



WORKING Villain FIRST

10 Ways To Create Fascinating Villains



By
Marilyn Horowitz

Your villain is often the missing link in your screenplay. Working villain first is a surefire way to give your script a new richness whether you're rewriting for a producer or developing your very first screenplay. This technique is simple: Instead of designing Dorothy and Toto first, begin with the Wizard and the Wicked Witch of the West. Think of your screenplay as having a DNA strand as its basic structure. Your hero's and your villain's needs are bound together like a double helix.

First, let's define what a villain is. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, a villain is: 1. A wicked or evil person; a scoundrel and 2. A dramatic or fictional character that is typically at odds with a hero. Let's redefine villain simply to mean: the obstacle that is preventing the hero from getting what he wants.

I have created five questions and five exercises that will help you develop better villains quickly and efficiently.

QUESTION #1: WHO IS THE VILLAIN?

This is not as simple a question as you might think.

Who is the villain in *Tootsie*? It's the love interest.

Who is the villain in *As Good As It Gets*?

He's also the hero.

Who is the villain in *Fight Club*? He's the protagonist *and* the antagonist.

Who is the villain in *In The Line of Fire*? The would-be assassin of the president.

Identifying your villain is often the key to finding what's missing from your story.

Picking a character who is not the obvious choice to be the villain can be the key to an original and/or high-concept idea. Examples of unusual villains can be found in such films as *The Usual Suspects*, *Angel Heart*, *Fight Club*, *Seven*, *The Silence of The Lambs*, *Citizen Kane* and *L.A. Confidential*.

Audiences love surprises, so try to provide them. In *When Harry Met Sally*, Harry (Billy Crystal) is actually the villain since his behavior prevents both himself and Sally (Meg Ryan) from being lovers and friends. Consider *Star Wars*, where the villain, Darth Vader (David Prowse), turns out to be Luke Skywalker's (Mark Hamill) father. In *The Usual Suspects*, Roger "Verbal" Kint (Kevin Spacey) turns out to be the villain and not the victim. In *Angel Heart* and *Fight Club*, the villain turns out to be the hero himself.

QUESTION #2: IN WHICH GENRE AM I WRITING?

Villains must be created to serve the story you are telling, which leads to a

discussion of genre. Depending upon the genre in which you're working, you may need an actual monster or someone who is merely an obstacle. The gun-toting villain of a film noir would be completely inappropriate in a romantic comedy unless it's the result of a deliberate choice on the writer's part to bend the rules. This kind of thinking sometimes results in truly original screenplays. *Married to the Mob* is an example of a romantic comedy with a gun-toting villain or two. Mike Downey (Matthew Modine) is far blander than the delicious gangster Tony Russo (Dean Stockwell) and his sweetly homicidal wife Connie (Mercedes Ruehl).

Aristotle wrote about the necessity of knowing your plot so that you can decide what kinds of characters are needed. This dynamic relationship between plot and character is crucial to understanding the underlying structure of your story. Dramas, comedies and romantic comedies each have their own requirements, but the important thing to remember is that you don't need to give a villain a gun to make him powerful.

Let's talk about drama first. Who are the villains in *Lost in Translation*? Seemingly, the off-screen wife and the preoccupied husband, but the real villain is Bob Harris' (Bill Murray) unhappiness as personified by

Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson). Very often the character's inner conflict is what's preventing the main character from achieving his goal. You as the writer need to dramatize this inner conflict by giving it a human face.

In *Ordinary People*, Conrad's mother (Mary Tyler Moore) is the villain. The mother is a mirror held up to the main character's guilt because he survived the accident and his brother didn't. She actually feels this way and expresses it onscreen. This lets us see how Conrad (Timothy Hutton) feels since he can't simply tell us.

In a romantic comedy, the villain is often the main character. *Groundhog Day* is a classic example of a hero/villain. In *Something's Gotta Give*, Harry (Jack Nicholson) brings Erica (Diane Keaton) back in touch with her own love and sexuality, then almost destroys her and any hope for a relationship.

In other genres, the trick is to rethink the usual gangster, alien or terrorist and add a twist. In *Die Hard*, the terrorist is really just a thief. In *Aliens*, the real bad guy is the corporate robot who wants to collect the alien as a specimen. We will address this idea in the next question.

QUESTION #3: ARE THE STAKES HIGH ENOUGH?

The ideal underlying structure of a screenplay is two separate stories colliding in an uncompromising battle. In *In The Line of Fire*, we have perfection in the high-stakes department. Conflict is only effective if no compromise between good and evil is possible. Both hero and villain battle for the president's life. One wants to save him, the other wants to kill him. No compromise.

The villain's story should be equal in its passionate need (though not necessarily in terms of screen time) to the hero's. Without this complexity, a screenplay will feel flat because the hero's journey is often not developed enough. In fact, the villain's need often drives the plot. In *Othello*, Iago's desire for revenge is the entire reason the play happens. In *Seven*, John Doe (Kevin Spacey) uses Mills (Brad Pitt) and Somerset (Morgan Freeman) as actors in the hideous drama he has created.

Villains can also play more than one role and don't necessarily have to be evil. In *Tootsie*, Julie (Jessica Lange) is a wonderful invention since her only sin is making Michael (Dustin Hoffman) fall in love with her—which means he can't stay a successful actress and get the girl.

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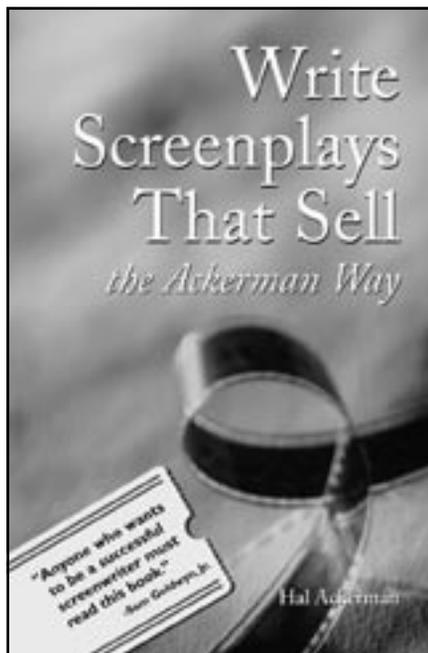
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Another useful technique is to have more than one villain in your story. In *The Silence of The Lambs*, Clarice (Jodie Foster) must battle Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine). In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy must overcome both the Wizard and the Wicked Witch of the West.

QUESTION #4: HOW ARE THE HERO AND VILLAIN RELATED?

When you write in a genre such as action, sci-fi or horror, the very structure of the plot demands the villain be conceived in the same moment as the hero. For example, in any crime drama you automatically choose the type of crime and its perpetrator at the same time you decide who will solve it. In *The Untouchables* you would think of Al Capone (Robert DeNiro) at the same moment you were conceiving Eliot Ness (Kevin Costner).

But even so, writers often make the mistake of having the villain be an impersonal one. Someone once said: "If it ain't like family, throw it out." The way to structure relationships between heroes and villains is to treat them as if they were members of the same family.

In *The Manchurian Candidate*, the villain is the hero's actual mother. In *L.A. Confidential* the two heroes, an ambitious cop and a very violent one, are like brothers. The corrupt Captain Smith (James Cromwell) is like their father. This relationship deepens the level of betrayal when he turns out to be the villain.

In *Die Hard*, when John McClane (Bruce Willis) kills Tony (Andreas Wisniewski), the brother of the evil terrorist's right-hand man Karl (Alexander Godunov), the story becomes a personal battle.

QUESTION #5: HOW CAN YOU HUMANIZE YOUR VILLAIN?

Nietzsche wrote, "Whatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil."

When villains show us what they love, they become human. For a moment we are unable to use our usual good/bad parameters. We are forced to feel their pain and see our pain in them.

Hannibal Lecter, in *The Silence of The Lambs*, is a classic example of a sympathetic villain. He happens to be a serial murderer; but because he loves Clarice, for a while he is able to act for good instead of evil. What

about Vito Corleone (Robert DeNiro) in *The Godfather II*? He was forced to kill to support his family. Is this not a noble human motive?

Find what or whom your villain loves, place it/them in danger of being destroyed by the hero or heroine, and you will see your script instantly go up several levels of excellence. In order to reach these levels, you must first find out more about your villain's history, which is why I developed the following five exercises.

These exercises are an alternative to writing a traditional character biography. Villains have pasts, and you need to know them. Without a context, a web of memories, how can you begin to understand the nature of their evil? How can you portray your villain dramatically? The five exercises will stimulate your creative imagination and allow you to remember your villain's past as vividly as if it were your own.

All the exercises will require you to work with a timer. The timer keeps you from spinning, intellectualizing or being attacked by self-doubt. You can reset the timer if you run out of time on an exercise.

Your goal is to know enough about your villain to be able to talk about him as if he were a close friend without exhausting yourself.

EXERCISE #1: UNDERSTANDING YOUR VILLAIN'S POINT OF VIEW

Set your timer for 15 minutes. Write a three to five-paragraph synopsis of your current script as if you were telling it from the villain's point of view. Confine yourself to the existing plot; just take a fresh look at the story. You might watch or read the scripts for *The Godfather II*, *The Stepfather*, *The Last Seduction* and *The Usual Suspects*. These are all stories told from the villain's point of view.

EXERCISE #2: INTERVIEWING YOUR VILLAIN

Set your timer for 15 minutes. Interview your villain. Remember that all villains are heroes in their own minds. Decide what kind of interviewer you will be. For example, are you a friend, the regular bartender, the therapist or an anonymous interviewer? Giving yourself a role helps focus the way your villain answers. Answer the questions below in the first person as if you were your villain.

Ask these questions in this order:

1. What is great about you?
2. How do you prevent the main character from succeeding?
3. What is the formative event that made you what you are today?
4. What is your dream?
5. What is your nightmare?
6. Who would you die for?

Example: (I choose to be an anonymous narrator.)

Interviewer: So Mr. Lecter, what's great about you?

Hannibal Lecter: Ah, there's so much. Did I tell you I graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard at 15? That I speak 23 languages? That I am a gourmet chef?

Interviewer: What was the formative event that made you what you are today?

Hannibal Lecter: When I was a boy, starving soldiers ate my sister during war time.

EXERCISE #3: PICTURING YOUR VILLAIN

Set your timer for 15 minutes for each picture. Again, begin with yourself. Draw a picture of your own nuclear family and assign a symbolic object to each family member, such as a baseball bat for a brother. This drawing is not about creating great art, so stick figures are fine. If the object is hard to draw, simply write "xylophone" next to the figure. Don't forget to put yourself in the picture.

Now repeat this process for your villain and his nuclear family. A villain rarely starts out evil; but if he did, be sure his symbolic object is something like a chainsaw.

It's easiest to understand people by knowing what they aren't, so understanding how your villain is different from you is a great way to gain insight.

EXERCISE #4: EATING WITH YOUR VILLAIN

Food will get you to the right level of intimacy more quickly than any direct expositional biographical techniques. Set your timer for 10 minutes for each of the three food experiences:

1. Write your favorite food memory.
2. Write your worst food memory.
3. Write your favorite comfort food memory.

Repeat all three, this time writing as your villain.

After writing, contrast your experiences with your villain's. For example, your favorite

food memory was the time you made apple pie when you were 12; and then you won a prize at the fair. Hannibal Lecter's memory is of eating someone with "some fava beans and a nice Chianti." Again, contrast allows us to see more clearly.

EXERCISE #5: EULOGIZING YOUR HERO

Set your timer for 15 minutes. Have your villain give the eulogy at your hero's funeral.

If *The Silence of The Lambs* were your screenplay, Hannibal Lecter would be giving the eulogy at Clarice's funeral. Of course, he would be in disguise and in mortal danger, but how could he resist?

"I have come here at great personal risk to talk to you about Clarice. To many of you she was a tough field agent, a relentless pursuer with a passion to conquer evil; but to me she was a true heroine because she could see the humanity in her prey. She and I had a lot in common—a passion to live life to the fullest, to risk everything to attain a goal. I always remember the story of why she became an FBI agent ..."

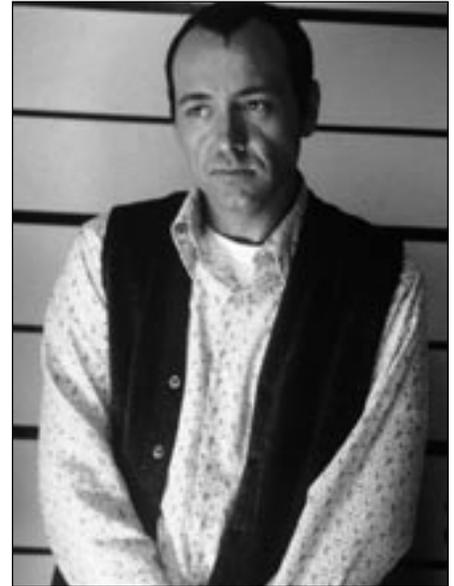
Or Harry from *When Harry Met Sally*, at Sally's funeral: "She and I had so much in common, well actually nothing, really; but she taught me that men and women could be friends ..." It's amazing what you can learn. If this idea works for you, flip it and have the hero talk about the villain.

If the eulogy exercise doesn't excite you, try this:

ALTERNATE EXERCISE: SPENDING THE DAY WITH YOUR VILLAIN

The best way to get to know someone is to spend time with him, the person. Begin your day as you normally do, and then ask: What would my villain be doing now? For example, notice in what order you get dressed, and then imagine how your villain might dress. Once you know how your villain dresses, shops, eats, works and gets along with others, you will know how he will behave in every setting.

You will find that the material you create will find its way into your screenplay. An example of how you might put what you discover to work is the opening of *The Stepfather*. It opens in an ordinary bathroom. A bearded, long-haired man starts the shower. As the room fills up with steam, he shaves off his beard and then cuts his hair. After



PAGE 60 (Left): **Anthony Hopkins** as Dr. Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of The Lambs*, written by Thomas Harris (novel) and Ted Tally (screenplay) (Right): **Margaret Hamilton** as Miss Gulch/The Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, written by L. Frank Baum (novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*), Noel Langley and Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allan Woolf ABOVE: **Kevin Spacey** as Roger "Verbal" Kint in *The Usual Suspects*, written by Christopher McQuarrie

showering he carefully dresses. He transforms before our eyes into a clean-shaven, conservatively dressed man. We begin to care about him as we follow him out of the bathroom and through the house. But, the house is covered in blood—to our horror we realize he has just murdered his entire family.

These exercises are just a beginning. Again, the key is to think of your screenplay as a DNA strand where the interweaving of the characters' needs causes the action to rise to a crisis where no compromise is possible. Without knowing your villain as well as your hero/heroine, it is hard to get the stakes to that high of a level. Even if you never do any of the exercises, just thinking about your villain with the same attention that you do your main characters will help you write a better screenplay. (i)

MARILYN HOROWITZ, script doctor, runs ArtMar Productions, a script consulting company based in New York City which emphasizes private story development. Marilyn also teaches three courses offered in the Screenwriting Certificate Program at New York University. Her latest screenplay, *The Fixer*, is in development with SnackPack Productions. She has completed a new book, *Rewriting The Screenplay in Ten Weeks*.