

Too Many Notes

From the script of the movie *Amadeus*...

Emperor Franz Joseph II

Your work is ingenious. It's quality work. And there are simply too many notes, that's all. Just cut a few and it will be perfect.

Mozart

Which few did you have in mind, Majesty?

In Summary

Critical thought or praise? Wisdom, as defined by the legendary William Goldman. The marriage of art and commerce. How to receive Notes: Tactical advice. How to give Notes: Four rules – be specific, empathetic, political, respectful. Three worked examples: the near-perfect script with the case for a political (and respectful) tweak; the classic development scenario – three drafts and a polish; an outsider's Note. A proposed template for the modern-day Note.

LET'S BE FAIR about this. As writers, we all claim to want honest, engaged readers – the kind who offer closely observed, tightly reasoned critiques of our work. Their appraisals may bring us the pain of tough love; their reaction to the material may highlight the need for revisions; they may unearth out-and-out flaws, errors that need to be rectified. But that's all going to make the script better. And that's what we require – right?

Of course not. What we really want is a lava flow of unalloyed praise.

It's human nature. For example, if you do really well in the degree examinations at Oxford University, you may qualify for the top mark, a Congratulatory First. The Dons call you into an oak-panelled room for what you fear may be a tough cross-examination on your papers. But then, when you walk in... the academics just stand up and applaud.

That type of approval is exactly what we writers want when we walk fearfully into the anteroom of reader reaction – and woe betide anyone who's not clapping hard enough.

The real world, sadly, offers the scriptwriter lots of noise and little congratulation. Welcome to the world of *Notes* – a rare instance of a Biblical notion's being one hundred-percent true in modern life: so far as Notes are concerned, it is definitely better to give than to receive. Provided, of course, that you give in the right way. Do it the wrong way, and you can end up in a great deal of trouble.

So let's start with the flip side of Notes, the receiving side. The script you've worked so hard on has been read, and the reader has comments for you. You've got Notes.

How do you react to them? How do you receive them?

The brilliant screenwriter and novelist, William Goldman (*Marathon Man*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Misery*, *The Princess Bride*, *All The President's Men* – oh *do* wake up at the back, there...) nails it in his truly superb 1983 memoir, *Adventures In The Screen Trade*. When you're on the receiving end of Notes, the best thing to do is shut up, let your pen hover over your pad, and write occasionally – in other words, take notes on the Notes. Essentially, your role is to play the eager beneficiary of other people's wisdom.

I'll let Goldman define wisdom for us in this context. He has a fearlessness

born of great talent, sensational achievement (just the two Oscars for best screenplay) and genuine desire to tell the truth. And, of course, there's the not inconsiderable fact that he's made good money from plying his trade.

It's the penultimate quality – the honesty – that makes him such a great, emotionally generous writer. Fine communicator that he is, Goldman relates an uncomfortable truth when he makes it clear that most producers – even the best ones, the ones with a strong reputation for creative excellence – really don't have a clue what they're doing. Why? Because they work in a movie industry where, Goldman unforgettably insists, *no-one knows anything*.

I repeat: no-one knows anything. That's wisdom for you. As Aristotle had it, the world is divided into people who don't know, and people who know that they don't know. Make sure you fall into the latter category.

The truth is that Notes are often addle-brained and confused. Of course they are. What else would you expect from an addle-brained, confused industry? In the land where no-one knows anything, just let the producer or director talk. The writer should keep quiet and let the ideas – or what pass for ideas – stand naked in all their glory before the god of movie hopefulness.

The great hope is that your script will make a movie, any sort of movie – and that it becomes a commercial and artistic success.

Which brings us to the old saw that Hollywood is the marriage of commerce and art. So it is. But what a fucked-up, dysfunctional hell of a marriage it is.

Art keeps getting violently drunk, throws the crockery at Commerce (invariably missing its target), and runs naked down the street crying 'Rape! Rape!' on a regular basis.

Commerce just can't stay faithful. It keeps looking for prettier artists who will write 'successful' movies that do well at the box office – comes home drunk on demographic research and the need to write to order, unbuckles its belt and beats the living crap out of Art with alarming regularity.

It's a stinking arrangement that involves mutual loving, mutual loathing – and deeply embedded co-dependence. The writer needs the producer, the producer the writer. There's no divorce, no escape from the marriage from hell.

It's commercial pressure that warps the judgment of all producers. Write to order, and you'll write formulaic crap. If the producer rolls over and gives in to the

aesthetic predilections of the writer, you'll end up with a movie that never gets made. Or, if it does, never gets a theatrical release.