

# Eight Qualities That Make an Average Screenwriter Great

*“Greatness is not this wonderful, esoteric, elusive, godlike feature that only the special among us will ever taste, it’s something that truly exists in all of us.”*

— Will Smith

Hollywood and beyond is full of tens of thousands of screenwriters, most of whom, sadly, will likely never see their dreams come true. Those that do make it often share many of the same qualities. These qualities are the difference makers. They are what takes a novice or average screenwriter and makes them stand out among the crowd of tens of thousands. Below we’ll explore eight of these qualities in detail and showcase how attaining and honing these qualities will make any screenwriter better, and hopefully many more great.

## 1. Vision

The ability to see your stories through the mind’s eye before placing any word on paper. Too many writers simply write page to page, plotting out the movie, and make choices strictly to get from point A to point B and beyond. The great writers can SEE the movie already from the perspective of an audience. “Write what you know” is one of the most misleading phrases given to aspiring screenwriters in books, seminars, etc. Better to tell them “Write what you love,” as far as genre, atmosphere, and what you love to see in the movie theater. But as far as vision goes, best to say “Write what you can see.” If you can’t see the scene and eventual compilation of scenes in your head, edited and shot like a film you see in theaters, then best to consider another avenue of expression and certainly another career.

## 2. Confidence over Ego

It takes time to get to this stage, but screenwriters need to be confident in their work. Writers will always have various forms of self doubt, but in order to have a career in screenwriting you need the ability to go into a conference call or meeting room, know your story, know your strengths, and be able to communicate on an equal level — rather than looking up with nervous puppy eyes to the executives and producers.

That said, you need to know that ego is *not* confidence. Ego is a facade.

“You need to buy my script because if you don’t, someone else will because my writing is better than anyone out there.”

Ego will get you nowhere. You need to be someone an executive or producer *wants* to work and collaborate with — not battle with. So throw away your books written by Joe Eszterhas. That’s not what Hollywood wants. They want someone confident in their own work so they know they can ask for what they need and trust you to deliver the goods.

### 3. Collaborative Skills

Plain and simple. If you are someone that can absorb notes from producers and studios and understand that in the end, you are hired to do a job, and then find a way for those notes to work within the confines of your own writing wants, you'll be one step ahead of most. Know when to choose your battles. Know when to back off and accept what you've been given. Understand that film is a collaborative effort and while the whole process truly *starts* with the written word — beyond the spark of the concept in ones mind — it most certainly does not end with just that.

In short, be someone they can work with and someone that they *want* to work with. Know that you're not always right and that others can better your work. And even when you think what they want is not something you agree with, be able to roll with it anyway and make their notes work.

### 4. Resilience

You will fail. You WILL fail. You will fail more than you prevail. Even the most successful screenwriters in past and present have failed more than they have prevailed.

If you don't have thick skin, you won't make it. If you can't takes notes from others on your writing, you won't make it. If you can't take a hit, get up, brush yourself off, and then do they same over and over and over, you won't make it in this profession.

You need to be able to handle adversity on any given day.

You need to be able to deal with the “sure thing” deal with a studio falling through at the last minute because of some lame reason that has nothing to do with you.

You need to be able to deal with rejection after rejection.

You need to be resilient and have the ability to get back on your feet and jump through the fire again and again until you make it. Sometimes you need to be resilient for years — a decade. Be resilient.

### 5. Know Your Industry

If you're an aspiring screenwriter and have no idea what's going on in the film industry, you won't make it.

You need to read the trades.

You need to know what movies are being made and who is making them.

You need to know the studios, the executives, the producers, the talent, etc. You need to know who is a player in the current game.

Every day there are writers that see stars after they get their script to someone of the caliber of, say, Kirk Cameron, and think that their script is going to get made and they're going to reap the benefits. It's Kirk Cameron, folks. ***Growing Pains*** was awesome, but even back then he couldn't get a movie greenlit. Take a co-star from any major television series right now — even they can't get a movie greenlit most of the time.

Know the industry. Know what's in development, what's in development hell, what's being produced, what's in production, what's in post, and when those movies are coming out.

Know which films opened big, opened small but grew, bombed, etc. Read [Variety](#), [Hollywood Reporter](#), [Deadline](#), [IMDBPro](#), [Box Office Mojo](#), [The Numbers](#), etc.

Know your industry because if you do get to a level where you are talking with agents, managers, execs, producers, and talent, you'll want to be able to sit down and have a conversation with them.

## **6. Know the Guidelines and Expectations**

This can obviously fall under the above fifth quality but needs to be touched on. Be ready to forget Robert McKee or Blake Snyder, as well as others. It's all theory. There is no secret formula to success. There are no rules. As William Goldman famously said, "Nobody knows anything." It's great food for the brain and you should explore all angles, knowledge, and perspectives that you can, but in the end, it's you alone in front of that screen. All you can do is know the guidelines and expectations of the film industry. The rest is up to you and your storytelling abilities.

Even if you can tell a great story, yet not follow the guidelines and expectations, you'll go nowhere.

Know that a 145-page screenplay won't get read on spec.

Know that if you don't properly format your script, it probably won't get read.

Know that if you don't engage the reader with those first few pages, the script will be tossed aside.

Know that if you don't keep everything (scene descriptions, scenes, dialogue, etc.) short, sweet, and to the point, your scripts won't be considered.

The two books that are recommended the most in that respect are *The Screenwriter's Bible* and *How NOT To Write a Screenplay*. That's all you need. Beyond that, read produced scripts that can be found online. You'll quickly learn the guidelines and expectations from those resources alone.

## **7. Know How to Handle Any Success**

Be ready. Prepare yourself. If you've been querying left and right, trying to get somebody to read your script, and then you finally get a bite from a notable player? That's a first successful venture. But you better have an amazing script because you'll burn that bridge once you first step on it if it's not.

Thus, you don't go out and spend a year marketing your first script. Your first script is and will be your worst.

Let's say your script makes it through the studio walls, you've found someone who likes it, and you take a few meetings. The next question they'll ask is, "What else do you have?" How are you going to be able to handle that successful venture? Do you have any other notable scripts? If not, you're in trouble.

Furthermore, let's say you finally nab an option on your script. You get a couple thousand bucks. Great. Now what? How do you handle that success? Do you stop and wait for this project to get made? You better not because there are tens of thousands of projects that have been optioned or purchased and have never seen the light of day.

Keep writing. Keep moving and shaking because obviously you've done something right.

Lastly, let's say you finally get something produced. Excellent. Go celebrate. But what's next? How are you going to handle the success? What if the film bombs? Will you be resilient enough to get back up and start that whole process over? What if it succeeds? Have you prepared yourself? Is your writing up to par to handle an even bigger project with bigger expectations? Will you let the poison of ego seep into your soul because of said success or will you be humble and accept your next assignment with confidence while being collaborative and build a reputation of being someone people love to work with?

## **8. Hope**

Without hope, none of the above will matter. You have to believe in the dream. You have to believe enough to overcome disappointment, time, and constant rejection.

You may find that this isn't for you. Fate may lead you down a different path and in the end, it'll be the right one that was intended all along. But if you feel it in your heart and gut that this is for you, that you feel confident in your work, and that you're destined for this career and there is no other, hope is what will get you through the rough times.

Obviously being able to write is an important quality. You need to know how to craft a great and entertaining story with great and entertaining characters. If you can't do that, obviously you won't make it. Find something better because the fates are telling you something. And sure, networking is key too. The ability to network will open doors of opportunity.

But when it comes down to it, these above eight qualities will truly tip the odds in your favor more, and greatness will be just ahead.