

# SCREENPLAY GURUS

## SCRIPT NOTES

**TITLE:** X  
**LOCALE:** Anytown, USA (a place with snow and ice fishing during winter)  
**WRITER(S):** X  
**PERIOD:** Present  
**FORM:** Feature Screenplay  
**GENRE:** Holiday/Family, Comedy, Drama  
**BUDGET:** Low  
**PAGES:** 107  
**DRAFT DATE:** NA  
**COVERAGE DATE:** 4/22/24  
**PREPARED BY:** AJ

---

## **COMMENTS**

### OVERALL

X is a fun, whacky, and nostalgic ride as a regular guy spirits his family away on a retro journey back to the future. There are loads of laughs in this Santa's bag if you're nice, not naughty; a near impossible mission for this dysfunctional fam.

The bold story, characters and insightful, funny lines are very well done. There are surprises and twists. With a layer of meaning to frost this delicious Christmas cookie, we learn to open our eyes to behold the present as a gift.

However, the story is a tad overstuffed. The writing is unnecessarily cluttered and a bit lazy.

Let's rip off the pretty wrapping paper to find the draft improvements within.

---

## **STORY**

Excellent work, writer. Funny, imaginative, and entertaining. The core is solid gold.

That's because it's PETER BILLINGSLEY! This bold choice is a real hoot. Ralphie's BB gun stands in for the Green Machine except it was never under the tree. The lack points to unresolved issues through unreliable nostalgia that's prettified for survival in the present. We learn the ghost of

Christmas past was not as benevolent as recalled. There will be identification from disappointed kids, now adults, who harbor the same grievance about a present Santa never dropped off.

A note about Billingsley: They would have to accept the role, then there's the matter of budget. Given it's one small scene, it should be manageable. It could be done in what's called a "shoot out"; bringing a heavyweight to the set for, in this case, a day to shoot their scene.

Conversely, it could be said this is a short cut, a way to infuse emotion into the story easily and artificially. However, the writer wisely does not depend on this cameo to fill out the story. The script does stand firmly on its own merit.

There is no recommendation to cut, but the writer should consider a change where a suitable scene from A CHRISTMAS STORY plays on the bar TV. As little as, "You'll shoot your eye out." This incurs a licensing fee but it's cheaper than hiring a (perhaps) reluctant Billingsley. A Kind Bartender character perhaps named Ralphie fills in for Billingsley.

Bottom line: we genuinely enjoyed this surprise at the bar. It's a great twist. And funny. It's the writer's choice to keep or cut. Other readers might not find it charming.

Hallmark Christmas films are formulaic. They require certain elements: Snow, trees, a problem that brings a woman back to save their small hometown (something), then falling for a local stud and finally eschewing city for country.

There is a sameness in Christmas comedies. It cannot be helped that in parts of the country there is snow in December. Where there's snow, there's sledding. There are trees and lights. A holiday family gathering has more conflict than turkey and gravy. No wonder there's a slight bump in real murders on Christmas due mostly to the pounding back of alcohol, financial and family stressors.

Therefore, finding an original take to a holiday comedy takes skill and the courage to spin elements way out there. X tips its hat to 8-BIT CHRISTMAS, CHRISTMAS VACATION, SURVIVING CHRISTMAS, the great-granddaddy A CHRISTMAS STORY, and a slew of others. Scenes in this story are directly lifted from other holiday-themed comedies. The difference is in the characters. This is where the writer shines. However, comparisons are to be expected.

There might be nothing new under the sun story-wise, yet there is plenty of room for originality in execution. The suggestion is a pass through the script to add more unlikely and surprising spins like the floatjacking to other parts of the story. The float scene is LOL funny because it's unexpected and maintains realism through the arc of the Teen's character. We also haven't seen this before.

Suggestions. Instead of sleds, what if the downhill was on Ski Bikes or shovels? A change of venue to a frozen lake where an ice boat race ends in watery disaster. Gramps on a shovel or Ski Bike is an inherently funny image we haven't seen before. What about the old fart on a snowboard? A luge on a track? Outside the box and outrageous is the watchword.

An issue with licensing is tackled in Craft. As noted, a solid core story. At this juncture, the script needs cuts, trims, and a thorough clean up.

## STRUCTURE

Spot on. The action and lunacy rise. However, the script is about ten pages too long. Comparables noted in Story run around 95 minutes – a sweet spot for all comedies. This script should as well with 97 pages as the max target. Ninety-five is better.

Markup flags cuts and trims. This includes the cut of an ending that feels tacked-on. At dinner, the characters' arcs are complete, including the clever closure of Adam. Jeff has the Machine. Get out. The story is satisfactory, complete.

The suggested cuts and trims total about five pages. This leaves another five to be trimmed or cut. The recommendation is tightening scenes with trims and cutting elements like the business with the 1983 phone. Especially Stan. We don't need to hear his calls, and we know a Motorola Brick is not a smartphone. Move quickly. Strike like a comedy cobra then move on to the next funny.

The short exterior household shots are inspired. From warm glow to storm-tossed. Great work.

A suggestion to move the VHS tape playback from page three to page one then the workplace. This allows a comedy lead away, i.e. an alleged happy past Christmas for young Jeff then forward to the Christmas spirit as an adult. An unvarnished view of the past tarnishes as the story progresses. The VHS is a little out of place on page three. It reads like a mistake.

The recommendation: cuts, trims. Keep focus and a quick pace.

---

## PLOT LOGIC

How many VCRs does this family have? It appears to be two, yet: Didn't we throw it out? Maybe the kids know. Rework this a bit. One beat-up VCR in a box in the basement, for example. VHS tapes there too. The VCR eating a tape will bring less than fond memories for some.

•  
INT. CHURCH NIGHT There are altars at the front of churches therefore it wouldn't be backstage like a theater. Behind the altar is a vestry.

•  
At 15, boy and girl twins would have their own bedrooms. It's a tad odd they're still sharing a room. Unless it's *that* kind of home. A shared room would have ended when they were much younger. Make the change to two rooms.

---

## CHARACTERS

As noted, excellent work. Not a weak character in the bunch.

LOL highlights: Brandon in general, his corrupting influence, selling dolls in the street then plasma! – the latter inspired and out there; the snotty teens especially their “give me the cash or crypto”; Adam and the “Swirlie”; lots more.

Jeff is well done. His journey to the past is successful. His arc is clear, meaningful. Splendid work.

A note here of the added sweetness. It's easy to write a shrewish wife who emasculates a milquetoast hubby. Here, Amy and Laura know Jeff is off his rocker yet they both love him and stay the course. Great moment that adds depth and meaning – the real spirit of Christmas.

AMY

(Beat)

Are you barely tolerating this as much as I am?

LAURA

(laughs)

Even more so, as much as I love Jeff.

AMY

Amen to that.

---

## DIALOGUE

Markup flags issues, cuts, trims, and highlights. Overall, the lines are in great shape with loads of heartwarming, acerbic and hilarious lines.

---

## CRAFT

An area in need of work. The writer is encouraged to thoroughly read the markup. Overall, the text is a tad haphazard and poor. There are also outstanding Actions.

•  
At 254, about three per page, there are far, far too many exclamations which are a signal of strong emotion or surprise. Constant exclaimed lines grate on audiences and make characters sound insane. Dialogue is performed. Consider the inflections when these lines are spoken:

JEFF

It's one **cookie!**

AMY

I am this close to being done with my ninety-six cookie contribution. When I'm done, I'll be done until next **year!**

JEFF

I hope you're ready for the greatest Christmas **ever!**

There are 142 ellipses, nearly two per page. They're not being used properly. Ellipses illustrate an omission of words, a pause, or something left unsaid.

Parentheticals are overused and incorrectly set. Parentheticals are limited to a few words as reference (to Jeff), simple emotion or action. Anything else should be an Action line. Markup flags cuts, and which parentheticals should be Actions. Overuse of parentheticals to convey emotion can be seen as the dialogue that follows is not working.

Avoid (beat). Note that unless the word requires an initial Cap, it's lower case. In lieu of the flaccid (beat), if a parenthetical is motivated, say something (stink eye) (puppy dog look).

Use exclamation, ellipsis, and parentheticals sparingly. A strong recommendation to clear all of these except where they enhance writing or are grammatically correct. Clutter slows reads. Treasure white. Think in "shots." Think clean.

•  
The screenplay guideline is Double Em Dashes (--).

KATHRYN

Thank you, Jeff-

•  
Sentences should be Active Voice, Present Tense without mixed verb.

Jeff freezes (Present) before breaking (Present Participle) out into a smile.

Jeff freezes then breaks into a smile.

Jeff freezes, breaks into a smile.

Jeff freezes but can't help to smile.

This sentence is awkward. It reads like the tree enters under its own power. The front door bursts open, **and the lush Christmas tree comes in.** Brandon and Stan carrying (Participle), Jeff and Laura following (Participle). (Note: the well-structured tree bidding war is great fun.)

The door bursts open. Brandon and Stan lug the lush Christmas tree. Jeff and Laura follow it in. The door bursts open. The lush Christmas tree just fits through the doorway. Brandon and Stan lug. Jeff and Laura follow.

•  
...a Christmas pageant at church, etc. Always finish thoughts. Etcetera what?

•  
Avoid temporal qualifiers like starts, begins and suddenly.

He starts to set down his controller...

The blow up Santa is starting to deflate. ("Is starting" is Passive Voice.)

He sets down the controller...

Miffed, he sets down the controller...

He slams down the controller...

The blow up Santa deflates.

The blow up Santa deflates. It lies in the snow like a hungover partygoer.

•  
Once in a location, use Mini Slugs or POV:

Curious, Jeff tosses the tape on the Christmas box, HUMS and shuffles to the --

DINING ROOM

JEFF

tosses the tape on the Christmas box, HUMS and trots upstairs.

DINING ROOM

•  
Avoid repeating in Dialogue what was just highlighted in the preceding Action. Cut the Dialogue or Parenthetical. We know the tree is secure, and that Stan is on the phone:

The guys get it in the stand, and Jeff tightens it into place.

~~JEFF~~

~~Locked in.~~

Stan talks on the blocky cell phone.

STAN

~~(into phone)~~

We can't go any higher than that. The profit margin for construction is tight as is...

•

In general, pump up the writing. It is noted some verbs, like "gives" (20), are repeated. Wordhippo.com has a ton of synonyms for "gives." Match Action to the character's emotional state.

Jeff holds up the old Christmas list.

Jeff shakes the list in her face.

Unable to speak, Jeff waves the list in her face.

He pats Jeff on the stomach, irking Jeff. (Uses Jeff twice – awkward.)

Adam pats Jeff's stomach. Jeff's eyes narrow. He looks like a volcano about to blow.

•

Whenever possible, avoid adverbs and adjectives. They add little. However, the assonance in this sentence is pleasing. Amy and Laura silently sip their steaming drinks.

Amy and Laura sip their steaming drinks in silence.

Without a word, Amy and Laura sip their steaming drinks.

•

#### MUSIC AND OTHER RIGHTS

To begin, adding a song to a montage or other casual use is where just about anything can be inserted at the director's discretion. Music licensing needs should be carefully considered when thinking 'contained' as in this script. Think about how much it's going to cost the production to license. In this script it's possibly millions. Generally, music choices are not a screenwriter's job.

JEFF'S... far surpasses casual use. The story changes by excising music. The following can be removed without changing the story: The familiar saxophone opening of Men at Work's "Who Can It Be Now?" begins. This could be written as an "Eighties' Rocker". Familiarity to the writer is not universal familiarity with a song from 1981. It translates to a 13-year-old in 1981 currently in their fifties. Readers might scratch their heads. A producer sees dollar signs then scratches their head.

So... that was like new Coke meets Superman III. Same issue here. One would need to know the history of these abject failures in 1983 and 1985 to get the reference. An easy fix is a response from Jeff something like "I won't fail like those things did." However, the fix explains the joke and takes the air out of it. A better way to handle it is to use a contemporary reference. After all, these people do live in 2024.

Does this story take place in 2024? Jeff is written as Forties. The oldest Jeff can be is 49 – born in 1975. That makes him around six in 1981. Fifteen in 1989. It tracks.

Brandon's corruption of the twins is very funny. Their transformation is a highlight. We'll try, but the Crue can't be contained! They're begging for the Crue!

This is a cornerstone. The suggestion to make it "Eighties' Heavy Metal". We'll try, but the headbanging can't be contained. They're begging for the metal. It means cutting Colin Hay. It has already been recommended to cut the last four or five pages. Same issue with Hay as Billingsley.

Amy's infatuation with Prince is also very funny. Suddenly the air fills with the opening guitar riff of Prince's "When Doves Cry." A suggestion for Jeff to play a real guitar and sing it for more intimacy... and funny. The right to use a recording can be high, but rights to lyrics and melody are easier by comparison. A recommendation to keep this as a fun part of Amy and Jeff's relationship. Just make it more palatable to a producer. Be aware that speaking lyrics must also be licensed from the copyright holder. Cut them when possible.

The use of Crue and Prince and the rest is a bold move and Voice which we applaud. They add to the overall enjoyment. Unfortunately, the vagaries of the industry could put the script at risk.

The most compelling reason to dial back Eighties' specifics is screenplays are written for audiences not writers. The script's nostalgia trip is top notch but a bit Motley Crue fan boy.

Successful stories are accessible to a wide age range. The references to the past must be written so they are accepted as important to the characters, and as a mirror of the audience's lives. Nostalgia can be catchy. The Twins learn "Everything old is new again." More in Marketability and Conclusion.

•

The recommendation is a deep pass on the text to amp up the writing, fix issues and typos, eliminate clutter, cut and trim.

---

## **TITLE**

Fantastic title. How about Rad, Radical or Bitchin' in lieu of Awesome?

---

## **MARKETABILITY and CONCLUSION**

This is a script for a low budget, contained film with a hard \$3M to \$5M budget. Licensing and hiring a holiday icon could easily balloon the cost to \$10M plus. A producer will certainly try to make a film from this script for as little as possible and may cut all the rights content anyway.

The story is enviable due to its projected low budget. Small cast, few locations, little or no CGI, one rollicking set piece. As written, the script just skirts nailing the "Four Quadrants": Men and Women above and below 25.

Though there are materialistic, lively, and rebellious 15-year-olds for teens, grandparents and middle-aged parents for older crowds, the deep dive on the Eighties, as noted, excludes a sizable part of the quadrants. As suggested, this can be nudged.

The script hits the jackpot with what's popular: Comedy. Christmas comedies also do well and show up every year. So too for stories that strike a universal chord – like this one.

However, the script is not currently ready for industry scrutiny. It must be cleaned up with more attention to bettering text. The writer's challenge continues to difficult choices on the rights issues.

The writer has Voice. This is a very funny and heartwarming script. Fortune favors the bold, and this script is both bold and a risk. The writer need not change a thing to fit the script into an acceptable rights position. Though potentially expensive, the story works exceedingly well as written.

Whether the writer projects an attempt at a sale or option, or simply as a Spec to land writing assignments, the content will be scrutinized. The script could be immediately discounted based on the over-the-top use of copyrighted material. Or celebrated. The writer is on a tightrope with this script. They could fall or make it gracefully across. The writer decides if the risk is worth it.

Thank you for the opportunity to read the script.

- Andrew



# SCREENPLAY GURUS' 11 POINT SCORING MATRIX

Scores: 0 – 10 points for each element, 110 total possible points

Pass: 0 – 75  
Weak Consider: <sup>1</sup> 76 – 80  
Consider: 81 – 90  
Strong Consider: 91 – 100  
Recommend: 101 – 110

Statistical Scores of Submitted Screenplays

Pass: 80%  
Weak Consider: <sup>1</sup> 10%  
Consider: 5%  
Strong Consider: 3%  
Recommend: 2%

PRESENTATION	5
THEME	9
STORYTELLING	9
ORIGINALITY	7
STRUCTURE	7
PLOT	8
CHARACTERIZATION	9
DIALOGUE	9
STYLE	4
CONCEPT	8
MARKETABILITY/COMMERCIAL APPEAL	8
TOTAL POINTS	83

**SCRIPT:      CONSIDER**  
**WRITER:    RECOMMEND**

Presentation:

Is the script properly formatted, free of typos and misspellings? Does the writing use standard English conventions? Is the cover page attached with the author's name and contact information only? Is there white space? Are there lengthy blocks of dialogue and action?

Theme:

Is the theme stated and does the screenplay reinforce it throughout? Is the theme relevant or unique?

Storytelling:

How effectively has the author crafted the timeline of events? Is the story interesting or compelling? Is it relevant? Does the script serve the genre in which it's written? Does the story have a through line and respect it without unnecessary departures?

Originality:

Does the story twist well-worn conventions, or create a new one, without straining credibility? Where does the story fit into the four degrees: Totally Familiar; Familiar, Yet Different; Different, Yet Familiar; Totally Different (Familiar, Yet Different and Different, Yet Familiar are preferred).

Structure:

Does the script have and an Inciting Incident, proper Act Breaks, Rising Action, Complications and Obstacles, a well-identified Protagonist and Antagonist?

Plot:

How well has the author informed the audience why the story's events belong in the script, and what the story is meant to communicate?

Characterization:

Do the characters have dimension beyond cliché and trope? Are they real or relatable? Do they have flaws? Do the characters elicit empathy or sympathy?

Style:

Is the writing clear, economical, free of bloat and unnecessary description? Does the writer "Show, don't tell?" Are the descriptions visual and intriguing? Does the writer use Active Voice and Present Tense?

Concept:

Is it sound, interesting, or compelling? Do Plot, Storytelling and Structure reinforce the concept?

Marketability/Commercial Appeal:

Where does the script fit in the marketplace? How likely is it to be made? How does it compare to similar films? How will audiences react?

1. AKA Consider With Revisions.

---

**Thanks for submitting your script to Screenplay Gurus! We hope the analysis gives you the info you need to make the script as good as it can be.**

[www.screenplaygurus.com](http://www.screenplaygurus.com)

[guru@screenplaygurus.com](mailto:guru@screenplaygurus.com)