

How to Sell to Hollywood

by Marisa D'Vari

Selling books to Hollywood can be a lucrative proposition. But what are the rules of the game? How do you get books and stories read? Before you can sell, you must understand the Hollywood system.

As a former Hollywood executive and the author of *Script Magic: Subconscious Techniques to Conquer Writer's Block*, I've received my fair share of questions about the secret of turning books and stories into Hollywood gold.

Here's what you need to know:

1. Who are these story analysts? How old are they? What is their education?

Story analysts come in every conceivable shape, size, and age. Readers at the studio are protected by a union and make very good money, often over \$1000 a week, which is extremely good by Los Angeles standards. Virtually all are exceptionally well educated, and it seems as if more than half have advanced degrees, with law degrees particularly prevalent.

Few readers are able to start off as story analysts, despite their education. They fast-track their way from being secretaries or mail room clerks by "reading on the side" -- offering to do coverage (what our industry calls a reader's report which tells executives how well suited your book or story will be for the screen) for free.

2. What is their day like?

There are two types of readers. The full-time studio or production company reader is required in most places to read and analyze at least two scripts a day. They show up like everyone else, have their coffee, put their legs on the desk, and read.

The other type is the independent or freelance reader. This is a cushy job, and, potentially, held by your worst enemy because these people get paid "by the pound."

Fast readers make very good money and the possibility of getting through more scripts is good motivation to internally shout "next" when material doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Personally, however, I wouldn't worry. Story analysts have an interior censor that lets them know very quickly if material has potential or not, no matter how strong or weak the time pressure.

3. What is a report for a studio like?

The story analyst's report or "coverage" consists of four sheets of paper in most studios. The first sheet is the cover sheet, with places for information (name, type of material, what executive it was submitted to, the analyst who wrote it), and for boxes the reader will check (great, good, okay, poor) to indicate the author's strength in terms of various story dynamics (character, dialogue, story development). The cover sheet also includes a space for a one sentence logline, and a one sentence comment.

The logline is a TV-Guide type description of what your story is about. The comment is a one-line summary of what the material has to offer. Most executives are intelligent; often, they've been recruited from Ivy League schools and have law or management degrees. They tend to look at coverage from a conceptual standpoint and to look first at the logline and comments sentences.

If there is a flicker of interest, the executive will read the rest of the coverage, and if the interest survives, s/he will personally read the material and then submit it for a weekend read" by the studio development team. The composition of this group varies from studio to studio but it may include the CEO, the president and VP of production, senior VPs, the director of development, the head of the story department and some analysts.

4. What happens after the development team reads the material?

The executive goes to bat, making a case for the material among his or her peers and boss.

5. What's the one element a book or story must have to convert well to film?

Universal appeal. It must contain the emotional elements that drive us all and to which we all can relate. It must be compelling, with an unusual mix of highly intriguing characters. And it must be the right story at the right time, read by the right reader and given to the right studio executive. Synchronicity plays an enormous part in this.

6. Can someone just send a book to a studio? What's the procedure?

Typically and traditionally, material goes through an agent. Why? Because an agent is the first filter. Only the most reputable agents with proven track records can convince a busy exec to consider a script even if the execs themselves aren't the first people who will read it. Reading material is an enormous drain on the studio's budget.

7. But I can't get an agent on the phone! And this is after I've already sold in Hollywood! I'm an East Coast writer, and agents at places like ICM and William Morris in LA won't take my calls!

It's tough being an East Coast writer, because so much of Hollywood is based on networking. Yet it is not impossible. The mantra is "good material always stands out." I would try the following tactics.

A. Be VERY nice to the assistant at the agency.

Young, naïve, and accustomed to West Coast informality and "have a nice day mentality," I was shocked in my first job as the assistant to the ICM Motion Picture Chairperson by how rude and, yes, snooty many of our East Coast clients were.

Being nice to the assistant can take you a long way, even to the point of a positive recommendation on a script or book since many of them are charged with reading their bosses' material. Once, a writer who cold-called me was so sweet and appreciative that I read his script on my own time and recommended him to the agency; he became a successful client!

B. Find a recognized third party to submit to an agent or agents on your behalf, preferably a highly regarded client or someone they want to steal from a rival agency.

C. Win awards, or get lots of buzz in ink and air. Nothing spells success like a name in the news (You can see how to get it in my new book, Media Magic!).

«»

Marisa D'Vari, author of Script Magic and the new book Media Magic: Profit and Promote with a Talk Show Host's Secrets, is a former Hollywood executive. She helps executives and entrepreneurs get new clients and enhance their image through media positioning and presentation skills. To engage her to speak to your company or to get an autographed copy of her book, email her at mdvari@deg.com or visit <http://www.deg.com>.