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Presents

5 SECRETS

TO A MOVIE IDEA

THAT DOESN'T SUCK

(AND WILL ACTUALLY SELL)

MICHAEL



ROGAN

**SCREENWRITING
VIDEO SEMINAR**

Hey there screenwriter...welcome to this special, totally exclusive (Michael Bay fans not invited) video seminar entitled 5 Secrets to Creating a Movie Idea That Doesn't Suck...and Will Actually Sell.

Thank you SO MUCH for joining me today. I know your time is valuable -

I mean there are all those Gordon Ramsey cooking shows to watch and Real Housewives of Pocatello, Idaho episodes to consume - but instead you're here. With me.

Taking serious screenwriting action. So, thank you.

And I promise, by the end of my presentation today you'll have a roadmap for creating a compelling, personal, emotionally-resonant and marketable movie idea - either one from scratch or an existing movie idea - that'll give you the foundation for a killer screenplay.

(And possibly become an asset that changes your life.)

Now before we get started, if it's alright, I'd like to ask you four quick questions:

Question #1 - Is it okay if we have fun? If we don't treat screenwriting like it's engineering. Or architecture. Or god forbid...Math.

So many screenwriting manuals out there make screenwriting sound as much fun as putting in kitchen cabinets. (I should know because I just put cabinets in...and it...SUCKS!

Storytelling is not like applying drywall. Or fixing a carburetor. Or even formatting a screenplay.

It's diving into the crazy, chaotic deep end of our imagination. And hopefully treading water long enough to come back with something interesting.

And while it's good to have structure and organization and discipline. It's also okay to have fun, dammit!

Is it okay if we have fun? Nod your head, if it's okay.

Question #2....is it alright if I'm a bit irreverent? If I take down a couple of sacred Hollywood cows and give you the straight scoop, maybe even a bit of gossip, to make some of my points.

(And unfortunately that MAY mean offending some high-priced, overrated Hollywood talent.) Would that be alright? (Smile) I knew it would be.

Question #3...if I tell a couple of stories and get a bit personal about my time as a screenwriter? I find how-to instruction actually makes the most impact when it's told through stories - not just a boring step-by-step paint by numbers formula.

So...if it's alright with you I'd like to tell a couple of quick stories along the way to help make some of my points. Is that alright?

Just nod your head. Good.

Question #4 - Is it okay if at the end of this class I ask you to take action? That after our time together that I ask you to not WAIT until you feel "inspired..."

Or until your creative muse knocks at your door...

Or for you to get caught up on all those episodes of Breaking Bad...

But instead that I ask you to do what 99% of the world never does, which is take ACTION. Now.

There's a quote I have up on the wall near my desk. It says: "eliminate the time between the idea and the act, and your dreams will become realities."
Dr. Edward L. Kramer

And I FIRMLY believe the #1 asset professional writers possess is NOT talent, or an MFA in screenwriting from Western Nova Scotia University or a tortured, angst-ridden childhood - although that can be helpful....

But it's an ability to drastically CUT down the time between idea and action. It'll be my job to help you get a helluva lot closer to the action side.

So, without further ado. Let's get started with Secret NO.1 to Creating a Movie Idea That Doesn't Suck...actually...sorry. Before we do that...

Would you guys mind if I shared with you briefly the inspiration behind this class.

The WHY I think it's so important you take action on the 5 steps I'm going to share with you. Because knowing WHAT you gotta do is important.

But when you know the WHY, it gives you purpose. And when you got purpose...you've got the motivation part of your brain actually helping you write - instead of putting every obstacle in your way imaginable... (Later on I'll go over how to do this in more detail.)

But right now: I'd like you to write down the following...I know...3 minutes in and he's already asking me to do homework.

But this is important. Okay...ready? Write this down:

"Behind the Botox...

And the lip implants...

And the C-Class Mercedes with the tinted windows...

The gatekeepers in the film business are scared shitless...

BECAUSE...for the first time in history...

They DON'T know where the NEXT good story...

Will come from."

Circle this sentence. Frame it. Tattoo on your forearm. Burn it into your cerebral cortex. Because it's absolutely true.

This wasn't always the case. When I first started in this business, every screenplay reader, junior producer, agency intern, and coked-out development executive KNEW...

Successful screenplays that led to successful movies that led to successful careers and led to beachfront real estate in Malibu...came from one of three places:

- 1) Established screenwriters who'd already sold stuff...

2) Bestselling novelists who came out of the big New York traditional publishers (the Simon and Schusters, the penguins, the bantams)

3) Recent graduates from one of the “approved” M.F.A. film programs such as UCLA, USC, NYU, and University of Texas...et cetera.

And like those David Attenborough BBC nature documentaries, where the lions hunt the water buffalos on the African plain,

Most folks in the film bizness would let “natural selection” cull the screenwriting herd -

So by the time a script landed on a studio exec’s desk or a producer’s inbox it had been vetted, filtered, verified, endorsed...

They could be confident in knowing this script was one seriously tough water buffalo.

And this whole gatekeeper/content development paradigm worked for a while. (Or at least for the folks who drive BMW’s and “take lunch” at Wolfgang Pucks.)

Until two seismic shifts happened...

1) Amazon released the Kindle and COMPLETELY changed the publishing industry. (Suddenly an author could have a bestseller, without being traditionally published, let alone mailing a single query letter to a Manhattan address.)

2) The cost of film production, AND more importantly distribution, became so frickin’ cheap that anybody with a YouTube Channel, a copy of Final Cut editing software...

And a gaggle of actors and actresses who don’t mind getting paid in burritos...could create a MOVIE capable of FINDING an audience.

And it’s this finding an audience that’s so damn hard for the suits. All those studio employees NEED material. Constantly. (Or else those 150K a year salaries and 4 bedroom bungalows in Pasadena, go bye-bye.)

Which means: Development executives and producers and agents and directors - and even actors, yes even actors -

Are begrudgingly owning up to the fact that...You! Yes you!

The screenwriter, whether you went to Tisch school of arts or grew up in an alpaca farm in Nova Scotia...MIGHT have the golden ticket they need.

This is not NOTHING, as my grandmother would say.

It's why formulating your kick-ass movie idea can do far more than give you bragging rights down at your local Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf.

It can CHANGE your life.

I know. Because getting my scripts optioned by producers, and taking meetings with agents, and attending film festivals with sociopathic directors, and hanging out at parties with insanely hot actresses who all seem to want to get back to their "theatrical roots"...these things did change my life.

My only regret is it took so frickin' long. (And that I was so stubborn about taking the scenic route.)

Because I stupidly sacrificed time, money, relationships...anything resembling a stable life...all because I was convinced I KNEW the best way to do things.

I had this burning passion to write movies - and figured I would just learn how to do it along the way. Like screenwriting osmosis.

And you CAN do it that way. (Takes frickin' forever, but you can do it.) And if you've got five - seven years to kill - then by all means, knock yourself out.

But what I'm going to share with you today will hopefully cut that down learning curve down by at least 60-75%. (And show you how to have a lot more fun in the process.)

Because after 5 years of churning out script after script filled with firecracker dialogue and poignant character studies and complex subplots -

all while working as a Dolphin Show Host at Sea World and making a robust 27,000 dollars a year....

I found myself at 29 years old with two major skills:

1) The ability to play Billy Joel songs to drunk tourists while a dolphin splashes me with water...

And...

2) The ability to write kick-ass query letters.

I was damn good at query letters. I knew the books said it was impossible to get agents and producers to read your material.

But I found the opposite was true. I found if you were funny, and respectful and self-deprecating and didn't come off as a psychopath, then they'd read your stuff.

And so with each finished script, I had no problem getting 10-15 agents and producers to read my screenplays. (And agents never read ANYTHING.)

But the response was always the same - funny situations, interesting characters, good dialogue (talking was never a problem for me), - but not enough story. (Talk about a vague note!)

I mean, how could that be? I used all my screenwriting tricks: hysterical set pieces, briskly paced car chases, post-modern cultural references, an exceptionally clever use of voiceovers...all those fucking montages...

But the industry was saying: as a dialogue teller, awesome. But as a Storyteller...ehhh...not so much.

And this was a problem because I was putting everything in my life on hold until I "made it." At the time, I was engaged to a fantastic girl - I couldn't afford the ring, and had to borrow the money (thanks mom) -

and this girl was supportive of my writing, but growing a bit tired of being with a guy who approached every ATM withdrawal like it was casino roulette...(Come on 20!)

But she waited. And waited. And waited.

Until...she didn't wait anymore. And one Sunday morning, after my card had been declined at the grocery store for an extravagant purchase of eggs and bread...we had THE talk.

She told me she loved me, and she wasn't looking for some super rich guy who drove a Hummer and listened to Nickelback...good thing because I hate Nickelback...but...

She needed a partner who wanted crazy things like...health insurance. A savings account. A car with a working transmission.

And though I tried to change her mind -- "seriously, Nicole, this zombie family drama is guaranteed to sell" - ultimately I didn't give her the answer she was looking for.

That I would get a backup plan.

Because to me having a backup plan, you know one where you get up before 11, would mean giving up on the ONE thing I'd wanted to do since I was a kid watching John Hughes movies at the AMC Weigand Plaza 6 in Encinitas, California.

Make movies.

And so, with that, she packed up her futon and bongo drums and Natalie Merchant CD's and drove away in her White Honda Civic.

Luckily I had enough money saved to keep me afloat for almost nine days. So I think it was on day 8...I wrote every agent, producer, manager who had replied to my queries over the years.

I told them I would do anything. Read scripts. Make coffee. Clean toilets. Watch the Extended Edition of WaterWorld. Anything...

If they would take me on as an intern and show me the film business from the inside out. Let me see what scripts were missing. (Let me find out how the story development sausage is made so I could finally figure what the hell was wrong my own screenwriting kielbasa.)

To stop being a dialogue teller and action scene teller and montage teller - and start being a storyteller.

Most didn't write me back. Some offered tepid encouragement. ("Hang in there, sport.") One producer gave me the number of their therapist. (A bit alarming that one.)

But a cranky, cantankerous producer named Jack offered me a "job."

And it was Jack that showed me the 5 secrets I'm going to share with you today. They're all important, but there's no doubt in my mind #5 is THE most important so be sure to stick around for that one.

And I don't think it's a coincidence, within 8 months of putting the strategies Jack taught me to use, I soon got two of my scripts optioned.

And it wasn't because Jack was a Hollywood power broker. (His office was next to a tanning salon in Reseda. His days of power broking were back when he'd attend parties with Ali McGraw and Steve McQueen.)

It was because Jack helped me learn how to get out of my own way.

To write from the heart, instead of self-consciously riff on what I thought the industry wanted to hear. (Turns out the industry doesn't know what it wants to hear.)

And here's the whole reason I shared this bit of gruesome personal backstory...you've got everything you need RIGHT NOW to write a killer screenplay.

You just need to get out of your own way.

And here's the coolest law in the universe: when you start to get out of your own way in your writing, you start to get out of your own way in life.

Now I can't guarantee the 5 steps we'll cover will get your script sold, or help you get a better apartment, or win over the girl next door, or bring about peace in the Middle East.

But the 5 secrets will teach you how to shape your crazy, unique, twisted perspective on the world...into characters and a story that Move other people.

And when you can make people see and hear and feel the story that's in your head...it's probably the most profound, meaningful, enriching, and self-esteem boosting feeling in the world. (Almost as good as hearing Brett Ratner is done making "Rush Hour" movies.)

And it's a feeling I want you to have.

So as we transition from the WHY to the HOW...I want to be totally upfront and transparent with you.

You might be asking yourself: This is all nice, but he's probably going to try to sell something at the end, isn't he?

The answer is yes. I AM going to invite you, if you're interested to work with me more in-depth on your movie idea, in a video course called [Movie Idea Creator](#).

BUT this class today will give you everything you need to get your movie idea mapped out. (It's just that the [Movie Idea creator](#) course provides a ton of shortcuts and goes more in-depth to make the process a lot faster.)

And though I would love to give you ALL that info today - it's got so much movie idea goodness that it's not possible to present in one class.

So, if you're interested, there'll be plenty of info about that program at the end. Otherwise - enough of the sales pitch and the Oprah-style confessional...let's move on to...

Secret No.1 to a Movie Idea that doesn't suck and will actually sell: Make Sure Your Movie Idea IS Actually a Movie idea

This one took me forever to figure out. Like learning how to tie a Windsor knot. Or change the ringtone on my phone.

When I was starting out as a screenwriter, people would ask me what my script was about and I'd say:

“It’s about a single mom from Manhattan forced to move back to Iowa to live with her estranged mother.”

“It’s about a former Marine coming to terms with the effects of combat.”

“It’s about a retiring police detective taking on one last murder case before he leaves the force.”

And as picturesque and movie-ish as they sound...These are NOT movie ideas.

These are situations. Concepts. Vague notions of a thing based on a thought which might someday grow up to a movie idea. (If it takes its story vitamins.)

But right now: they ain’t even close to being movie ideas.

So...what is a movie idea?

Well...according to Jack...and don’t worry about writing this down, it’ll be in the worksheet I email you.

A movie idea is a sentence which articulates:

- 1) A main character
- 2) The central dilemma facing that main character
- 3) The all-powerful opponent standing in the way of resolution of the dilemma and
- 4) Super high stakes if the main character does not resolve the dilemma.

Now, of course, this doesn’t stop Hollywood -- and film industries around the world - from releasing movies based on flimsy or weak premises. (Especially if M. Night Shyamalan is at the helm.)

You and I have seen many films which feel half-baked like they were created in a film studio test tube: two private detectives, one a conservative neat freak, one an alcoholic slob, must work together to stop a serial killer who dresses up as a clown.

It sounds like a story. I mean it's got conflict. (The whole opposites attract thing.) And it's got a goal. Right? (And we can get Tom Cruise and Paul Giamatti to star - with Jim Carrey as the clown.)

But whose story IS this? Where's the dilemma? Working with somebody who you can't stand...so you can achieve a goal? Big deal - every person who earns a paycheck, deals with that.

And most importantly what we're missing is a significant emotional component. A WHY it's vital that these detectives MUST track down the killer - aside from the fact that killing is bad, and clowns are just plain wrong. And should never be used at a nine-year-old's birthday party. (Sorry Mom, but it's true.)

But if instead we did something like...

A slovenly, alcoholic private detective MUST work with his neat-freak rival, and the man who is now married to his ex-wife, to catch a deranged killer who kidnapped his daughter.

Now, it's a bit extreme. But notice what I did:

1) I made it clear the focus of the story is on the alcoholic detective. Not this ambiguous duo that our earlier descriptions referenced. (Remember: Butch Cassidy is not a buddy movie. It's about Butch. Sundance is just along for the ride.)

2) I made the dilemma facing our main character way beyond annoying.

(Not only does he have to deal with anal boy...but it's the same guy who his ex-wife is now buying IKEA furniture with. Ouch.)

3) I made THE clown killer aspect, the whole REASON for the story, a lot more personal

- And a dilemma ANYBODY could understand. Even an Amish farmer, who's the biggest pacifist in the world, would understand the need to drop everything and go kick some evil clown ass to save his daughter.

4) I didn't put in extraneous details that might compromise the overall movie idea.

Ofentimes writers will pitch me their story, and they'll put in all this intricate detail....on someone other than the MAIN CHARACTER.

Something like:

“My story is about a former cop, turned bounty hunter, who must track down a serial killer who dresses up like a clown and reads children's poems right before he kills his victims and spent 10 years in an orphanage and is named Roland.”

This writer has spent hours imagining all the creepy, Hostel-like torture scenes they're going to write with Roland the Maniacal Murder Clown.

Problem is: unless Roland is the main character of your story - and if he is then you are definitely playing in some dark waters, my friend - then you have tilted all the emphasis of your story toward your villain...

...and we know next to nothing about your hero. (He's a detective.) Okay...is he more Sam Spade or Mickey Spillane? Jim Rockford or Sherlock Holmes?

So, Secret No.1 action step is...

Next movie or 1-hour drama you watch, see if you can describe it in the following sentence:

A main character who MUST [central dilemma they're facing] and face off against [badass opponent who either created the dilemma or stands in the way of them achieving resolution] or else [mongo Super-Size consequences if your main character takes no action.]

Now, we move on to...

Secret No.2 to a Movie Idea That Doesn't Suck and Will Actually Sell: Fill Your Movie Idea Tank With High-Octane Fuel

Years ago I had the chance to study Playwriting at Bristol University, in England. You want to talk about a major with no economic viability. (I remember my mom calling me up on graduation and congratulating me on being prepared for life in the 14th century.)

Anyway...

So one night the Bristol Theatre department arranged to have the super-famous, and supremely awesome, playwright Harold Pinter to come and give a talk about his life in the theatre.

Now you may not be a theatre dork like me...but Harold Pinter was like the Quentin Tarantino of his playwriting generation. Hip, cool, aggressive, really interested in violence, and recognized as a master of dialogue.

Even if you have a phobia about theatre, plays like *The Homecoming* and *The Lover*, with their surreal set-ups and absurdist wit, are great additions to your library. (Would love to have seen what he could he have done with *Transformers 3*.)

Anyway...Harold Pinter was my hero. And he was going to come to MY school. (Pretty high on the Michael kick-ass meter.)

So he spends the first half-hour or so sharing theatre gossip. (Most of it with a cigarette in his hand.) And then it's Q&A time. So I raise my hand WAY up like the eager American that I am...

And I say: "Mr. Pinter, my name is Michael and...uh...I'm in the playwriting program. It's an absolute honor to meet you. I wonder if you could tell me where you get your wonderfully strange story ideas?"

He nodded his head slowly, then looked up at the ceiling, as if taken aback that I had offered such a probing and insightful query into the creative process.

He then took a drag off his Pall Mall straight and stared right at me and said: "I get all my ideas from a small garden gnome named Rufus who feeds on chocolate caramel Hob NObs and lives in my shrub."

The sound that came next was that peculiar audio frequency of your literary hero - and classmates, including that cute girl Emma, who you were thinking of asking out for a drink - laughing at your stupidity.

And, yes, it was a phenomenally dumb question. Not just because I was asking WHERE he got his ideas, like IDEAS were just sitting there in the

aisles of Sainsbury's. (Oy, next to the biscuits, love. That's where you'll find the story ideas.)

But...it was my presumption that story ideas are these fully-formed things that just need to be excavated from the ground, like us writers are archaeologists.

When really we're more like the Army Corps of Engineers. Building bridges in remote locations to connect two points that have never been connected before.

Because that's one of the most amazing things our brains do...create connections where there aren't any.

Jules Verne was sitting in a Parisian cafe when he read an ad in a newspaper that said "Travel the World in 80 Days...By Balloon" and suddenly his mind starting wondering who the hell would take that kind of trip?

And what would they see?

Leo Tolstoy was sitting on the couch one day daydreaming - because that's what you do in Tsarist Russia - when an image of a melancholy woman in a ball gown came to him.

Obsessed with finding out who she was, he kept thinking about her until he realized her name was Anna Karenina and she was kind of bipolar and Western literature was never going to be the same.

Stephen King was a struggling short-story writer, and full-time English teacher, when he came across an article in Life magazine that said if telekinesis, the power to move objects, did exist...it appeared strongest in adolescent girls.

Presto, Carrie was born - and so was a bestselling career.

Now, the trick is to fill your brain with enough high-octane story awesomeness that it's just dying to make connections.

And where do you find all this movie idea fuel? Do you need to sit in a Parisian cafe reading Le Monde? Do you have to move to Moscow and stare at women's elbows?

Well, I go over a TON of killer strategies in [Movie Idea Creator](#) on this - we spend an entire lesson on what I call movie idea brainstorming on steroids - but there are some trusted standbys that still work really well.

They include:

1) Reading newspapers and magazines to see what catches your eye

(I found an article recently detailing how estate sales in the Hamptons are breaking out into fistfights. Something about fifth-generation Rockefellers and Vanderbilts fighting over a velvet Elvis wall decoration just screams dark comedy.)

2) Taking classic films and novels and giving them a modern twist...

(Isn't Hunger Games just "Lord of the Flies" with more weapons and better costumes?)

3) Using events from your personal experience -

The first full-length play I ever wrote was inspired by an incident that happened in my hometown...

Where a nine-year-old American boy shot his neighbor, who was from England, with a hunting rifle because they were playing "Redcoats vs. Colonials..."

And I kept wondering how does that happen? What are all the events that would lead up to something like this?

Whatever you do, however you find your movie idea fuel, it's important to keep a swipe file. (Here's mine.) Where you add little bits and pieces you come across.

And let me give you my absolute favorite movie idea brainstorming exercise that I do EVERY single day. (Even on Christmas and Super Bowl Sunday.)

It's called the The Big Secret.

Secrets are not so great for long-term relationships. But they're fantastic for us screenwriters. Because secrets:

- a) Give your story a huge emotional reveal that can transform ordinary scripts into classics. (Think Chinatown or The Crying Game)
- b) Provide instant dilemmas for characters trying to keep the secret hidden. (Tells us what they are they willing to do, and not do, to keep the secret from coming out.)
- c) Gives your opponent a heavy-duty weapon to use against your main character. (Always a good thing.)

So, let me give you a couple of resources I have bookmarked and visit every day to find story-worthy secrets:

Resource #1 PostSecret -

This is probably one of the most interesting websites you'll ever come across. It works like this: people send in postcards, anonymously, to the blog's owner who then posts them on the website.

The stuff here is funny, (sometimes raunchy), heartbreaking and always revealing.

Because we've all got deep, dark secrets we don't want anybody to know. At the same time, there's something very powerful about writing it down.

Both for them...and you as a writer.

Resource #2 Six Billion Secrets

This site is similar to Postsecret. And though not as famous - it does seem to be a bit easier to navigate. Though Postsecret is my usual go-to resource, I still pop by here every day to see if there's something I might be able to use in a future story.

Resource #3 Secrets Much Closer to Home -

We've all got secrets. Could be as simple as "I have a fantasy where I'm not married anymore and instead living in a flat in Madrid with Penelope Cruz" or could be as complex as "there's a body buried under my septic tank."

And even if you're a Buddhist monk who's a complete open book and doesn't have a single interesting secret rattling around in that brain of yours - chances are the people closest to you do.

My grandmother for years had told my father, and his siblings, my aunt and uncles, that her dad, their grandfather, had died.

Until one day they're at a family reunion in San Luis Obispo, California. And this older gentleman in his 70s walks up and introduces himself as their grandmother. My grandmother grabbed the kids, threw 'em in the car and sped out of the parking lot.

Now I don't know EXACTLY what happened. But there's a secret there...that's for sure. (And one that's probably worth exploring to see what kind of story it might offer.)

So here are your Secret No.2 Action Steps:

Action Step #1 - Get yourself a swipe file.

It can be digital and organized and live in the cloud. Or it can be chaotic and messy and tactile like my mess of papers here. Whatever it is decide on some THING and stick with it.

Action step #2 - Try to read, watch or listen to one source of brain input each day that's outside your comfort zone.

Do you always read the sports section first thing in your morning newspaper? (Then head over to the local news instead.)

Do you have that film blog as your default homepage? Well, then try visiting a poetry forum.

Step in other people's shoes and you might just find they have a story to tell.

Action Step #3 - Commit to putting something in your swipe file each day.

Can be anything. A piece of dialogue. An image. The foreboding feeling you get when the postman delivers your mail.

Just put something in each day. (And your brain will be on the lookout for weird connections, without you even realizing.)

Secret No.3 to Creating a Movie Idea that Doesn't' suck and will actually sell: Find Yourself a Kick-Ass Dilemma (Along With a Kick-Ass Main Character)

You might have noticed the order in which I titled this secret. Dilemma first...then kick-ass main character. That's intentional.

Because most screenwriters are so eager at the beginning of story development to build their story around a specific individual - an individual who often walks and talks a lot like the writer - that they put this artificial governor on the engine of their screenplay.

They make their STORY conform to this concrete image they have in their mind of this one particular character they just know will be PERFECT for their script.

When really...the character should be molded and shaped into something worthy of your story's central dilemma. Not the other way around. (Kind of like running an open audition for main characters - but without all the crappy, soft-focus headshots.)

Now this isn't set in stone - if you KNOW you were put on this earth to write a full-length screenplay about your Uncle Louie, who travelled the world as a government spy/tango instructor - then don't let me stop you. (In fact, send me a copy of the script. I'd love to read it.)

But if you've found in the past your movie ideas start off strong, then lose steam as you try to come up with zany, dramatic and visually-compelling situations to put your characters in...

Then let me offer an alternative: Figure out the dilemma first, and then find a character that takes that dilemma to extraordinary heights.

I know this sounds backwards. And heretical. And contrary to everything your screenwriting gut tells you.

When I was starting out I was absolutely convinced audiences were sucked into stories through characters.

And why not...it's characters we spend 120 minutes staring at in the dark. (While we eat buttered popcorn and scowl at that teenage boy texting in the row next to us.)

But it's actually the CHOICES your character makes, not their resume, that makes them compelling.

Say, I've got a story. It's about this young lawyer. Cocky, arrogant, ambitious. Drives a C-Class convertible. I'm imagining a young, or at least younger, Matthew McConaughey. (Without the perm and bongo playing.)

Anyway, this hotshot lawyer comes from old Alabama money and a long line of lawyers, but instead of working for the family firm, he decides to work for the Southern Poverty Law Center.

And he tells people it's his way of reconciling his family's checkered past regarding race relations and slavery. But what he doesn't want anybody to know, and is deep down afraid to admit, is that his moral stand is little more than an elaborate way to give an institutional middle finger to his father.

It's a rite of passage story where a young man tries to find out what he really believes - and which values he's willing to fight for.

Okay...pretty good, right? We've got conflict. Obsession. Lack of compromise. A character with a secret. All the recipes of a good movie idea, right?

Wrong. We've got a character study. A personal history. A sketch of what our hero feels, thinks, says, believes.

But it's not a STORY. And if we try to write a screenplay based on character studies we'll end up writing something personal and emotional and....something that will NEVER get made. (Let alone get finished.)

Unless we're Edward Burns, and for some unknown reason, people keep giving us money to make films.

But what if instead I say: there's this young hotshot lawyer. Comes from old money. A long line of lawyers.

Works for the Southern Poverty Law Center. And he's DATING an African American colleague of his at the law center.

One day, his grandfather summons him to his mansion and informs him that unless he breaks things off with the girl and quits his job...he'll be cut off from the family fortune.

What he decides to do in THAT moment IS character. (Not those collections of traits we came up with earlier.)

And audiences will THINK Matthew McConaughey's performance was stunning. And that the directing was amazing. And that the costumes were fabulous. (When really it was the strong dilemma you and I as screenwriters set up that got people emotionally hooked to the story.)

Now...let's stay with the Southern lawyer dilemma for a second. Do YOU think grandpa threatening to cut off his trust fund is a strong enough dilemma? Would that REALLY force him to break things off with the girl?

Yeah, me neither.

For one thing, a lawyer, even one who works at the Southern Poverty Law Center, will probably be able to eke out a living. Somewhere. Even if the family unit kicks him out of the trust fund nest.

And really, this character, let's call him Matthew - doesn't seem to me money is all that important to him.

Something tells me he's grown up with a silver spoon in his mouth, and now that he's on his own, he's pretty happy using the generic cutlery from Wal-Mart.

But...what if grandpa summons him to the big family mansion and threatens to cut off his inheritance. (And our main character goes into this long monologue where he tells grandpa to kiss his fat Alabama ass.)

And then as Matthew walks out, grandpa mentions that he'll also make sure he never attains political office in the state of Alabama or any other state in the union.

Well, now. That's more interesting.

While money doesn't strike me as a huge motivating factor for this Matthew character - power, fame, prestige - those things DO.

And because we've adjusted the dilemma, we need to adjust our main character's occupation. Because the Southern Poverty Law Center, though admirable a pursuit, is not USUALLY a springboard for political office.

But the D.A's office is.

So what if our main character works as an assistant D.A? And instead of defending those who can't afford representation - something usually reserved for public defenders - he instead takes down corrupt, wealthy, white business owners.

Like his grandfather.

And suddenly instead of a story about a civil-rights lawyer in Alabama grappling with moral hypocrisy....yawn...we've got something a lot more interesting.

And maybe I don't even need the mixed-race relationship element. (Maybe I do.) The more I dig into this idea though, the more I sense the real story is about how far this D.A. is willing to go to serve justice - and what he's willing to lose.

Now, the idea is not perfect. (I wouldn't want to go out and start writing just yet.) But it's Something. It's the germ of an idea.

And what I hope you see is that working with the dilemma, and the main character at the center of that dilemma, is kind of like futzing with those old rabbit ear TV antennas.

The left and right antennas can move independently, but ultimately you're trying to find that one place where the signal is in balance. (Mostly, so you can watch that episode of Rockford Files in perfect fidelity.)

So...here's how I recommend you find your own story antenna:

Action Step #1 Look over your swipe file, you know the one I asked you to create in Secret #2, and pick ONE idea that jumps out at you.

Doesn't have to make sense or be logical. Just pick an idea that catches your eye. That "feels like a story. That connects with you. (Even if you're not sure exactly why.)

Action Step # 2 - For that idea you pulled from the swipe file, try to find a central character.

Don't worry about picking the "right" character...you can always change this later. For now, just write down who you THINK the central character is.

Doesn't have to be super specific, just put down basic stuff like age, gender, physical appearance, a couple of words that describe their personality. (Don't over think this - just put something down.)

Action Step #3 - Looking over your initial brainstorm, and having some rough idea of who the central character is - try to come up with the most excruciating painful, emotionally taut dilemma you can.

You may need to create a couple of these - as my example earlier showed the more you play with these dilemmas, the more focused and powerful they become.

Come up with 2-3 hard-core dilemmas, involving two equally sucky choices.

Action Step #4 - Reshape the main character until they are the best person to have to take on this dilemma.

Again, have fun with this. Ask yourself what kind of character would have the farthest emotional terrain to travel within this existing dilemma.

Forcing Lady Gaga to go to the Burning Man festival in the desert...where clothing is definitely optional and hallucinogenics are handed out like Skittles (allegedly) or else her kidnapped sister will be killed... doesn't feel like a huge dilemma?

But what about Martha Stewart? Or the Queen of England? Try to come up with a character type for whom the dilemma represents the worst of all possible worlds.

Okay....

Secret No. 4 to Creating a Movie Idea That Doesn't Suck and Will Actually Sell: Get Mean (Really Mean!)

This is the fun part. This is where you unlock the cage to your inner Hannibal Lecter and embrace your primal Darth Vader to come up with a diabolical apocalyptic worst-case scenario for your main character.

And that's important. Because it's got to be apocalyptic.

Not sorta bad...or moderately uncomfortable. Or really stressful. It's got to be end of the world as they know it...and they don't feel fine...type stuff.

Now this doesn't mean you gotta have alien robots destroying the Hoover dam. (God forbid.) Or Nazis capturing the Ark of the Covenant in the early 40s.

But it does mean nailing down two key elements:

Element #1: An opponent who represents the ultimate, nightmare, kick-ass, no-holds barred, challenge for your main character.

This is where you get to dig into all those character studies you spent hours laboring over. Because your opponent does not exist in a vacuum.

They must be customized to fit the demands of the story - which is to push your main character to their absolute limits.

I've used this example before, but I think it's a good one.

Take Hannibal Lecter. He isn't just creepy and scary and has a strange London/Welsh/Pittsburgh accent. He is the PERFECT opponent for Clarice Starling.

Because excels in every area where Clarice is self-conscious and lacking.

- She's socially awkward, he's charming and well spoken
- She has a tough time hiding her emotions, he's a sociopath and a master at deception
- She's still learning to read people in her occupation, he's a master at manipulation
- She comes from a rural, unrefined West Virginia background...he's an Ivy league educated psychiatrist who listens to opera...

And most importantly, the one BIG secret she has...and wants nobody to know...those frickin' lambs won't shut up...Hannibal Lecter is the ONE person who has the insight and leverage to get her to expose it.

It's powerful storytelling. (And far more than a simple thriller.) I highly recommend you revisit that film if you haven't seen it in a while.

But what if instead we pitted Hannibal Lecter against...Dirty Harry. Or the George Clooney character from Ocean's 11. Or James Bond. Or Batman. Or Lara Croft - Tomb Raider. Or...Martha Stewart.

Completely different stories. That's because your opponent has to not ONLY be stronger, better, faster, wealthier, wiser, and equipped to hit your main character where it hurts most.

But their job is to force your main character to FACE their flaws and insecurities - and cause them to either dig deep down and find a strength and resourcefulness they didn't know had...

Or accept defeat and realize they can't change and are destined failure. (The latter should be reserved only for French movies and independent film festivals.)

Okay, so that's the first element. The bad guy or girl who stands in the way of your main character and forces them to SEE, as the Persian poet Rumi put it..."where all the bandaged places are."

Element #2 is to take this baddie and use them to create a vivid, lush, graphic nightmare scenario.

Now this shouldn't be some abstract concept or vague idea. Like "Lawrence of Arabia loses a battle" or "Woody and Buzz get trapped at the neighbor's house."

This is Woody and Buzz trapped in the dark, shadowy lair of Sid's room. Where a pit bull eats toys and dolls are subjected to medieval torture.

This is Lawrence thwarted in his attack on Dereaa, captured, then tortured...then having to admit the cause he's been fighting the whole movie - the thing he has given up his entire British allegiance for - is pointless.

So ask yourself what would your hero's actual worst-case scenario look like? If you were the art director or cinematographer or set designer...what would be the most horrible scene you could dream up? What would it smell like? Sound like?

This is the OR ELSE of your story. The REALLY BAD thing that could happen if they don't win.

And here's a bonus NINJA tip, set up your really bad OR ELSE in the beginning of your story and then have it ACTUALLY happen to your main character.

A lot of newbie screenwriters will set up HUGE stakes in the beginning of their script and then stop the story train right before the last stop. This is a mistake.

You want to take your main character face-to-face with the very thing they've been dreading the whole time. Not only is it good for them, but audiences will feel ripped off if they don't see it.

In Raiders of the Lost Ark, this is Indiana Jones being just feet away from the Ark...but watching it be opened by Nazis.

In Bull Durham, this is Crash Davis realizing he'll never get back to the Majors...but instead watch the brain-dead 20 year old punk he's taught for months get the call to the "show" after just 12 games.

In *The Third Man* - my favorite movie of all time - this is the Joseph Cotten character realizing the only way to stop defective medicine killing the children of wartime Vienna - is to not only betray his best friend - but the woman he loves.

Because when you nail down the kick-ass villain, and the hellish nightmare scenario, you have more than just a neat scene that'll look good on the Blu-ray edition.

You have an emotional core your entire script is based around. (And then it's just a matter of filling in the gaps. (Which is what we'll cover in the last secret.)

So...to revisit my lawyer example from before, what traits does my lawyer possess that the grandfather villain could exploit.

Well...here's what I came up with just a few minutes ago:

Matthew is impetuous, erratic....granddad is patient, calculated, conniving.

Matthew pisses people off, ruffles feathers, steps on toes. Granddad is beloved by all.

Matthew is ambitious (meaning he needs other people to climb the political ladder). Granddad is already at the top, and capable of pushing that ladder over.

Matthew has lines he won't cross - perhaps out of principle or fear - granddad is ruthless and willing to do anything to protect his interests.

And as for the nightmare scenario....what would be the worst situation I could imagine for Matthew?

Well, we could have his political career ruined. Okay? But how could we make it stronger...

What if grandpa frames him with pictures of him in an adulterous affair...or better yet...frames him in the murder of a prostitute. Or maybe his own wife.

Yeah, because that way the same assistant D.A. who pissed off every cop, judge, fellow lawyer. Is now at the mercy of that same system...because he wouldn't play ball.

(And maybe the nightmare scenario is him being put into county lockup. And a couple of prison guards escort him to the laundry, and lock the door. Where 5 fellow inmates, who he helped put in prison, wait to exact a bit of their own revenge.

Now I didn't know any of this ten minutes ago. but by sticking with it and lining up grandpa's strengths with Matthew's quote unquote flaws I came up with some cool, additional story ideas - and one awesome climax - for me to explore.

Now your hero and villain will have a different balance of traits. Maybe your hero is a broke, slacker with no ambition. And your villain is a wise, rich and successful patriarch who constantly has his eyes on the prize (say anything).

Maybe your hero is a thirteen year old suburban kid. And your villain is the entire U.S. government. (ET)

Maybe your hero is a rural farm boy from Tatooine and your villain is an all-powerful robot wizard.

But push farther, go deeper and find that really mean part of yourself. (It just may end up transforming your movie idea into something amazing.)

Secret #4 Action Steps

Action Step #1 - Make a list of your main character's top 3-4 blind spots/insecurities.

(It's okay if you don't know them yet. Just focus on what you think they are based on the dilemma you came up with.)

Action Step #2 Come up with 2-3 possible bad guy/girl options.

For each villain, make sure they're REALLY strong in every area your main character is weak. (This one element alone is responsible for 90% of all the story problems I find.)

Action Step #3 - Come up with 2-3 nightmare scenarios that represent a graphic visual seriously f*^ed up situation for your hero.

(This is where you get to let your English major symbolism monster out and have fun putting all kinds of weird stuff in your story. Get experimental. Go weird. Your audience will love you for it.)

Secret No.5 to Creating a Movie Idea Doesn't Suck and Will Actually Sell: Fill in the Gaps (With Your Super Magic Shovel)

So just to remind you, what we've covered so far. We:

- 1) Defined what a movie idea actually is
- 2) Filled Your Gray Matter with High-Octane Story Fuel
- 3) Brainstormed a Kick-Ass Dilemma (and Main Character That Fits That Dilemma)

and...

- 4) Found an Opponent That Matches Up Well With Your Main Character (and Bought a Nightmare Scenario to Complete the Set)

Once you've done that, once you've nailed down these elements, it's just a matter of filling in the blanks of the Ultimate Movie Idea Formula, which I covered in secret #1, which is:

Your Story is about a SOMEBODY [Main Character] who MUST do something they don't want to do [Kick ass Dilemma] and face off against a [Kick-Ass Opponent] or else [Nightmare Scenario] Will Happen.

Now the movie idea formula seems deceptively simple - I mean how helpful can that really be.

But filling in the blanks of the formula will give you that all-important spine to your story. Paddy Chayefsky, the playwright and screenwriter of Network, before he wrote a single word...

Would write down what he believed the story was about, and put it above his typewriter. This, he believed, would help him ensure every word he typed was connected to the spine of the story.

Let's take my lawyer example from earlier:

So far I've got: "A young, brash, politically ambitious lawyer MUST take on his wealthy and connected grandfather or risk the loss of his reputation - and possibly the love of his life.

Alright, so already, I can tell this movie idea is weak. (Or as my 13 year old nephew would say: "It sucks butt."

And it's really weak in the MUST and OR ELSE department.

I mean "Take on his wealthy grandfather..." how frickin' boring can you get? I mean sure the man is powerful - but so what? But the man is probably in his 70s or 80s. How interesting is that going to be?

So, what would be a stronger opponent? The Birmingham elite class? Better. The Alabama Democratic Party? Okay. The seedy back-room corrupt organized crime world of Alabama?

Which begs a question...does Birmingham, Alabama have a corrupt organized crime world? I'm not sure - my feeling is if they do, it may not conjure dread in the hearts of studio execs and audiences.

But what if we move the story from Alabama to Philadelphia? Lots of old money there, so we can get the family angle in there.

But there's also an organized crime element we could exploit there. But what does this mean for our whole civil rights story angle?

Well, as I said earlier, I wasn't entirely sure that was the most important story element to me. (I'm interested but what I'm really after is to explore the idea of ambition vs. justice.)

So what if we changed it to...

A young, brash, politically ambitious lawyer MUST take on an organized crime syndicate in Philadelphia - headed by.... his grandfather? His father? His best friend going up?

Yeah already I'm thinking of killing granddad - sorry, pops - and going with the best friend angle. (This ancient friend motif worked well in Mystic River.

Where a murder investigation of a girl was flavored by age-old tensions and resentments. Not to mention some of the worst Boston accents you'll ever hear.)

So...okay. Let's go with the best friend. Our main character Matthew has to take on his powerful, connected best friend. (Probably the same best friend who promised to help support his political campaign.)

Now we're getting somewhere. Now it's getting interesting.

But what about that or else...still feels flimsy to me.

I mean sure losing his chances at a political career is bad...but...so what? I wanted to play shortstop for the San Diego Padres. We've all got dreams that get shattered.

What if we had something like...?

A young, brash, politically ambitious lawyer MUST risk his political reputation and take on a Philadelphia crime syndicate - headed by his childhood friend - or else the murderer of his...what...?

Girlfriend. Fiancé. Ex-girlfriend. Mistress. Best friend. Sister. Dad....somebody...or else the murder of this somebody close to me will go free.

I like the mistress angle. (Implies more internal conflict for our seemingly moral hero.) Maybe our hero is married. Has the perfect "political" marriage. But he's been seeing somebody on the side.

And then one morning, after he spent the night with her, she shows up dead. Everyone thinks she killed herself. But something doesn't smell right to Matthew.

So he hires a private detective. (Maybe one he worked with in the D.A.'s office. Who uncovers something? But then he dies mysteriously.

So Matthew digs deeper...until he finds out this big crime syndicate is involved. (Headed by his best friend.) Who has every level of civic authority in his pockets.

Which means they might try to frame him for the murder. Oh...that's good.

So, let's recap real quick:

A young, brash, politically ambitious lawyer MUST risk his reputation and take on a Philadelphia crime syndicate - headed by his best friend or find himself charged with the murder of his mistress.

I hope you're beginning to see how fleshing out the movie idea formula THIS WAY can save you a CRAPLOAD of time.

We started with an evil grandpa in Alabama...and then jumped on a plane and got ourselves an evil best friend mobster in Philly.

And if I had started writing the script based on my initial premise....then I'd probably be knee deep in my second draft trying to make the whole Alabama courthouse showdown work - before it occurred maybe this whole thing doesn't work.

And I'd probably give up on the whole project. (Which is what I did with too many projects to mention.)

Instead of realizing what I really needed to do was to keep tweaking and testing. (Not believing it was just more evidence that I was never meant to be a writer.)

So, the two action steps for Secret #5 are simple, but important:

1) Write out your movie idea using the MOvie Idea Formula template which again is:

Your Story is about a SOMEBODY [Main Character] who MUST do something they don't want to do [Kick ass Dilemma] and face off against a [Kick-Ass Opponent] or else [Nightmare Scenario] Will Happen.

2) Once you've done that, spend some quality time tweaking, adjusting, and reworking the movie idea formula until it's where you want it.

Until it almost sounds like a movie idea that somebody else came up with. (When you get to that point, you know you have something special.)

Oh...and I forgot one other thing. Let's call this the Bonus Secret.

Remember the title of Secret #5 was Fill in the Gaps (With Your Magic Shovel)

So let me tell you about the magic shovel.

Because the magic shovel...is what keeps you motivated and inspired and dedicated to the project. It's what transforms your story from a series of random events and characters into a living, breathing world that hits people in the emotional gut. (And has them writing you stupidly large checks.)

Because the magic shovel is...fear.

If this story scares you. Feels like it's going to be too much work. Feels like it's not going to lead anywhere. Feels Like it'll make you look dumb and get you rejected and prove to everyone that you are the worst writer in seven counties...feels like it's too personal, too painful...too...anything you don't want to feel.

Then you know you are on to something.

Because THAT stupid fear talk in your head is just resistance. It's just your amygdala, the fight or flight part of your brain, trying to protect you.

And that amygdala is great when you're being chased by a sabretooth tiger but it sucks royal ass when it comes to getting any writing done.

And with my lawyer idea I've got a ton of bullshit fear self-talk. I don't know anything about being a lawyer. I don't know anything about organized crime. Or Philadelphia. Or local politics.

But even more importantly I'm more uncomfortable about the subject matter. Moral hypocrisy. I'm scared to write about a main character who has a mistress. (And what my wife may think about me writing such a script.)

I'm scared to write about somebody being called out on their bullshit. (Probably because I'm secretly terrified somebody will call me out on my mind.)

And I'm scared to think what I'd do in a situation like that.

Now, I'm not saying once you fill in your movie idea formula you're totally ready to go - and primed to start typing FADE IN. There are a lot more dots to connect.

But...you'll know whether this movie idea is strong enough to be worth pursuing. (And whether it's strong enough to scare the ever loving shit out of you.)

Just no matter what you do. I beg you to take action. Keep moving forward. Keep trying out things. Keep having fun.

Keep telling stories. That's where the magic is. (And quite possibly a pretty damn lucrative career as well.)

So, now that you're ready for battle, if you'd like to find out how I might be able to help you connect those final movie idea dots to your killer story...

To help you get that Ph.D in movie idea studies, then click on the big button below this video.

There you'll get information on my video course **Movie Idea Creator: How to Unearth a Kick-Ass Movie Idea in 7 Days or Less**

There you'll learn screenwriting nuggets of goodness such as:

My top 10 Movie Idea Brainstorming Strategies

My 3 Absolute Favorite Movie Idea Creation Exercises (All of which take 5 minutes or less)

The 5 things Your Villain Absolutely, Positively Has Gotta Have

How to Create Obsessive Uncompromising Heroes (and Heroines) That Resonate With Audiences, Studio Execs and...most importantly...You!

....and perhaps the most important of all - Story Structure in 7 Super Simple Steps - where I show you how to not only use abuse alliteration, but also take all the fun movie idea brainstorming we do in the course...

...and translate it into a blueprint for your screenplay that will help you get from FADE in to FADE out....So. Much. Faster.

The course represents 15 years of trial and error (mostly error)...and the culmination of everything I've learned, borrowed, stolen, rejected, then later accepted about movie ideas to help me option my scripts.

And I'm so passionate about the course - that I'm giving a one year money-back guarantee for it. That's right.

Give it a try. Sell your script to Judd Apatow. Have coffee with Jennifer Lawrence to discuss "character." Talk about your love of 40s film noir with martin Scorsese at the Cannes Film Festival junket party.

If you don't think the course was helpful - feel free to return it for a full refund.

Again, if you'd like more information on that just click on the BIG button below this video.

And...if you don't end up taking advantage today of the HUGE discount I got going on [Movie Idea Creator](#) then let me say...

Thank you so much for investing your valuable time in this video class. I hope it's slightly better than the 2nd matrix movie, and that you've learned a thing or two.

And if you have a burning screenwriting question that is frying your brain, shoot it to me over at michael@scriptbully.com

Until we talk again...be bold. Write often. and kick writer's block in the ass.
