

SCREEN
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Working with Screenwriters

A handbook for Screen Directors in consultation with



sdgi.ie



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Forming a strong relationship with a screenwriter is essential to your film or TV show's success. It will facilitate communication about the story's direction, open doors to greater creative possibilities, and give you a stronger understanding of storytelling. Overall, a positive relationship with a screenwriter will make your work better.

At SDGI, we want to help you form collaborative relationships that lead to the strongest creative potential. This guide of resources and advice is meant to trigger your thoughts on how to work alongside a screenwriter to form the best relationship possible.

Contracts & Expectations

Both you and the screenwriter should work with the film or TV show's producer to establish a contract before the filmmaking process begins in order to avoid any hassles, mix-ups, or disputes further down the road.

This contract is best exemplified through a deal memo that clearly and comprehensively defines the rights, obligations and understandings of both parties and has legal enforceability. It should clearly articulate whose role is what, any rates or agreements necessary, and writing details such as the number of drafts expected.

Expectations should also be clearly defined at the onset of your working relationship. Details of how the writing process will work, how involved you will be as a director, and deadlines for drafts should be articulated before the writing process begins. Having these expectations and deadlines in place will outline your relationship, and ensure that both parties are on the same page.

If you are considerably involved in the writing process, there may be a possibility for co-authorship or a screenwriting credit. However, these requirements are quite strict. In order to be credited you must have written a substantial amount of the script, with the Writers Guild of America requiring as much as 33%. Credits for "Story by," "Screenplay by," and "Written by" each come with their own set of requirements. Giving notes, contributing lines, or brainstorming ideas is not the same as co-writing and will not establish you as a screenwriter on the project. Unless you are a dedicated writer and have discussed this expectation with the official screenwriter and producer, co-authorship is an unlikely scenario.



The Story

Sidney Lumet, an American film director and screenwriter, says that “When I first meet with the scriptwriter, I never *tell* him anything...instead, I ask him the same questions I’ve asked myself: What is this story about? What did you see?” Making a point to view the narrative from the screenwriter’s point of view is a powerful way to better understand the story as a whole.

This is also a great way to improve collaboration between yourself as the director and the screenwriter. Your conversation with the writer will be more fruitful and exciting if the writer sees that you truly understand their work and their intentions behind it. Asking questions about the story, gaining details from their point of view, and listening to their vision both improves the overall film or TV show and strengthens your creative partnership.

However, as the director, you are responsible for bringing the story to life. The finished work will not be a literal and exact replication of the screenplay, but a cinematic conversion of the original narrative based on your vision. Clarifying your vision for your film or TV show to the screenwriter is a great way to begin this transitional process.

Be clear about the style, tone, and energy that you anticipate the piece having. Some directors share other aesthetically-similar movies, shows, books, or photographs to convey the style or vision that they have for their own work.

While you ultimately get to decide on the artistic goal, the screenwriter is the one penning the words to reach it. It is important to keep them informed and value their creative input by listening to their initial vision and subsequent feedback.

The Process

Establish your pathways of communication early on in the process. Whether it be late night phone calls, constant email chains, or in-person chats over coffee, establishing clear lanes to communicate is a surefire way to success. Create a schedule that works for you and the writer, and let the ideas run.

Secondly, respect the writer’s process. While some can brainstorm in real time and love bouncing ideas off of other people, others require alone time with their thoughts and would rather type on their own before pitching their ideas. Respect the boundaries that a screenwriter possesses, as this will lead to the strongest creative content.



Lastly, give good notes that feed your collaboration. Be clear about what problems you see and what you want changed. Your notes should build an intelligent conversation between yourself and the writer that leads to an overflowing of ideas and suggestions. Ultimately, while you draw their attention to what you need changed, let the writer's brain work on how to solve the problems.

Disagreements

Despite your best efforts to create a positive professional relationship, you may encounter disagreements or conflicts with a screenwriter. Here are the best ways to resolve some that may come along.

- **Over the script:** The screenwriter is the original source of the story, as they conjured the story and characters out of their imagination. With this in mind, recognize that the writer may have some non-negotiables about their script. Respect their understanding of the story, as they may reject notes that do not serve the final film or TV show.
- **Over production:** If a screenwriter wants to be on set, have a conversation with them about what that would look like. Are you open to having a separate set of eyes on location, or would you prefer to involve them more in the editing suite? Set boundaries about where their input is needed.
- **Over anything else:** Sometimes, your personality will simply clash with a screenwriter, creating a negative working relationship. Keep in mind that disagreements are not always harmful—it is possible for your conflicts to be constructive and result in stronger writing, filming, and directing. That being said, never aim to create conflict, and always treat a screenwriter with respect, regardless of whether you get along.

In the face of any disagreement, maintain your responsibilities as director and stay professional yet respectful. What occurs between you and the screenwriter is first and foremost a working relationship, and does not have to be a friendship. Always remember that you share a common goal: a successful, beautiful, and powerful piece of cinema.



Resources

- <http://script.ie>
- <https://www.wga.org>
- <https://federationscreenwriters.eu>
- <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/directors-close-up-how-writers-work-with-directors-and-how-writers-direct/>
- <http://reeljeffewing.com/relationship-screenwriter-director/>
- <https://nofilmschool.com/2012/08/best-and-some-worst-practices-to-manage-writer-producer-director-relationship>
- <https://deadline.com/2015/05/produced-by-conference-screenwriters-producers-1201435124/>

Note: These guidelines are suggested and recommended by the SDGI, and Writers Guild of Ireland but in no way legally binding or contractually required. If you have official concerns about collaborating with your screenwriter, please contact your Guild, agent or a legal agency.