a person with unique gifts, flaws and a specific lesson to learn.

I have developed a series of five questions and five exercises that will breathe new life into your hero and help you sell or finance your screenplay. I recommend that you perform them in the following order.

QUESTION #1: WHAT IS YOUR HERO'S DREAM, AND DOES HE REALIZE IT?

In real life, we struggle to realize our dreams. When we go to the movies, we want to feel a connection to the world and other people. We watch films to try to understand our lives or escape from them. Either way, a good film allows us to experience a kind of emotional release. This

catharsis is, in part, what helps us decide if we have seen a good picture or not. We live for our dreams and want to watch others living out their dreams, or not.

Every life-plan begins with a dream. Your dream was to write this screenplay and sell it or direct it. What is your hero's dream?

In *The Godfather*, Michael's dream is to have his own life, marry Kay and be a lawyer. Does he realize it? Or, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's dream is for the Wizard to save her and send her home. Does she realize her dream? Yes and no. She gets home, not because of the Wizard but because of the life lesson she has learned.

In *Working Girl*, Tess' dream is to be an entrepreneur; but she doesn't really believe she can do it. The obstacles she has to overcome show her that she does have what it takes, and that's the kind of lesson the hero needs to learn in any successful screenplay.

QUESTION #2: WHAT IS YOUR HERO'S WORST NIGHTMARE?

We will do a lot to avoid having our worst nightmares come true. What does your character fear the most?

In *Star Wars*, Luke's worst nightmare is failing as a Jedi Knight. *Star Wars* is a great example of a story where every event in the film forces the hero to face his worst nightmare. First, Luke can't leave Tatooine because of his aunt and uncle. Alderaan is blown up, and then Luke's trapped in the Death Star trash compactor. Finally, when he gets his chance to blow up the Death Star, he's about to lose until he realizes that his fear of failure can only be overcome by surrendering to a higher power and using "The Force."

In *Casablanca*, Rick's dream ended when Ilsa failed to meet him at the Paris train. When the film begins, an embittered Rick runs a club in Casablanca where he avoids any political or personal involvements. "I stick my neck out for nobody."

His worst nightmare begins when Ilsa walks into his club with her new husband. Rick is now forced to face his feelings for her and take a political stand.

Questions #1 and #2 are useful diagnostic tools because they offer a different way to analyze traditional three-act structure by defining the relationship between the acts in the following way: Act One sets up the dream, and Act Three resolves it. Act Two is where your hero must confront his worst nightmare. Make sure that your second act

is the ultimate dramatization of your hero's worst nightmare.

QUESTION #3: FOR WHOM OR WHAT WILL YOUR HERO DIE?

By answering this question, we can determine if the stakes are high enough to bring the story to the strongest possible climax.

Good examples of high stakes are in *The Godfather* where Michael, the son, will die for his father; in *Working Girl*, where death is not literal—it's a symbolic death: she must let go of her old self in order to realize her dream; and *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy is willing to face death at the hands of The Wicked Witch of The West in order to get home.

QUESTION #4: WHY IS YOUR HERO THE ONLY PERSON WHO COULD BE IN THIS STORY?

Now that we have been able to define your hero's dream, nightmare and for whom or what they would die, this question can be answered.

One of the reasons we are drawn to the movies is that we all want to understand our own experience. This is also why we write.

A successful screenplay will always have a hero or anti-hero with specific gifts and flaws as well as a specific life lesson to learn. Good examples of stories which demonstrate these things are *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca* and *The Silence of The Lambs*. Dorothy has the gift of loyalty and self-reliance, and her flaw is being unable to take responsibility for her own life. The lesson she has to learn is that she had the ruby slippers all along and must take control of her own destiny.

In *Casablanca*, Rick's gift is for survival; and his flaw is that he is bitter about love. He has to learn that love is its own reward so that he can do the right thing by Ilsa and rejoin the bigger fight, the fight for freedom.

In *The Silence of The Lambs*, Clarice has the gifts of ambition and tenacity as Hannibal Lecter tells her in the scene where they first meet. Her flaw is that she's stuck in the past. The lesson Clarice must learn is that she has to forgive herself for not saving the lambs before she can catch Jame Gumb and move on with her life.

A caveat here: While the lessons our characters must learn often mirror our own

experience, it doesn't mean they are necessarily true on a scientific or religious level. They represent dramatic truths, not psychological facts.

QUESTION #5: WHAT IS THE HERO'S UNBREAKABLE BOND WITH THE VILLAIN?

The biggest challenge in a script is frequently that the stakes are not high enough. I always advise writers to "work villain first." I have found that, when you identify the main conflict before you design the plot, you make better choices; and that saves drafts.

The high-stakes problem usually stems from two sources. One, the plot does not have enough events that ratchet the story up to a cataclysmic climax; and two, the relationship between hero and villain is not sufficiently intense. The first problem is usually due to the second, so this exercise will kill the proverbial two birds with one stone.

What's needed is a good reason for the hero and villain to stay locked in mortal combat until the final crisis in the third act. The deeper the reason, the greater the tension, and, thus, higher conflict—which always results in a better script.

What is interesting is that often the villain is not actually a bad person. The dramatic problem is, then, how much our hero has to change as a result of the relationship. We see this structure frequently in romantic comedies such as *Tootsie*, where Michael cannot continue to be "Dorothy" if he wants to have a relationship with Julie. The unbreakable bond is that they are in love.

In *The Silence of The Lambs*, the key relationship is between an FBI agent and a serial killer. This would be fine except that Hannibal Lecter is not the one Clarice is pursuing. Then, what is their unbreakable bond? They, too, are in a kind of love. His demand for personal information and intimacy and her symbiotic need to solve the case form the kind of fascinating interaction that keeps us on the edge of our seats—and them joined at the hip.

Ask yourself if there is enough conflict in the relationship between your hero and villain to create the strongest possible crisis and keep them trapped together until the end of your story.

THE FIVE EXERCISES

The five exercises that follow are designed to help you tweak your screenplay with the

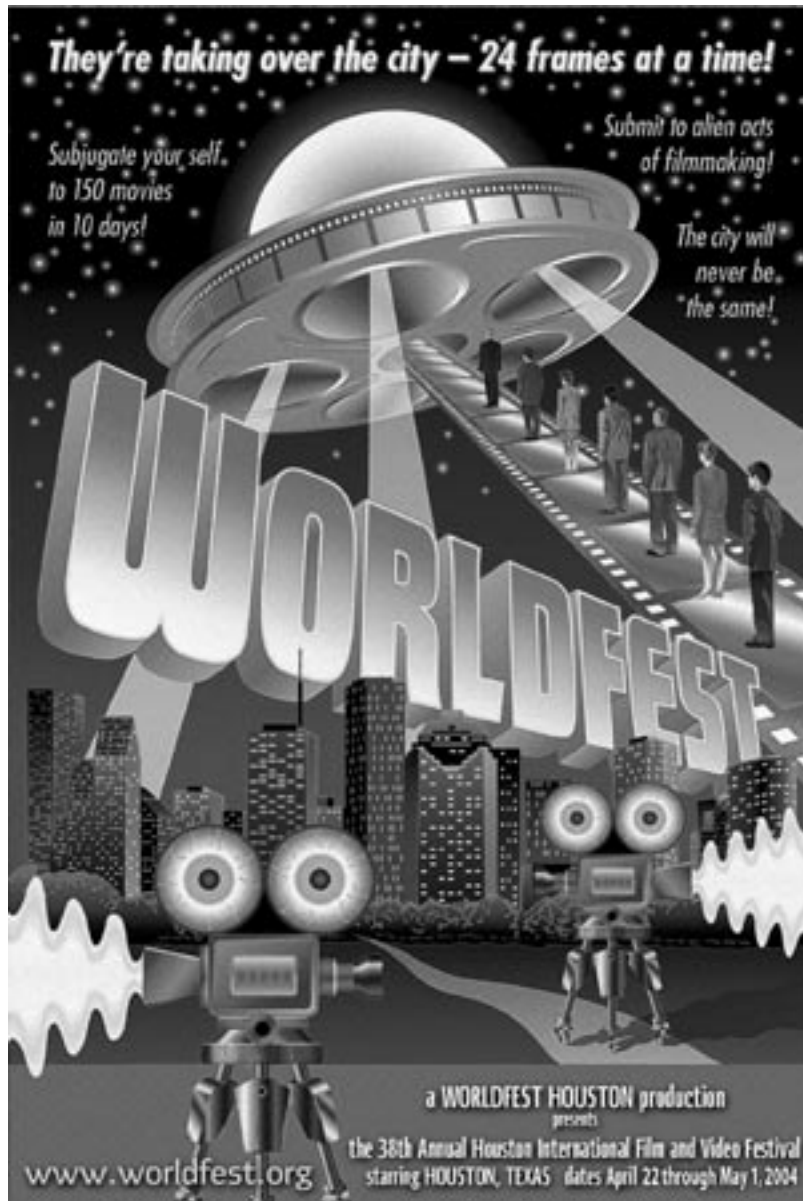
least possible effort. Perform these exercises while keeping the previous five questions in mind.

All the exercises require you to work with a timer. The timer keeps you from spinning, intellectualizing or being attacked by self-doubt. Work in 15-minute intervals. You can reset the timer if you run out of time on an exercise—but keep moving forward.

EXERCISE #1: ASKING, “WHAT HAPPENED WAS ...”

This exercise allows you to ask your hero to retell the plot of your screenplay as if he were telling the story to a trusted friend, therapist or bartender. Imagine that the movie is over and your main character has enough distance to look back over what he has been through. For example, Bernie Lootz, the hero of *The Cooler*, is at a bar, and the bartender says, “How did you two love birds meet?” Bernie looks at Natalie and answers, “Well, I was having a slow night at the casino. What I did back then was jinx anyone who was having a winning streak. Anyway, on this night ...” And off you would go, letting the hero recap the whole script in his own words.

Put this away for a few hours and then read it aloud to a trusted ally. As you read aloud, you will be able to hear where your story is working and where it’s not. Now, you’re almost ready to begin making some adjustments. But before you



actually touch your screenplay, I recommend that you complete the other exercises.

EXERCISE #2: THE PREMISE-ASKED-AS-A-QUESTION CHART

A premise, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, is “a proposition upon which an argument is based or from which a conclusion is drawn.” I have found that rephrasing the premise as a question becomes a powerful tool. The premise as a statement makes us want to argue while the premise-asked-as-a-question arouses our interest and gets our attention.

For example, a premise such as “good always conquers evil” can become a big question: Does good always overcome evil? Immediately, there is a qualitative shift in our response.

How to find your premise-asked-as-a-question: The premise of *The Godfather* is “family duty is greater than personal achievement.” So, how can that drive a script? It can’t; but, if we rephrase it as a question, “Is family duty greater than personal achievement?” our curiosity is aroused. We want to know the answer to the question, both as writer and audience.

How to prepare the chart: Take a sheet of paper and draw two columns. Write your premise-asked-as-a-question above, and then at the top of the left-hand column write “yes” and on top of the right-hand column write “no.” This chart should look like those pros-and-cons lists you made in debating class. The intention now is to figure out where the hero begins in terms of his opinion and where he ends up. If your hero’s opinion at first is “no” and transforms into a “yes,” or vice versa, this is the proper degree of change. If not, you now know why your hero is flat.

Facing the unpleasant fact that your hero needs work is critical because you can’t fix something unless you know what’s wrong. We need to understand the lesson that the character has to learn, whether he learned it, and now what he will do as a result.

Premise: Do you have to resolve the past to have a future?	
Yes	No
Clarice Act Three Hannibal	Clarice Act One Crawford Jane Gumb Dr. Chilton

Using the chart for your other characters: Review the arc of the other characters to see where they change and where they stand in relation to the hero at the beginning and end of your script.

This information will help you see whether the other characters are really helping or hindering the hero from attaining his goal. If they are flat, your hero has nothing to work against; and their scenes together will be boring.

If you look at the sample chart, Hannibal Lecter begins where Clarice ends up; so the villain pushes the hero where she needs to go. If the villain is actually helping the hero, not hindering her, where's the conflict?

If you study the chart, you'll notice that both Crawford and Jame Gumb end up being on the opposite side of the chart from Clarice. Then, you would check your screenplay to see what is actually going on. Are Crawford and/or Jame Gumb the real obstacle(s)?

EXERCISE #3: THE OBSTACLE/ OPPORTUNITY CHART

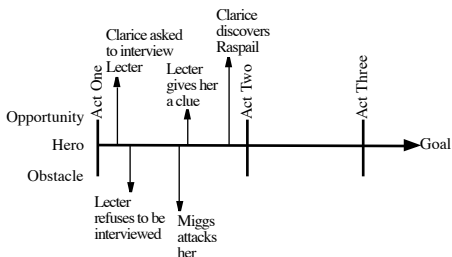
Turn a page sideways and write your premise-asked-as-a-question at the top.

Draw this diagram and divide it into three proportionate parts for the three acts and label the upper half "Opportunity" and the lower half "Obstacle."

List the events of your story on the chart, choosing whether they are obstacles or opportunities for your hero.



You will immediately begin to see how each event pushes your story forward—or not. Events aren't just things that happen to the hero, like a tornado; meeting a new character can be an event, like when Dorothy meets the Wizard. An event can be thought of as a "change," that thing heroes hate to do more than anything else. Changes are what cause your hero to adapt and grow so that he can learn the lesson that helps him achieve his dream.



This deceptively simple chart will show you conclusively what is not working because you will be able to see whether there are too many opportunities and not enough obstacles, or the reverse. You will be shocked at how much extra "stuff" you find. If the event doesn't fit, you know what to do.

EXERCISE #4: USING A LOGLINE

Preparing a logline for your screenplay is a basic marketing tool that has been described as trying to vomit into a thimble. If you can't fit your screenplay into this incredibly reductionistic abstract structure, it means that your hero is not sufficiently active. The cure is to go back and find new answers to questions 1, 2 and 3.

This is the way you set up the form:

When _____, he/she must _____ or _____.
(Name)(gets into trouble) (risk) (lose)

Now, write the logline for your screenplay. For example: When an advertising executive is mistaken for a secret agent, he's thrown into a maelstrom of espionage and must risk his life to save a beautiful spy (*North by Northwest*).

EXERCISE #5: INTERVIEWING YOUR VILLAIN

This exercise will help you answer question 5: "What is the hero's unbreakable bond with the villain?" It's important to look at your hero from different points of view. Who

better to give you a new perspective than the guy who has it in for your hero?

If you interviewed Shelly Kaplow, Bernie Loozt's boss in *The Cooler*, and asked why he ever employed such a schlub, Shelly might begin by saying, "We go way back. I remember the time I saved his ass. He owed money and ..." and suddenly, 15 minutes later, you have a rich history between the two of them without doing a lot of work. You will find out more about the hero's flaws than you ever wanted to know, and this new information will allow you to heighten the conflict and create better events.

As you can see, this 10-part process offers a fast and easy way to diagnose the problems that are keeping your script from selling or getting financed. You can weave a richer tapestry without having to unravel what you have created. (i)

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