MASTERING CHARACTER NAMES AND MOVIE TITLES

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SCREENCRAFT

ScreenCraft Presents

Mastering Character Names and Movie Titles

Introduction

Welcome to **ScreenCraft's Mastering Character Names and Movie Titles**!

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

The famous William Shakespeare line from his iconic play *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted as a phrase which implies that the names of things or people do not affect what they really are. Make no mistake, in the film and television industry **they do**.

Naming a script can be an arduous task for a screenwriter. You want to capture the heart of your concept and communicate that with just a few words — and the fewer the better. It's a vital part of the process because the title is the first thing that people read when considering your work. Thus, you have to make the best of first impressions.

Naming a *character* within your movie is no easy task either. It's often like naming your own child. You want the name to have some meaning, either obvious or hidden. You want it to stand apart from the rest.

In this book we'll share various ways you can master the art and business of naming your movies, television series, and characters. While it may seem minuscule in the big scheme of screenwriting, you'll hopefully walk away with an understanding of how important character names and titles are.

SECTION ONE: MOVIE TITLES

Chapter 1: Why Movie Titles Matter

One of the most underrated aspects of a screenwriter's arsenal is their ability to create titles that jump off of the page and further entice the powers that be in Hollywood to take notice.

It's a sad truth that within Hollywood's over-saturated development platform, there are so many scripts to consider — and so little time. Therefore, screenwriters are tasked to do whatever they can to stand out from the rest. Oftentimes it's a strong and compelling concept. Sometimes it's a great logline. It could also be the writer's voice within the context of the script pages or even a special and unique character that hasn't been seen in movies yet.

But before all of that, what is the first contact that Hollywood has with any given screenplay that comes through their email inbox? **The title**.

Since the dawn of publishing, picking a strong title for a story has been a highly debated and highly explored subject. In these contemporary times, companies and individuals have even tried to create algorithms to come up with what they feel would be the most marketable title for novels and movies.

And that's really what we're talking about here — **marketability**. Now, there are two phases of conjuring marketable titles for screenplays.

The first phase comes during the spec writing process when a screenwriter is writing under speculation that their screenplay will be purchased and produced. Which is to say that no one is hiring them to write the screenplay.

The second phase is after the fact, when a screenplay has either been purchased by a studio or production company and is being produced, or after a concept has been specifically developed by a producer or development executive, leading to the hiring of a screenwriter for the assignment.

In the first phase, the purpose of creating a strong screenplay title is to stand out from the thousands of other spec scripts being distributed through the over-saturated spec market. Unwise advice that often makes the rounds is the notion that when you're writing on spec, the screenplay title doesn't matter because it's likely going to be changed anyway down the line. It's true that if your script makes it to the second phase, the title could and likely would go through any number of variations based off of marketing and creative input from many individuals. However, the screenwriter still needs to use their title as a weapon in their literary and cinematic arsenal to call further attention to their script for it to be considered in the first place.

A strong screenplay title can't overshadow an otherwise horrible concept, story, or overall poorly written and conceived script. However, a strong title **can** grab the attention for consideration because, as most should know, there are hundreds upon hundreds of amazing screenplays that are overlooked by Hollywood. It'd be a shame for such scripts to slip through the cracks because of the early red flag of a bad title. It's disconcerting to think that a mere bad title would cause the demise of an otherwise excellent screenplay, but the reality is that the filtration process of Hollywood development can often cause that to happen.

Movie titles matter.

Chapter 2: Good Titles vs. Bad Titles

What makes a title good or bad — and better yet, what makes a title stand out in a strong and compelling fashion?

Let's start with some examples to ponder.

1. *The Babysitter Murders*

2. *Shoeless Joe*

3. *Star Beasts*

4. *Wimpy*

5. *Not Tonight Josephine*

6. *The Ship of Dreams*

7. *East Great Falls High*

8. *A Long Night at Camp Blood*

9. *The Lunch Bunch*

10. *Anhedonia*

11. *It Had to Be Jew*

12. *Love Hurts*

13. *The Tribal Rights of the New Saturday Night*

14. *A Boy's Life*

15. *Night Skies*

16. *When I Grow Up*

17. *Affairs of the Heart*

18. *Coma Guy*

You've never heard of these movies. **Or have you?** Most of them are actually the original titles of some of cinema's most iconic films.

1. *Halloween*

2. *Field of Dreams*

3. Alien

4. Psycho

5. Some Like It Hot

6. Titanic

7. American Pie

8. Friday the 13th

9. The Breakfast Club

10. Annie Hall

11. Annie Hall

12. Basic Instinct

13. Saturday Night Fever

14. E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial

15. E.T. – The Extra-Terrestrial

16. Big

17. Fatal Attraction

18. While You Were Sleeping

The reasons why they were changed — and why we're glad they changed — vary. We'll cover many elements of the hows and whys within this book, but one can argue that the eventual decisions made for the final titles were wise ones. Some are stronger than others, but all of them are titles that best convey either — or a combination of — the concept, story, genre, or special compelling character featured in each script and eventual film.

We'll use these examples, and a few more, to break down the secrets and considerations that screenwriters need to utilize in order to find the best title for their script.

Chapter 3: Directives to Follow

Before we get into some of the idiosyncrasies of creating strong movie titles, let's cover some general directives to follow.

1. Avoid Click Bait

Click bait is a contemporary internet reference that also harkens back to the tools employed by print journalism — creating headlines that force readers to "need" to explore further.

First off, the titles you choose can't purely be conceived for click bait. You'll be doing yourself no favor by titling your script **The Secret Trump Files** only to have the reader discover that the screenplay is actually telling the heartfelt story of a puppy lost in a strange place.

If you're thinking that no screenwriter would ever stoop so low, I can tell you from years in development and writing coverage, this happens more often than you think.

2. Focus on the Core Concept

The idea isn't to deceive. It's to entice. It's to showcase the strongest and most specific core element of your screenplay. The best titles often wrap the genre and overall concept together in as few words as possible. Because the title is your first marketing tool that Hollywood sees, you want to find those words and terms that best encapsulate your whole screenplay.

Alien is as specific as it gets. The cast and crew of a space merchant vessel are tasked with surviving the assault of an alien on their ship.

The movie **Snakes on a Plane** is a perfect example of selling the core concept within the title alone. It says it all. *"The title was what got my attention,"* Samuel Jackson told USA Today. *"I got on the set one day and heard they changed it, and I said, 'What are you doing here? It's not Gone with the Wind. It's not On the Waterfront. It's Snakes on a Plane!' They were afraid it gave too much away, and I said, "That's exactly what you should do. When audiences hear it, they say, 'We are there!'"* While the eventual movie wasn't anything to remember, for the most part, the marketing centered on that title gave an otherwise lackluster thriller some box office legs to stand on in the end.

Big is another straight-to-the-core title. While the script's previous title **When I Grow Up** could be considered a strong contender, the single word **Big** captures the essence of the film. When asked to make a wish, the small in stature Josh quickly says, *"Big. I*

want to be big." That's the whole film right there. His wish and the repercussions of it. If that script is in the first phase with a screenwriter writing on spec and trying to find a title that best captures the core elements of their script, the title **Big** sells it, especially when Hollywood goes on to read the logline — After wishing to be made big, a teenage boy wakes the next morning to find himself mysteriously in the body of an adult.

So when you're looking to title that script of yours, understand that being overly specific is often the best way to go in the end.

3. Avoid the Steven Seagal Syndrome

You always want to avoid generic terminology and phrases in your screenplay titles — words and combinations thereof that could really mean anything and everything.

We call this the **Steven Seagal Syndrome**.

Here are the titles of many of Seagal's movies — **Above the Law**, **Hard to Kill**, **Marked for Death**, **Out for Justice**, **On Deadly Ground**, **Fire Down Below**, **Half Past Dead**, **Out for a Kill** (seriously), **Driven to Kill**, **Contract to Kill**, **Out of Reach**, **Into the Sun**, **Mercenary for Justice**, etc. If you're not a truly dedicated Seagal fan, you wouldn't know the difference between most of these movies because they are utterly generic titles. Sure, many denote the characteristic of the hero, but beyond that, they don't stand out. They are forgettable. And when you're in the first phase of screenwriting — writing spec scripts — "forgettable" is not a term you want to be connected with your writing.

Note: Most of Seagal's movies are titled to emulate the titles of his earlier successful hits specifically to capture the international market attention where most of his current movies still make money today. Thus the many iterations of "… Kill". So there is a method to that madness.

4. Capture the Genre

Studios and producers will want and need to know the genre of your script before they even read it. The title is the best and fastest way to do that.

Halloween captures its genre instantly and is much broader and more appealing than compared to its former title **The Babysitter Murders**. The same can be said for **Friday the 13th**, which was a better option than **A Long Night at Camp Blood**. **Halloween** and **Friday the 13th** have an atmosphere to them that embraces the horror genre. They're instantly creepy, foreboding, and scary.

When you're titling a horror script, search any and all terms that touch on those types of stories. Do the same for action, comedy, science fiction, and drama. Search for keywords and phrases that emulate the tone and atmosphere of those specific genres. Then delve deeper by looking at synonyms for those words and try to create compelling wordplay on the phrases you find.

5. Ensure That the Titles Make Sense to the Story

There once was a film named *50 First Kisses*, reuniting him with his *The Wedding Singer* co-star Drew Barrymore. The film tells the story of Henry Roth, a man afraid of commitment until the moment he meets the beautiful Lucy. They hit it off and Henry thinks he's finally found the girl of his dreams until he discovers she has short-term memory loss and forgets him the very next day. He takes it upon himself to meet her again and again, despite the fact that at the dawn of each new day, she forgets who he is. Now, if you watch the film, you'll notice that while they may have 50 dates (onscreen and off), they don't necessarily have 50 kisses. So the title of the film was changed to *50 First Dates*. Needless to say, when the post-production crew came in, the studio had to print additional badges with the new title.

Lesson learned — make sure the title stays true to the story. Don't call your script *The Lone Gunman* if the main character travels with multiple gunmen.

Hollywood screenwriter John August tells the tale of a script he worked on during one of its drafts — it was called *Planet Ice*. The problem was, there was no planet made of ice in the script. It was a title that was a holdover from previous drafts. The film was eventually released as *Titan A.E.*

Chapter 4: Unique Characters and Character Types

Some screenplays have characters that are the focal point of the overall concept, which is to say that the whole film centers primarily on a unique character. If you take them out of the story, there is no story. You can't replace them with a stock protagonist.

Juno is a unique character. She's a pregnant teen with a witty and "beyond her years" outlook on life that she isn't afraid to share. Without that character, there is no film.

Forrest Gump is a unique character. He's a learning and socially challenged man that lives a rather adventurous American life. The whole film is about how this "different" character reacts to love, war, and loss. Without him, there is no film.

Jerry Maguire is a unique character. One could argue it's more about him being a unique character type, but we'll cover that below. The concept is that he's the ultimate sports agent success story that has to deal with losing everything and building himself back up, but this time with heart and honesty. Without him, there is no film.

Annie Hall is a unique character. While the film doesn't focus on her point of view like the other examples, her character is the main purpose of the concept as the main character — neurotic New York comedian Alvy Singer — falls in love with her. Without her, there is no film.

Naming a screenplay or film after the main character isn't *always* advisable, but in certain situations where you have unique characters that stand out, you should consider it as an option as long as the character is central to the story and strong enough to warrant putting their name on the cover page.

Another variation of this is including the name of the character in the title, as was the case with films like ***Good Will Hunting***, ***When Harry Met Sally***, and ***There's Something About Mary***. While including names of the lead characters in titles may seem as if they'd pack less of a punch upon first sight, know that Hollywood is all about casting, and lead actors especially are looking for unique characters to play. If the character name is in the title, it's often a slight hint that the screenplay in question is character driven.

Character "type" refers to a certain character that has a unique power, position, or occupation.

American Sniper — and the fictional action film ***Sniper*** before it — is a title that sells

the concept, story, character, and much of the genre. All in one.

The underrated Alec Baldwin and Demi Moore film *The Juror* sold the package of the film with its title. The film was simply about how a juror involved in a sensitive case deals with coercion from the mafia.

American Assassin sells the concept of an American who becomes an assassin after his fiancée is killed by terrorists.

The Invisible Man — or the lesser title of *The Hollow Man*, a once-hot script turned into a lackluster movie — was about, yes, a man who has acquired the power to become invisible.

So if you have a character that has a certain power, position, or occupation that stands out, consider using that — or a variation of it — for the title of your script. Words like The Soldier, The General, The Master, The Conjurer, The Hypnotist, The Garbage Man, The Lawyer, The Wrangler, The Pilot, The Engineer, The Mail Man — these are all examples of the possibilities that you can explore, depending on your script. The variations can be as simple as dropping The from the title, which makes for a more powerful statement with the single word. You can also add additional words to the mix to give the title more depth, such as The Soldier Within, Lawyer No More, The Last Pilot, etc.

Chapter 5: Explore Titles with Dual Meanings

A screenplay's title comes into play **twice** — before the reader reads the script, and then after they've read it. When you've paid extra attention to crafting a title, you can often come up with two meanings. This offers extra significance to the title and also manages to give the reader an extra punch when they're done.

If you look at the title for the Tom Hanks film ***Cast Away***, you'll notice the dual meaning behind it. His character is literally cast away from his world, specifically from the love of his fiancée — and he literally becomes a castaway when his plane crashes and he washes up on the shore of an uninhabited island.

Good Will Hunting has the dual meaning of including the unique lead character name, as well as denoting the story element of finding the good in Will Hunting.

This is where the screenwriter can truly have fun with their titles and use their creativity on multiple levels.

But be careful. Sometimes you unknowingly — or knowingly if you have a sick sense of humor — create titles that have unintentional dual meanings.

Sexual innuendos can easily sneak up on you. Sony Studios created many Sony lot ID badges for a Will Smith superhero film called ***Tonight, He Comes***. Snickers ensued. The studio wisely decided to rename the film ***Hancock***, which still instigated some snickers but was a clear improvement. There exists a whole different kind of entertainment industry that has mastered the art of sexual innuendos in movie titles. Let them handle it and save yourself and your script from some unintentional laughs.

Chapter 6: Google Your Titles

We do live in a small world after all. Compelling titles are hard to come by and as we're all humans, well, great minds think alike. It's not uncommon to discover that multiple books, screenplays, and movies share the same title that you just brainstormed for two weeks. It can be disheartening, so do yourself a favor and Google any titles that you come up with. If you find matches with self-produced books or any other more obscure property, don't worry about it as long as the content is vastly different. But if you see that previous movies have been released with the same title — or there are upcoming releases in development or production — you're better off going in a different direction.

Studios have often been known to stockpile and trade great titles as well, even if the actual script isn't used. The Bruce Willis film ***Tears of the Sun*** was actually the title of a script that was under consideration for a then-fourth ***Die Hard*** installment. In return for the use of the title (***Tears of the Sun***) for a non-***Die Hard*** film, Willis agreed to do a ***Die Hard*** sequel based on a different different script, which would become ***Live Free and Die Hard*** (***Die Hard 4.0*** in some territories).

There is no exact science for creating masterful screenplay titles. No magic formula. No "fill in the blank" Mad Lib sheet. It's all trial and error. The true key is to put a lot of thought into it because it truly is a key factor to your screenplay in that first phase. A strong title can be the difference maker, no matter how ludicrous that may seem to some. These chapters are there to help you through the journey of finding that one title. And maybe you'll luck out and find one that proves to be lightning in a bottle.

SECTION TWO: CHARACTER NAMES

Chapter 7: Why Character Names Matter

While choosing the perfect title for your screenplay, pilot, or novel can be an arduous task, choosing character names is even more exasperating for most writers. You want major character names to resonate with the audience and fully portray the character's traits, but you also want them to be unique and memorable — without being too obscure and unrealistic.

And then you have to consider the multiple minor characters in your screenplay — each of which has to be named. And when they are, those names are scattered throughout the whole script in character name headings, scene description, and dialogue.

So you must choose — but choose wisely.

John Smith is too common and doesn't stand out. ***Raskell Snotwhyler*** is too much and needs to be toned down a bit. Clarice Starling, Indiana Jones, and Ethan Hunt have been taken by other movies and represent iconic characters already known by audiences worldwide.

Character names matter.

So how do you find the perfect character names for every character in your script — big or small?

In this final section, we offer creative ways to find the best names you possibly can.

Chapter 8: Character Name Generators

Let's start from the bottom of the barrel and work our way up. Many scripts have characters that are either only referred to in the story by other characters or have limited screen or page presence. You obviously don't need to put too much thought into them, unless they are integral to the story or theme.

In these cases, the best places to go are character name generators — websites that have thousands of names available that are generated in either random fashion or based on genre, time period, geographical territory, or other more unique subtopics.

Random generators also offer writers a chance at finding a gem that resonates with their main protagonists, antagonists, and villains as well.

The best of the bunch is [Fantasy Name Generators](), where you can choose from a wide selection of name types — and within those types, you can sometimes find hundreds of options in subtopics.

You can generate fantasy names based on different types of fantasy settings, time periods, and locations.

You can generate real names based on time periods and geographical locations.

You can also search through a wide variety of additional names for groups, planets, places, gangs, etc. There's even a random generator that offers unique names for arcades.

The sky is truly the limit with this name generator, so when you have to name that random garbage man, mailman, waitress, orc, robot, demigod, pet, Civil War soldier, or Celtic warrior — look no further than Fantasy Name Generators.

Chapter 9: People From Your Life

Sometimes you want your character names to be a little more personal. Writers often write not just what they know — but who they know as well. Whether it's a fictional story, autobiographical, or just a story that has strings from your life woven into the fabric of the screenplay, pilot, or novel — you can find great names all around you.

You can pay homage to a friend, family member, or relative by using their name for a variety of reasons and inspirations.

Maybe a character you've written was inspired by that strange kid from high school.

Maybe that bully character was inspired by a bully from your youth.

Maybe you had a coach whose words resonated with you enough to inspire a similar fictional character.

Whatever the reason, some simple but perfect choices are easier to find than you'd think. While you want to avoid using full names — especially if the characters you write aren't particularly flattering — staying close to home in your search is a good compass.

Chapter 10: Unique Resources to Find Names

Sometimes you have to think out of the box to conjure strong — or at least suitable — character names.

Phone Books and Cemeteries

They may not really make phone books anymore, but if you can find them, they are a resource with endless possibilities as you mix and match first names with last names.

Cemeteries may seem like a dark and macabre place to look, but many writers have found their best names on tombstones. They range from simple to unique and are just a few minutes away as you walk, bike, or drive through your town or city. And sometimes it can feel like you're honoring those who have passed.

Famous and Iconic Name Hybrids

Looking to find a strong name that resonates? Why not Cormac Faulkner or William McCarthy, Virginia Austen or Jane Woolf, Neil Lewis or C.S. Gaiman, Bram Carroll or Lewis Stoker, Stephen Steinbeck or John King?

You can choose famous authors like the above examples, or use other notable figures from history, cinema, pop culture, sports, and entertainment. You can match traits and themes found in those famous names and combine them with others to create the perfect hybrid.

Baby Name Websites

Anyone that has had a baby in the digital age has visited a baby name website. It's amazing to see the endless types of names and spelling variations that are out there.

A simple Google search for "baby names" will take you to endless possibilities. Perhaps the most interesting tool is provided by the U.S. Government — the [Social Security Baby Names Background Information](#) page. All names are from Social Security card applications for births that occurred in the United States after 1879. You can search for the most popular names from any decade from that point to the present, which would be an excellent tool for those writers that are writing period pieces.

This website lists popular baby names by Decade, U.S. states, and U.S. Territories. You can look up the 1930s and discover that the most popular name for a boy was Robert,

while Mary was the most popular girl's name. You can then jump ahead fifty years to the 1980s and see that Michael and Jessica were the most popular names during that time period.

To be able to search per decade also means that you can represent the era in which your period script takes place correctly — at least going into the 19th century and beyond.

Chapter 11: Search for Meaning

When you inject the themes and traits of your characters into the search for their names, you are going the extra mile as a writer. They often play like cool little Easter eggs within your script — even if you're the only one that knows about them.

Meaning-of-Names.com is one of the best destinations to find meanings behind both first and last names. The best feature is where you can search for names based on certain keywords or themes.

If your character represents strength, you can choose from six pages of names that represent that trait — from multiple countries in both genders.

If you are looking for a unique villain name — one that represents evil — you can find names like Keres (Greece), Ubel (Germany), Div (India), and many others.

You can then click on the names offered and be taken to a description and origin page that details the history behind each name — and even dictates what gender is usually associated with that name as well.

Chapter 12: 7 Ways Screenwriters Can Naturally Introduce Character Names

"What are the best ways to introduce character names to the audience?"

It may be a simple question, but it's a difficult script problem to tackle.

Character name introductions in screenplays — and the eventually produced movies — often come off as forced and unnatural.

1. Introduce Names Through a Group Conversation

Two people having a conversation know each other — or at least have gone through the introductions that would dictate a name drop (and if not, well, there's a simple way to introduce the names). Thus it would come off as very unnatural for them to refer to each other by name. However, when more than two people are talking, in the real world they will say a character's name to differentiate who they are talking to.

Patrick (Christian Bale) in **American Psycho** offers a simple example while speaking in a group. ***"So we know what Lewis thinks on the subject. What about you Donald?"***

2. Show Names on Physical Objects

Screenwriters can use name tags, nameplates on desks and office doors, business cards, and any other number of items to easily introduce a character's name to the audience.

This practice can often come off as a bit too forced, so the best way to avoid that in this scenario is to be creative. Perhaps showcase computer readouts, mugshots, signatures, or whatever else gets the job done.

3. Announcements

Character names can be introduced based on their situations and settings. If a character is in a waiting room, a receptionist can call their name out. If a student is sitting in class, their name could be called through the speaker. If a character is waiting for coffee, a barista can call out the name that was placed on their order.

And to be creative, screenwriters can have fun with these moments by utilizing

mispronunciations.

Imagine a scene where a barista has made a coffee and calls out the name written on the cup.

"Kirstin?"

A woman walks up and accepts the coffee while quipping, *"It's Kristen."*

4. Answering the Phone

This is a simple yet effective way that is natural to the real world. If a character is in their office, they may answer the phone naturally by saying their name.

In an episode of The Office, Michael Scott (Steve Carell) answers the phone by saying, *"Michael Scott."*

Or you can take it a step further and have a receptionist or assistant answer the phone for them before transferring the call. Characters that are detectives or federal agents may answer their phones with just their last names or their rank and last name. Either way, there are many variances to use phone answering as an option.

5. Characters Referring to Others

If we stay with the office setting, the script may showcase two co-workers talking about a nearby manager or co-worker.

"What's going on with Dwight?"

Screenwriters can also work with transitions. If two characters are talking about another character not present in the scene, the very next scene could focus on that character being talked about, thus the name is implied.

6. Don't Mention the Character Name at All

Believe it or not, there are many iconic movie characters that are never mentioned by name. Marilyn Monroe's character in *The Seven Year Itch* (The Girl), Ryan Gosling's character in *Drive* (The Driver), Clint Eastwood's character in the *Man With No Name* trilogy of spaghetti westerns, Edward Norton's character in *Fight Club* (The Narrator), Viggo Mortensen's character in *The Road* (Man), and ten of the angry men in *12 Angry Men* are just a few characters whose names are never mentioned.

The story and setting will usually dictate whether or not a character name needs to be introduced, but it's usually best that they are.

7. Listen to How People Say Names in the Real World

As you go through your daily routine, listen for times when people say their names or you learn somebody's name in a natural way. Make note of it. It may inform you of additional ways to get that character name out there in your script.

Overall, as with any writing, be creative. Always look for unique ways to tackle otherwise simple problems. And when in doubt, just keep it simple. And natural.

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