

Monkey Business

June 2010

Animated musings from
Emmy-winning screenwriter...

...Jeffrey Scott

Lessons From the Trenches of HOLLYWOOD

THE FIRST TEN PAGES

Ever get a big fish on the line only to have it get away before you could pull it into the boat? Me, too. Chances are you didn't set the hook. The same is true in screenwriting.

The first ten pages of any screenplay are the most critical. This is especially true in animation. If you don't hook the viewer in the first ten minutes of a film you have lost him for the remainder. He may have already bought a ticket, but it's not that ticket that will make you money, it's the additional 10 tickets you sell when that viewer tells his family and friends what a great picture he just saw. Word of mouth, not ad dollars, makes blockbusters.

How do you hook that viewer? With three things: interest, empathy and mystery. And how do you put these three things into the first ten pages of your script? Let me show you by once again using my favorite example of a beautifully scripted animated feature, *Kung Fu Panda*.

HOOK THE VIEWER'S INTEREST IMMEDIATELY.

In animated features this is most often done with a visual action sequence. *Kung Fu Panda* started off with a beautiful Asian tapestry of martial arts action as a mysterious panda warrior kicked the stuffing out of his adversaries. It sure grabbed my interest. But that's not enough. You can start a film with action to hook the viewer, but action alone, without the other elements, won't keep him on the hook.

ESTABLISH THE VIEWER'S EMPATHY FOR THE HERO.

In *Kung Fu Panda*, the instant the opening action ended, Po, the panda hero, fell out of bed and plopped onto

the floor of his real-world bedroom, brought back to his mundane life of being a waiter in his father's noodle shop. It was all a dream. In one second the audience became aware that Po was an overweight klutz with impossible dreams of becoming a kung fu warrior.

Now the viewer isn't just interested in the kung fu action, he's interested in the hero. We all have big dreams, so we feel for this poor kid. Empathy! The writers have pulled the hook deeper. But the fish isn't in the boat yet.

DRAW THE VIEWER INTO THE MYSTERY.

After establishing the hero, his goal and the virtual impossibility of reaching it, the villain is revealed—a vicious kung fu warrior named Tai Lung. His escape from prison is imminent and the local kung fu master, Shifu, must choose a new dragon warrior to defeat him. The stakes are set. And the audience knows that this is Po's destiny. But how can an overweight, klutzy panda possibly defeat a highly trained, kung fu warrior tiger? That's the mystery!

In ten artfully crafted pages, *Kung Fu Panda* hooks the audience with visual action, gains their empathy by revealing a flawed character with universal dreams of becoming a stronger person, and puts them into mystery, wondering how the hero can possibly accomplish his goal and defeat the villain.

There are 80 more pages to come, but if those first 10 don't set the hook, the viewer is going to swim away. And with him will go those other 9 tickets.

Jeffrey's Latest Monkey Business

Jeffrey's ghostwriter, Hunter N. Pecker (pictured above), has received numerous emails from his many simian fans asking what his homonid "front man" looks like. So Hunter snapped a picture of Jeffrey (right) for all to see.

Hunter keeps Jeffrey in a cage while he's not out pitching projects or schmoozing execs, but he Photoshopped the bars off the picture to avoid charges of cruelty to animals.

While Jeffrey has been picking fleas out of his thinning hair, Hunter has been busy writing an exciting action screenplay for one of the world's largest video game companies. More news on this as soon as Hunter's NDA permits.

Ook! Ook!

