

Top Writing Tips

My Five: **Tessa Sheridan**

Award-winning UK screenwriter Tessa Sheridan shares a fistful of tips on writing screenplays:

In between raiding the fridge, checking my emails, nattering to the neighbours and cleaning the bathroom taps, I occasionally get some writing done. There must be more hours in the day than they let on.

Screenwriting is one of the forms I write in and it usually keeps me off the streets. Here is a fistful of tips for those who aspire to join me filling those extra hours with invented worlds, screwed-up characters and improbable storylines.

Don't summarise – pinpoint

Description in screenwriting's got to be concise and punchy, active yet emotive. It's nearer the intensity and focus of poetry than the landscaping of a novel. Easy to say, but how do you summarise the image of, for instance, your character Mathilde entering a run-down and dirty rented flat in just a few words?

Answer: you don't.

Mathilde walks in. Water drips from the rusted boiler and takeaway trays lie scattered on the floor.

Show us a telling detail that stands for the whole – the reader can invent the rest. Make 'em work.

Bin those twirling moustaches

Motivate your baddies. No-one – and I mean no-one – is aggressive or mean *from their own perspective*. The way they look at it, they're just defending themselves against a previous aggressor. Poor dears.

Example:

I'm not evilly plotting to murder the heir and inherit his fortune, I'm putting right the wrong that was done to my family by his ancestors...

Or: I'm not a nasty, selfish grown-up son, I'm a wounded child who wasn't loved enough by his parents...

Even Satan in Paradise Lost had a pretty justifiable grudge against his previous boss - *from his own point of view*.

Be Laurence Olivier with an eraser

Read all dialogue out loud. Yes, all of it. Out loud. To the mirror, if that helps. If it doesn't sound like what you or your character would say, change it. Then read it out loud again.

Chances are your first version is clogged with adjectives, over-long sentences and 'written' grammar. Forgive yourself with a nice glass of wine.

Ditch the formalities

Rid yourself of those pesky hellos and goodbyes by starting scenes late and getting out early. Experiment with how late you can arrive in a scene and still be just in time. Find the highest dramatic point, where a question hangs in the air – and then get the heck out of there.