

Monkey Business

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Animated musings from
Emmy-winning screenwriter...

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Lessons From the Trenches of HOLLYWOOD

K.I.S.S. BAD STORIES GOODBYE

One of the most useful maxims in life is known by the acronym K.I.S.S. I'm sure you've heard of it. It stands for "Keep It Simple Stupid". But simplicity is not just the key to a happy life; it's also the key to great storytelling—which only makes sense because stories are about life.

Well-written animated features, no matter how complex they may seem upon first viewing, have basic character and plot elements that are *very* simple. To construct a simple story you need only answer the following questions:

What does the hero want?

What is stopping him from getting it?

What does he THINK he needs to attain what he wants? (This is often a physical object or power known in writing parlance as the *McGuffin*.)

What does he REALLY need in order to attain this dream? (This is a character change, not the *McGuffin*.)

What does the villain want?

What does he THINK he needs to attain this? (This would likely be the same *McGuffin*.)

What is the theme that ties all this together?

These questions, though simple, may feel a bit complicated when looked at for the first time. But let me give you an example to show you how beautifully simple they can be answered.

Kung Fu Panda, written by Jonathan Aibel & Glenn Berger, is perhaps the most elegantly simple animated feature ever written. Let's go through it and see how the writers answered these questions.

What does the hero want? Po, the panda hero, literally dreamed of being a kung fu master.

What is stopping him from getting it? He's a fat klutz.

What does he THINK he needs to attain what he wants? Once Po is chosen to be the next Dragon Warrior, he believes he needs the "secret" power of the dragon scroll to become a kung fu master. The scroll is the *McGuffin*.

What does he REALLY need in order to attain his dream? He just needs to find the confidence within himself to utilize his innate abilities.

What does the villain want? Tai Lung wants revenge on Shifu, the kung fu master who refused him the dragon scroll, and to destroy Po to prove that he, Tai Lung, is the true Dragon Warrior.

What does he THINK he needs to attain this? The "secret" power of the dragon scroll (*McGuffin*).

What is the theme that ties all this together? "There is no secret, the power is within us." And thus the *McGuffin* is rendered meaningless as is the usual case with *McGuffins*.

I could write pages and pages describing the elegant simplicity of this story, but then I would be violating K.I.S.S. myself. And that would be stupid! So instead, I suggest you read the *Kung Fu Panda* script (available online) and focus on the above questions. You will discover the beauty of its simplicity, and enjoy a wonderful story. And you will learn the "secret" of great writing.

Jeffrey's Latest Monkey Business

Most monkeys love bananas. Not Jeffrey's ghostwriter, Hunter N. Pecker (pictured above). Being a Hollywood party animal, Hunter is big into sushi. However, for contractual reasons Hunter has agreed to stop eating sushi while he's finishing up writing and story-editing the scripts for next season's *Sheldon* series currently airing on qubo, ION, Telemundo and NBC.

Sheldon is an enthusiastic young mollusk who, along with his shellfish friends, gets into all sorts of comical undersea mischief and heartwarming adventures. Hunter is having a blast writing the show, but looks forward to his contract being completed so he can get back to eating sushi. According to an unnamed source, Hunter was seen eyeing one of the show's cute little crab characters and muttering something about her making a fabulous California roll.

Ook! Ook!

