**Outlining Your Script or Story Outline**

I continue to be amazed by the number of screenwriters and working, published novelists I meet who do NOT outline. And at the risk (one from which I have rarely shied) of coming off as a smartass -- they are wrong.

I hasten to point out that they are not necessarily bad writers. Some great writers work that way (on a tightrope, without a net). What I am suggesting -- and this is both arguable and unprovable -- is that their work -- their end product -- would probably be even better if they had outlined.

My next argument, however, is almost inarguable: writing a long, complex piece, such as a novel or screenplay from an outline will make the entire process easier, less angst-ridden, and -- except for those of you with masochistic tendencies -- far more pleasurable and satisfying. And, as with the Great Ones, your finished story will be better.

~~ What is a Story Outline and How Does it Differ From a Synopsis or a Treatment?

A synopsis is generally defined as a one-to-four page narrative description of what happens in your story, told with some sizzle, since it will likely be used as a selling tool -- to entice an agent, publisher or producer to take a look at your manuscript.

A film treatment used to consist of 20 to 40 or more pages of narrative. That seems to have changed. In Hollywood, where it is rumored that few people will (or can) read, and even fewer have attention spans longer than five minutes, treatments have become so brief that the line between them and synopses is blurred. I have had producers caution me that anything longer than four pages is death. Even for the purposes of selling the screen rights to a novel.

An outline is a different animal. As mentioned above, it's a scene-by-scene breakdown (continuity) of your story, written (basically) in narrative form. The length and amount of detail can vary, and style need not be a concern unless you plan to show it to others who might not get it. For TV and film scripts that are written on assignment (rather than on spec), the outline will invariably be read by producers and often by non-writers, such as studio or network executives, and should, therefore, be written with such exposure in mind. But if your outline is for your eyes only, the writing can be sketchier.

Because of my background in TV and my own comfort level, spec or not, I still write my outlines in some detail. The outline for my novel, The Sixteenth Man, was 112 pages. Thus, for me, the outline for each scene of a movie or TV script might run a half a page to a page, double (or 1.5) spaced.

~~ What Does a Story Outline Look Like?

Outlining can be rather daunting and, for those unfamiliar with the process, it may be difficult to imagine the form -- not that there is a single, rigid style. To acquire a self-created example, I suggest that you try a technique I've found both enlightening about the form and instructional about writing -- a method by which you can learn how good stories (and those not-so-good) are constructed. Even experienced writers, including professionals, may find it to be a few well-spent hours.

Rent or buy or borrow a videotape or DVD or other type of recording of one of your favorite movies or shows or miniseries (or one that is not a favorite, but was nonetheless an artistic or commercial success). View the first scene, punch Pause and write three or four or five lines about what the scene was about. Then run the second scene, and repeat the process -- and so on and so on. It will take a while, but by the time you're through, you will have an outline. You'll see what it looks like, know how it's supposed to read.

But more than that, you will have learned. A lot. You'll see what the writer was doing -- understand it on a fresh level. Which can be a revelation.

~~ One More Plea (But Not the Last) On Behalf of Outlining or How the Drudgery of Writing Your Outline Will Turn Into Pleasure

While the high-wire act of writing a novel, play or screenplay without knowing your characters or where they -- or your story -- are going may be exhilarating, it can -- and often does -- result in the unfinished-manuscript-in-the-desk-drawer syndrome, with its accompanying discouragement and depression.

I don't know about you, but I am not into that type of risk of my time and efforts, nor do I recommend it for others.

Working from an outline will make you a better writer in a hurry.

Yes, I've heard the argument that -- having outlined -- the actual writing process then becomes one of filling in the blanks. And the one about how the author sacrifices spontaneity. Or the potential for inspiration.

Nonsense.

Did the great painters not work from sketches? Does anyone suppose Beethoven composed his Ninth Symphony without having a pretty solid idea of where he was going?

As mentioned, building your story in this way will give you control over your writing. You'll see the things that are working, and the things that aren't. The unities -- and the disunities. The flow. The repetitions. It is a lot easier to fix a story at the outline stage than it is after you've written -- and sweated -- 80,000 words, and find that on some intrinsic level it doesn't work. Or that you don't need that chapter, or this character. Or that you've gone off in a direction that works against your narrative.

Or, worst-case, once you start making changes -- the entire structure begins to collapse.

In TV, we call that kind of after-the-fact phenomenon pulling threads. A most-disheartening experience for a writer.

By outlining, you can avoid such disasters. Your outline is where you construct -- and more easily deconstruct and/or reconstruct -- your story.

Whether you work with file cards on a bulletin-board, or a computer program, or scribble on a legal pad, your outline will, for instance, enable you to look critically at each scene, each situation, to judge how it fits into the whole of your story -- the dynamic. You'll see how you've paced your story. Where it sags, where it needs help. You'll make discoveries about your characters. It will help you maintain balance -- and that so necessary objectivity, or distance. If there isn't enough edge or angst or heat inherent in a scene or a setup or a chapter, you'll have a far better chance of recognizing it, being able to fix it, adding to your mix. If consecutive scenes are too much alike -- or too jarringly different -- you'll see it. Is this scene too long, that one too short? Is there enough incident -- stuff happening -- or too much? Are you maintaining your desired focus? Is there a hole in your plot? Is your story entertaining enough, compelling enough?

I'm convinced that with few exceptions, whatever reasons a writer gives for working without the net provided by an outline, what it really means is 'I'm too lazy to work the kinks out of my story ahead of time.'

Can successful novels, plays and movies be written that way? Sure. It's your call. But know this:

Outlining will help you and your writing -- and it can save you from disaster. Viewing it another way -- do you want to win -- or lose? Are you willing to gamble your time on another uncompleted project? I'm not. In my own writing, assuming my story idea survives the outline stage, I finish what I start.