

# TEN TIPS FOR CREATING EXCELLENT DRAMATIC SCRIPTS

Steve Harper

## OVERVIEW

Some say that the elements of good story telling are planted deep in our cultural consciousness. On some level, we all know a good story when we hear one. If, as an audience, we're engaged and excited, we will follow a protagonist anywhere. But knowing a good story and being able to write one are two different things. Here are ten things to look for in each dramatic piece you create: whether it's a play, a novel or a screenplay.

### TIP ONE: TAP INTO YOUR UNIQUE VOICE

No one in the world sounds like you or has your sensibility. Use that sensibility as the basis for your work. What excites you? What enrages you? What makes you curious? Channel the energy you bring to your life – use that energy on the page. Allow your dramatic creations to emerge from your unique perspective. Start from that place to build character, circumstance and the world of your piece.

### TIP TWO: DO YOUR RESEARCH

Whether you research at the beginning of your process or throughout – never hesitate to find information to make your story ring true. More often than not, research can lead to inspiration: turning a good idea into a well-executed and believable story. Remember, too, that research is not only in books or on computer. Find people willing to tell you their story and add their expertise to your dramatic creation.

### TIP THREE:

#### DEVELOP A ONE SENTENCE DESCRIPTION OF YOUR STORY

In TV and film this is called the logline: a single sentence that states who your lead character is and what he or she is up against in your story. This may seem

like an exercise at first, but this distillation of your piece can be the north star of your play or screenplay. It can keep you on track and ensure you're telling a focused story.

#### TIP FOUR: OBSERVE THE RULES OF STRUCTURE

You can achieve a sense of structure by knowing your story must have a beginning, middle and end. In any script, it can be helpful to get clear on what separates the beginning from the middle and the middle from the end. Work out those details and you'll likely be on more solid ground than if you just started writing.

#### TIP FIVE: CREATE A SOLID OUTLINE

If you're taking a trip, you need a road map. An outline is simply that. Some writers start with them, others write them later in the process. Those who don't need outlines are likely masters of their craft. If that's not you, do an outline. It can be a page or several – it will help you continue writing when your initial inspiration dips, your energy flags, or you get lost.

#### TIP SIX: DEVELOP DISTINCT CHARACTER VOICES

On a basic level, it's more fun to write in voices other than your day-to-day speaking voice. Interesting characters speak in diverse and interesting ways. Listen for how friends, family, and strangers use language. Borrow from them to create distinct characters.

#### TIP SEVEN: YOUR PROTAGONIST SHOULD BE THE CATALYST

Make sure your lead character moves the story forward. Characters are defined by what they DO. If your main character doesn't do anything, but only reacts, your story will be much less compelling. Think of it this way: each character has a super-power. Your lead character should use that power to advance the story - or that power (and your character) is likely being wasted.

#### TIP EIGHT: KEEP THE STAKES HIGH

I go to the theatre or the movies to learn something new about the human condition. The human condition is defined, in part, by life and death. Some of the most compelling scripts make direct use of this. Keeping the stakes high

means putting your character on the line as much as possible: physically, emotionally, psychologically. Keeping her in danger often will keep your audience paying attention.

**TIP NINE: MAKE SURE EACH SCENE CHANGES THE DYNAMICS**  
Here's a simple rule that spices up any script. If you start a scene in a happy place, end it in an unhappy place. If people start as friends, end the scene as enemies. Make sure something major shifts in each scene. It will create a dramatic roller coaster for your characters and your audience.

**TIP TEN: CREATE YOUR FIRST DRAFT QUICKLY**  
Create your first draft quickly without looking back. It's easier to edit than to create something from scratch. Rather than agonize on a first draft, dare yourself to get it down as swiftly as possible. How much can you pour out at once? After paving the way, you may have a mess of a script, but it's a SCRIPT! Once you've got a script, revision is the name of the game.

## RESOURCES

Story Robert Mckee  
Screenplay Syd Field  
Save the Cat Blake Snyder

## ABOUT STEVE HARPER

Steve is a professional actor and writer with a passion and commitment for coaching artists who want to pursue their creative work while keeping a healthy balance between their professional and personal lives. A graduate of Yale, The A.R.T. Institute at Harvard and The Juilliard Playwriting program, he's appeared at The Guthrie and The Kennedy Center, and his writing has appeared in theatres across the country and in publications like *The Juilliard Journal*, *Creativity Calling* and *The Kenyon Review*. Find him at [www.yourcreativelife.com](http://www.yourcreativelife.com)