

A vintage typewriter with hands typing on the keyboard, set against a blurred background of people.

5 Essential Writing Tips From A Working Screenwriter

Andrea Mann

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“Writing is the
best gig in the
whole business...
You just sit down
and make shit up.”

Robert Mark Kamen

The writer of *The Karate Kid* is right

Writing IS the best job in the business (even when it's not your actual job). It's fulfilling, meaningful and a total bloomin' joy. But it's also challenging. From knowing what to write in the first place to seeing your project through to the very end, these five tips are prompted by challenges I (and writers since the dawn of time) have faced – and will always continue to. Which is probably why I find them so essential.



Spoiler alert: none of them are “*Wax on, wax off*”. But I hope they’ll be useful no matter what kind of writing you do, and serve as helpful reminders you can return to any time you’re struggling with a writing project.

So let’s pull up a chair. Literally...

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“The art of writing
is the art of
applying the seat of
the pants to the
seat of the chair.”

Mary Heaton Vorse

Tip 1: Feel the fear... and start writing anyway

‘Start writing’ may seem obvious, but trust me: it’s a common hurdle. Not least because it doesn’t just apply when you’re embarking on a project, but every time you plan to write. Yes, to err is human, and so is to procrastinate. (Every time I need to write, it’s amazing how my house suddenly needs cleaning.)

And whether it’s starting in the first place or sitting down for that day’s planned writing session, our delaying is usually linked to fear.



We're hesitant to write because we're most likely afraid of something. Of it being rubbish. Of the whole thing being too difficult. Of us not having the ability we hoped we had. We might be afraid that we'll be found out – because we're an imposter, right?! – or that we've left it too late in life. We may even feel like we need permission to write at all (if that's you, here's your permission slip).

These fears are all part of the creative process – of being human! – and *not* signs you shouldn't be writing. They're signs that you're moving out of your comfort zone and smashing your own personal glass ceiling. So acknowledge the fear – but don't let it stop you writing. Because the only way out is through (that glass ceiling).



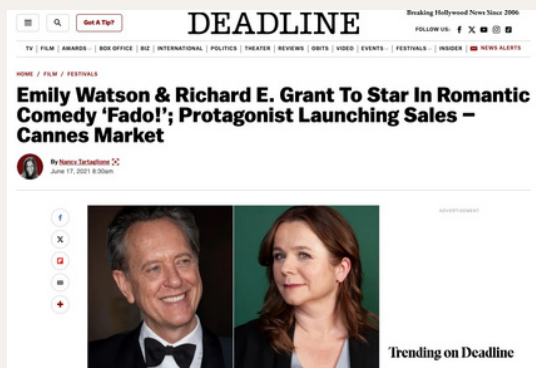
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“A deadline is
negative inspiration.
Still, it’s better than
no inspiration at all.”

Rita Mae Brown

Tip 2: Set goals and deadlines

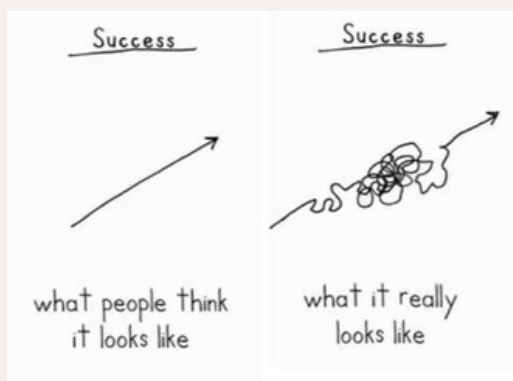
When I sat down to write what would be my first screenplay to go out in the world – *Fado!* – I set a goal and deadline for when I wanted that final draft to be ready, and then I set other goals and deadlines to get me to that final point (eg. one month before: start final rewrite; one month before that: give to friends for feedback; and so on). And when it *did* go out in the world? Well, rather amazing things happened. Turns out there's a reason it's called Deadline:



I still set deadlines and goals now I'm hired to write for others – and I can't recommend it enough to keep you on track, maintain momentum and get you to the finish line.

Just remember to:

- Set deadlines that are realistic for *you*
- Set goals that are in your personal control (eg ‘Finish a first draft’ not ‘Win an Oscar’)
- Celebrate your goals and deadlines as you hit them (in fact celebrate all your wins, big or small!) And if you miss them, remember:



Life happens. Shit happens. Shit life things happen. So be kind to yourself, reset your deadline/goal, and get back in the saddle (whether or not you're writing while riding a horse; though if you are, hats off to you, because that's some impressive multi-tasking).

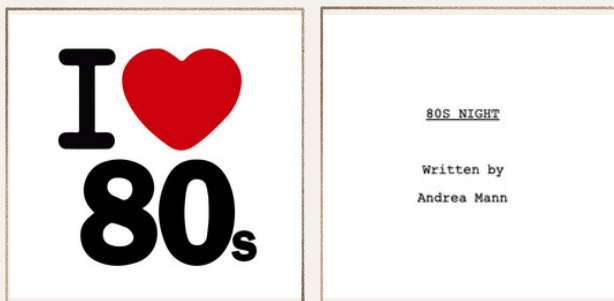
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“Follow the fun.
If you’re not having
fun writing, you’re
doing it wrong.”

Jordan Peele

Tip 3: Write what you love

The idea for my second spec film script came from one thought: “If Mr Spielberg called me tomorrow and ask me to write something, what would that dream project be?” And the answer was: “A musical”. A few years later, the *West Side Story* gig went to some green kid called Tony Kushner... but still, I instinctively knew that the next script I wanted to have in my arsenal was a musical. And I knew I wanted it to be an 80s jukebox musical.



80s Night is me on a plate: my childhood (and, let's be honest, adulthood) passions laid bare for all to see. It was challenging – I'd never written a musical before – but it was a labour of love. Because it all came from love.

Write from your heart, and write what you love. Don't write what you think 'the market' wants – it won't ring true, it won't be fun, and by the time you've finished it, the market will want something else. Write what is meaningful and joyful and interesting to *you*. That's how you find that all-important 'voice' of yours.



Us cheering you on as you do what you love

And 'write what you love' still applies if you're a writer for hire. Bring yourself – your full self – to your work. Bring your views, tastes, inspirations and passions. Because that's why they hired *you*.

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“Very few writers
really know what
they are doing until
they’ve done it.”

Anne Lamott

Tip 4: Trust the process

‘Trust the process’ is a mantra I return to again and again while writing – whether I’m in the quagmire of a Rubbish First Draft, wrangling a This-Is-Going-Out-In-The-World Draft, or trying to address a tricky note from a producer.



For me, ‘trust the process’ means continually reminding myself: Yes, this is difficult, but that’s normal. Yes, this is terrible, but ‘writing is rewriting’, an iterative process. It means having faith – even when I feel like Andy DuFresne chipping at a wall with a tiny rock hammer – that keeping going with my project will get it to the place I want to get it to. Because somehow, magically, it always does.

If the process's job is to work its magic, then our job is to set ourselves up so that we help the process as much as possible. For example:

- Plan a designated time and space for your writing. It deserves that. So do you!

- If you're stuck, change things up. Go for a walk, visit a gallery, watch a favourite film. Giving your brain space to problem-solve and let ideas percolate is part of the process, too.



- Use notes/postcards/Pinterest to remind you of whatever helpful messages you need to hear during whichever part of the process you're in. (Above, for example, is my windowsill right now: with Katie Abey's and David Shrigley's art simultaneously inspiring and reassuring me.)

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“Don’t get it right,
get it written.”

James Thurber

Tip 5: Finish the damn thing

I used to be a serial quitter. Or more precisely: a quitter-while-I-was-ahead. In my 20s and 30s, I walked away from numerous jobs and relationships, always while I was ahead. So when I started to write my very first screenplay, I knew the most important thing was to simply *not quit*. It was to keep going and finish a first draft. It was to ensure I typed ~~Fin~~ 'THE END'.



When I finally did it, it was like I'd unlocked a whole new level in the game of life – and excitingly, I realised that if I'd done it once, I could probably do it again. So if you also find yourself scribbling ideas in notebooks and/or starting projects *but not seeing them through*, let me assure you: a) you're not alone and b) you too can unlock this level in your own life.

As with Tip 1, it's usually some sort of fear that lies behind our difficulty in finishing.



My own personal fear was around failure and perfection. If I always quit things while I was ahead, I never failed. If I never failed, I was perfect. And if I was perfect, I was loveable. Simple!

But we don't need to be perfect, and our work doesn't either. Indeed, our writing can never be perfect because no art is perfect. (Although the screenplay of *Moonstruck* comes pretty close.)

So don't worry about trying to make your draft great (let alone 'undeniable'). Don't worry about what work it may or not need later. For now, just finish. the damn. thing. Then go and watch *Moonstruck*.

Happy writing!

And yes, I mean that literally. I hope these tips help you have a happy writing experience – because as I said at the start: writing is fun, and fulfilling, but often it's hard. A bit like life.

Writing also – like life! – takes courage. It requires you to dig deep, overcome challenges and bring yourself to the page. So here's to your courage both on and off that page. Here's to the satisfaction of typing *'The End'*, or indeed *Fin*. And here's to enjoying the journey that takes you there. Wishing you all the luck, success and joy in the world with your writing –

Andrea



About Andrea Mann

Andrea is a British screenwriter who writes both comedy and drama with intelligence and heart. She cut her teeth writing jokes, sketches and songs for stage, radio, TV and podcasts, before her debut spec script – the romantic comedy *Fado!* – was optioned, launching her screenwriting career. She now has six feature films in development.



Want to work with me?

I now offer bespoke, one-to-one mentoring programs for beginner and emerging screenwriters. If you're looking for guidance, support and inspiration in both the craft of screenwriting and your wider creative goals, find out more on my website and email me at andrea@andreamann.com.



“Don’t think about making art, just get it done. Let everyone else decide if it’s good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they are deciding, make even more art.”

Andy Warhol
