

## POCKET GUIDE TO WRITING FOR ACTORS - 10 THINGS TO LEAVE OUT

by Sylvia Cary

INT. CONNECTICUT COUNTRY KITCHEN - DAWN

A little girl, SYLVIA, 4, stands on a chair at the stove, trying to make French toast. The kitchen is in chaos. Pots, pans, dishes, bowls and baking ingredients are spread all over. Sylvia pours all the right ingredients (but in the wrong amounts) into a huge frying pan -- a quart of milk, a dozen and a half eggs, a stick of un-melted butter, a tin of cinnamon, a fist of salt (ditto pepper), a bowl of sugar, and two slices of bread. She turns the burner up high until the contents of the frying pan boil up like a cauldron. She reaches in with a spoon, tastes the concoction, and burst into tears. Her mother enters the kitchen.

MOTHER

Oh my God! What are you doing?

SYLVIA

(wailing)

I must have left something out!

From French Toast to Screenwriting

My first attempt at writing a screenplay, like my first attempt at making French toast, was a disaster. I used all the right ingredients in all the wrong amounts. The script was called *The Ladies War*. It had dense paragraphs of description based on years of research (which I love doing), long chunks of dialogue, a few hundred characters (I had more people in that script than I know in real life), all totaling up to a rambling 240-page script that didn't work, leaving me wondering: "What did I leave out?" The answer? Not nearly enough!

I began to educate myself about what to include in (as well as what to *leave out of*) my scripts. I read screenwriting books. I took screenwriting workshops. I wrote a script with a partner and three more for hire (my name isn't even on them). I joined the Scriptwriters Network and after a while, I dug out my "French toast" script (*The Ladies War*), chopped off the first half of it (which included my main character's childhood and the entire War of 1812!), rewrote it, and submitted it (unsuccessfully) to the Producer's Outreach Program and the Carl Sautter contest. On my third try, I won first place for features in the Carl Sautter in 2003. The script (still too long at 130 pages) got a staged reading at the Lee Strasberg Theatre (one of my prizes), and

as a result of that got optioned by Desert Light Productions, where it has since been in development.

### Writing an "Actor-Friendly" Script

For me, the development process has an education in how not to write a script that alienates the very people (readers, producers, actors, directors) that I want to attract. During sessions with my producer, April Adams (also an actress), we managed to cut down *The Ladies War* (renamed *Peg's War*) from 130 pages down to 99 pages, with the hope of selling it to TV. As we all know, a lean, clean script with plenty of white space has a much better chance.

While my intentions were good - to write an "actor-friendly" script -- it's amazing how easy it is for a writer to start slipping in things that irritate actors. Writers don't mean to do this, but it happens. Based on my own experience, here are some things to consider *leaving out*. But keep in mind that - just like my French toast recipe -- there's nothing wrong with the ingredients I'm about to mention. Just use them in palatable amounts:

#### 1) *Leave out Parentheticals*

When I first started doing script coverage, I read a lot of bad scripts. One day I read a good script that had one bad thing about it: The writer inserted a parenthetical under every character's name telling the actor how to read the line: (angry); (sarcastic); (joyful); (bitter); etc. There were so many it got to be funny. Needless to say, the script got a pass; it had "beginner" written all over it. "Be very careful of telling actors how to read a line," warns April Adams. "Unless it's critical that the line be read a certain way, and it's not obvious from the context, don't put it down on paper."

Yet as a writer, I can understand the temptation to do this. In my own script, for example, I wanted to make sure the actor realized he was supposed to be talking to his wife in a patronizing way - so I put "patronizing tone" in parenthesis under the character's name. April Adams took one look at it, whipped out her pen and slashed it out. "Hey!" I said. She put up her hand: "The scene itself shows he's patronizing." She was right. Still, cutting that parenthetical made me nervous.

#### 2) *Leave Out "Beats"*

Whenever I read the dialogue I've written, I can feel the pauses in my bones -- usually when a character changes the subject or the mood shifts. I've always put in the word "beat" (or a "then") at these moments. Well, don't do it. Actors (who actually use the term "beat" differently) don't like to see the word "beat" in their

dialogue because they feel it's telling them when to speak and when not to speak. And they may not even agree with the writer's timing -- so it just gets in their way.

### 3) *Leave Out "Little Bits of Business"*

Adding a "little bit of business" for an actor to do is sometimes a way of sneaking in a "beat" without actually having to write down the word. "He takes a sip of his coffee" can double as a "beat." But unless taking a sip of coffee has a direct relationship to the plot - a "plot consequence" as Judith Weston, author of *Directing Actors* puts it - then don't use it. On the other hand, if the coffee is poisoned and the character dies, or if the character bangs somebody over the head with his cup and kills him, then that "little bit of business" should probably stay in.

### 4) *Leave Out Underlinings*

Underlinings tell actors which words to emphasize, so actors usually resent them. As Denny Martin Flinn says in *How NOT to Write a Screenplay*, "Actors don't need anyone to tell them where to punch a word." If the writer tries to tell them anyway, chances are they won't pay attention. Again, it's just something that ends up getting in the way.

### 5) *Leave Out Detailed Descriptions*

As mentioned above, I love doing research. I spent years researching *Peg's War* just for fun, which included going to Washington, D.C. and poking around old sites and buildings. Naturally, I wanted to put every tidbit of history that I'd dug up into my script - just as I wanted to put every ingredient in the refrigerator into my French toast recipe when I was four. When I initially submitted the script to the POP and Carl Sautter contests, the feedback I got made it clear that there was too much description. In the Scriptwriters Network we hear this all the time: Nobody likes reading descriptions -- especially actors. In fact, actor William H. Macy told us as much when he came to speak at one of our meetings. He said that when he picks up a script, he reads only the dialogue. What most actors want to do is create their characters from scratch, getting their clues from the script's content, from the facts set down in the script, and from their own intuition.

So I cut, cut, cut my script. What was left over gave April Adams a chance to do some additional slashing on her own. "Just give the reader a sense of things," she said, "but don't insist that an actor has to be five feet 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches tall, or that his clothes have to be a certain color or fabric, or that a table in a room has to be round, or that all the food items at a banquet have to be seen on the screen. It's all just a guide to design production." She adds: "It's OK to describe an unusual room, for example, one

that reflects a character's personality, mood or level of success (all that helps the actor), but it's not necessary to describe the House of Representatives or Paris in great detail."

#### 6) *Leave Out Anything That Closes the Actor's Mind*

"Writers shouldn't include anything in their scripts that will narrow the vision of any of the major collaborators, including the actors," says April Adams. Writers shouldn't do anything to stifle or stop the actor's creative flow. "Don't interfere; don't butt in."

Once again, we writers don't mean to step on an actor's toes. We think that by adding things, we are being helpful and making improvements. But actors want writers to leave out their "helpful" coaching and trust the actors to know how to say their lines - and just maybe they'll come up with something more powerful than what the writer wrote.

For a writer, this kind of trust doesn't come easy -- especially if you've had a bad experience. In my own case, an actress in a staged reading read one of my characters as a "whiner" instead of as a woman who "spoke her mind." My immediate reaction to this was to go back to the script to see what I could do to "actor-proof" the role so this could never happen again! When I cooled down, I realized that the story itself should have made it clear that the character wasn't a whiner; a good actress would figure that out. If not, it was beyond my control. So I refrained from adding yet another "actor direction" to a script that already had a few too many. But it was hard to keep my hands off of it.

#### 7) *Leave Out On-the-Nose Dialogue; Clichés, and Wordy Verbiage*

It's no fun for actors to say lines that are "on the nose." There's no depth to these lines; there's no "there there." People just don't talk right out and say what they are feeling and thinking at any given moment. Actors know that in real life, people don't know themselves and therefore don't even know how to always say what they mean - but the truth lurks within, which is so much more interesting to play. Psychologists know this, too, which is why they rarely take what a patient tells them at face value. Shrink even have an expression: "*Whatever it is, it's the opposite.*" In other words, patients speak to therapists in subtext. When a patient says "I'm not depressed" or "I'm not angry at him," the therapist has to consider that what they are feeling underneath may be just the opposite. They have to look below the words, at the subtext, to see what's really going on. What could be more exciting for an actor than playing a role, say, of a man who insists he's not angry yet he's sitting on a time-bomb of pent-up emotion? Just think how this fact will impact every single line the

actor says, even the most superficial and bland utterances. That's the kind of challenge actors want. So leave out the superficial chit-chat (unless it's appropriate), leave out the clichés, and leave out the excess verbiage, and give the actors something they can sink their teeth into.

#### 8) *Leave Out Tongue-Twisters*

You've probably heard this many times, but there's nothing as educational as hearing your own script read out loud. No matter how many times I read my script to myself, it wasn't the same as having other voices have at it. Things that I thought were "lyrical and literate" were potential obstacles for actors to trip over. After the staged reading of *The Ladies War* at the Lee Strasberg Theatre, I changed some of the tongue-twisters back into English. It was also enlightening to go around and collect the actors' scripts after the reading and see some of their comments about their roles. One actress wrote next to one of her lines: "Huh?" That got my attention!

#### 9) *Leave Out the Mind-Reading Requirements*

Actors look for motivations and objectives: What does their character want? What is the character's objective in every scene? Why is a character the way he is? The answers should be found in clues the writers puts into the script -- up to a point. But what drives actors (not to mention readers) crazy is when information is buried in the description sections but is never seen up on the screen. If Charlie's little sister was hit by a car when Charlie was six and to this day he has guilt because he wasn't watching out for her property, then this fact (if it's important to the Charlie character today) needs to pop up on the screen - in the form of dialogue, or in Charlie's behavior, or even in a flashback. But it can't just be dumped in a description paragraph where only a psychic with a crystal ball will find it. A script isn't a novel. So if you don't put the facts on the screen, leave them out. The same goes for so-called character assessments: It does no good to for the writer to say that Charlie is "insecure" unless we see that insecurity on screen. For an actor, what does "insecure" look like and talk like? It's the old "show don't tell" rule. Show it or cut it.

#### 10) *Leave Out Your Writer's Ego - and Let Go*

Once you type FADE OUT that's only the beginning. After editing, polishing, and re-writing you'll have to hand it over and lose control of it - which is how it's supposed to be. "A script is a blueprint, painful as that is to the writer," Producer April Adams goes on. "It is to be enhanced upon and used as a collaborative element. But if you have created strong circumstances in your script, the characters will emerge and be

memorable, and the final product will hopefully be something you can be proud of."

So hand over your script to the next collaborator. Think of it as the Olympic Torch: You got to carry it on the first leg of its journey, and now it has many, many more miles to go.

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Bios:

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*Producer, actress, April Adams, heads Desert Light Productions and is also an experienced Casting Director. She helped cast the cult film DAYS OF HEAVEN, TV's ROOTS, SOAP, EIGHT IS ENOUGH and THREE'S COMPANY. Theatre casting includes Broadway, NY's Roundabout Theatre and a variety of well-known regional theatres. Her work casting award-winning commercials led to her being invited to be a judge for the CLIO Awards. She worked at Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre, the Theatre Development Fund and John Houseman's The Acting Company. Email: [april@desertlightproductions.com](mailto:april@desertlightproductions.com)*