

Story Editors

The Writer's Best Ally

By Kate Tremills

Most writers know story editors as their antagonists from the production world. In fact, many story editors work on a freelance basis to bring a writer's work to its best incarnation. This article explores the benefits of the writer/story editor partnership: support, feedback, a faster writing pace, built-in deadlines, and contacts. Follow the process of working with an editor from the germ of an idea to the polished script.

THE WRITER'S BEST ALLY

Many have heard of story editors as part of the development team on feature films. The association may not always be a pleasant one, since the story editor is hired by the producer. Regardless of the editor's good intentions toward the writer's vision, the producer pays the bills. And what the boss says, goes.

But there's a whole other world out there for writers and their natural ally, the story editor. A world where the writer's needs always come first and the editor supports you to create your best writing. A land where you work as a well-oiled team to create a polished script from the germ of an idea in only three months.

HOW IT WORKS

Many story editors, screenwriting professors, and readers

offer their services as independent story editors. They work directly with a writer to facilitate the creation of a script. The writer hires an editor on a contract basis to work together through a specified number of phases. The editor then bills a fee for each phase, including idea to first draft, second draft, and polish draft.

THE BENEFITS

Before using a story editor, writing a script from the idea to the third draft took me at least six months. Six months of struggling with the arguments and doubts in my own head as I forged a story. Only then did my creation see the light of readers' feedback. And my colleagues considered me a fast writer. Many new screenwriters spend a year on their script before getting feedback. Unfortunately, quite often the responses come as a shock. And they dive back into rewrites for another year.

Writing for the film industry means learning to write tight, quality work at a fast pace. Fresh scripts are written in two months. Rewrites are done in two weeks. Taking a year to write a script is like asking for a sabbatical. And you lose paying work in the meantime.

The best analogy for a writer working with a story editor is an amateur athlete working with a professional coach. Your talent reaches an impressive new level through the combination of setting goals, regular encouragement, feedback, and support. Best of all you don't

have to spend all of your creative time alone. Story editors with solid industry experience keep you on track while still allowing you to stretch your creative limits. Like an athlete, everything improves. Especially your speed.

The time you save comes on many levels. I write faster and with more focus when I have regular feedback and deadlines that involve another person. The weekly brainstorm sessions and meetings keep me excited and motivated, resulting in the regular flow of pages. Even if your writing pace doesn't increase by a single preposition, your script will be far more solid when finished. Saving you months and months, never mind the pain, of rewriting.

TEAMWORK

Once you have established a contract with your story editor, you will decide how you want to work together. Editors work in person, over e-mail, on the phone, via online messaging, by post, or a combination of those options. I recommend including some form of personal contact in the process, such as talking over the phone or face-to-face. This forges a stronger relationship and facilitates productive brainstorming sessions. The energy from these sessions often translates directly into written pages.

You can start working with an editor with as little as the general idea for your script. A good editor will ask you question after question until

your idea blossoms into a full-blown story. Some editors will toss out ideas for you to consider or as brainstorming fodder. Remember that you do not have to use any of their ideas, but keeping an open mind always allows more possibilities. It's up to you to set the boundaries of how you want to work. And to choose an editor that respects those boundaries.

Once the story has been fleshed out and you have your key characters, the editor will request that you create a detailed step outline. The step outline maps out the scenes in each act with a brief (generally one paragraph) description of what happens in each scene. The purpose of the step outline is to develop a solid structure for your script and to establish the drama of your plotlines. Your editor will look over the outline to detect flaws in the dramatic structure. You will use the outline as a map for writing your script.

Once you have hammered out the step outline, the writing begins. I deliver writing to my editor in quarters of a script: first act, part one of the second act, part two of the second act, and the third act. This keeps the structure and turning points fresh in my mind, while dividing the writing (and reading) into manageable amounts.

I give myself a deadline of writing roughly 25 pages, or one quarter of the script, per week. At the end of the week, I e-mail the pages to my editor. We meet over the phone at the beginning of each week to discuss the last week's pages. Since the first draft is important as a creative draft, my editor generally asks questions to clarify issues, ensures that I stay on track structurally, and gives positive feedback to keep me writing. We "spitball," or toss ideas back and forth, if I am stuck with a character or a

scene. Instead of spending weeks alone brooding over an issue, we resolve it in a phone call. These sessions can be anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours. So be prepared to add a good long distance plan to your arsenal of writing tools.

After the first draft, we set up the same process of pages and meetings, but generally at an accelerated pace. Rewriting, by nature and by necessity, is a

faster process than pure creation. The second draft may take three to four weeks. The polish (or third draft) should take only about two weeks. With your editor, it's possible to create a polished script in three months.

Of course, wrenches can be thrown into the schedule. If your story editor is extremely busy, the meetings may have to take place bi-weekly. Or either of you may get a gig on a film. Then there's all of the usual life emergencies and peculiarities. When first setting up your schedule, work out as many of these issues as you can foresee. Planning in this way will keep you from getting discouraged and will ensure that the creative juices keep flowing. Always remember that you are paying for your editor's services. That makes you the boss. And what the boss says, goes. Sounds good, doesn't it?

FINDING AN EDITOR

Story editors are almost as plentiful as writers. They come with a wide variety of credentials, skills, styles, and fees. The best way to find an editor is, like with most things, through

referral. Referrals mean you already have a strong sense of how an editor works, her credentials, and whether she can foster results. Friends aren't the only means to a referral. They can also be obtained from production companies and film commissions that regularly use story editors and readers for their projects.

Beyond referrals, there are several creditable ways to find

ing with a professional editor, you can set up the process to be thorough, rewarding, and free. Of course, it means you will have to give up a chunk of your writing time to return the favor when it's your colleague's turn.

FEES

The range in fees for story editors is a broad one. The best approach is to do a little

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a story editor. Screenwriting organizations, guilds, and schools are the first step to accessing your local pool of talent. Professors, readers, and writers often earn extra money offering their skills as story editors. Accessing editors this way also comes with built-in references. Be sure to verify that the potential editor has done story editing before and understands the etiquette and skills required. A good writer does not always make a good story editor. The writing sensibilities may be there, but the people skills may not.

You can also find an international array of editors via the Internet. They include as wide a range of credentials as they do fees. Many of these editors have websites that list their experience and what services they offer. Some, such as the world famous Linda Seger, refer to themselves as script consultants and have different levels of fees depending on the services provided.

At the other end of the scale from script consultants is the option of exchanging editorial services with a fellow writer. While this does not necessarily offer the same results as work-

research on the options available and choose what fits your needs and your budget. Working with a local story editor allows you to pay in your local currency. Many of the story editors on the Internet are based in the U.S. and, therefore, bill in U.S. dollars, doubling the cost for some writers. When assessing fees, keep in mind that working with a good story editor will save you time and money in the long run. Time spent on rewrites and money spent on untried submissions.

MOVING ON UP

If you have been looking for a way to take your writing to the next level and create a finished script in the process, working with a story editor is for you. The cost will be well worth it when you, and better yet, producers, read the final product. Just imagine what it'll do for your career. ■

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