

LA SCREENWRITER

Producing Your Own Script for Novices



*Today's guest post is written by Vanessa Frank, the presenter of **Film Funding from A-Z**, an on-demand course which teaches film finance to independent filmmakers.*

by Vanessa Frank

Hollywood is full of anecdotes about screenwriters who got their big break after putting their script into production themselves. Whether you're fed up over dealing with apathetic prospective producers or you're just a "roll up your sleeves" kind of a person, there are certainly excellent reasons for taking a more proactive role when it comes to getting your film into production.

However, Hollywood is equally rife with stories of writers who have failed spectacularly at producing their own work. A writer can face considerable public embarrassment when a crowdfunding campaign is a failure, or when they're subjected to yet another year of awkward conversations around the Thanksgiving table when success fails to materialize. Worst case scenario, a lack of understanding of the legal, fiscal, and union regulations surrounding film production can land you in the midst of a lawsuit.

So what do you do if you have lots of willpower but don't yet have experience?

Well, the first big paradigm shift that you need to have is understanding that a film production is essentially a small business. As a writer, you are primed to view filmmaking as art. However, once you step into the shoes of a producer, you need to start seeing filmmaking first and foremost as a legal and fiscal structure.

That's certainly not a very sexy or creatively rewarding way of perceiving a production. But this is the essence of what a producer's role entails.

The vast majority of what a producer does on a daily basis involves overseeing the minutia of financial and legal requirements. This is often an

agonizingly analytical and bureaucratic process which has very little to do with subjective emotions, personal preferences, or art.

So if you're going to genuinely succeed in producing your own script, you need to make this fundamental psychological leap. You must be uncompromising in your adherence to the responsibilities that investors, distributors, and the completion bond company will be holding you accountable for.

That said, for many writers the issue isn't a lack of willingness to undertake this laborious process, but rather a lack of knowledge of how to go about it.

For such individuals, I highly recommend investing heavily in quality books on the subject of film producing and attending, for example, a university extension class or short course on film producing. Shadowing a film producer by acting as an unpaid intern can also provide invaluable experience when it comes to the myriad of challenges that one faces in practice as a producer.



As you can probably tell from that list of recommended activities, this educative process isn't swift. But if you're serious about the responsibilities that being a producer entails, then you won't cut corners on this essential learning process! If this is the direction that you genuinely see your career heading in, then I highly recommend thinking in terms of years, not months.

If such an investment of time and money isn't something that you're willing to accept, then ultimately producing your own script clearly isn't something that you're ready to take the adequate level of responsibility for. It's important to truly count the cost of such an exercise and be very honest with yourself about whether this is a price that you're actually willing to pay.

Another option is to hire a consultant to walk this path alongside you. If you are someone who is highly coachable and committed to diligently following directions over a sustained amount of time, then this can provide the kind of support that you need.

That said, you should expect to pay top dollar for this kind of consultancy. Anyone who has the expertise to be of real value merits a significant financial investment. And as film development can easily take one to three years, you need to be prepared to continue making this investment over a considerable amount of time.

Furthermore, please be aware that you should be extremely discerning about who you engage in such a role. The film industry is unregulated, so just because someone presents themselves as a consultant doesn't mean that they have the expertise, the experience, or the knowledge to be of real value to you. Identifying the right consultant for your project requires an ability to look beyond hype and to really weigh the results of that person's past experience.

The independent film industry sadly has a cottage industry of such "experts" who prey on writers who are looking to produce their own script. So do your homework! Don't hire someone just because they spoke at a

conference or are good at creating hype. Really look at the value of past roles they've held as an executive or producer and the metrics of what they achieved in those roles.

Additionally, you will need to be prepared to invest heavily into the cost of film development. Though it's possible that you may be able to share some of this expense by finding an investor or a co-producer, ultimately this is going to require a significant financial investment from you. And if your reason for wanting to produce your own script is a desire for creative control, then having other producers and/or development investors may not be amenable to you. Either way, like with any small business, investing in the start-up expenses of this enterprise is a normal part of your responsibilities.

So if you aren't in a position to part with thousands of dollars, or you have a fundamental objection to making such an investment, then producing your own script isn't going to be a good fit.

But if it's something that you're willing to do, then you need to define very carefully just how much you can afford to invest and what the estimated costs will be when it comes to legal expenses, setting up an LLC, creating a budget and schedule, creating artwork, and possibly doing a PPM or meeting the requirements of pre-sales. You need to make sure that you have enough cash to get yourself through the entire development process!

Producing your own script can be an intensely rewarding experience. It can make the difference between your script sitting on a shelf indefinitely and it actually going into production. It could kick-start your career and be the break-through that you've been waiting for.

However, it is neither easy, inexpensive, nor quick. For this reason, it's important to really weigh the expense of this exercise against what you are willing and able to give. By starting the process with a very sober analysis of just how demanding an undertaking this endeavor will be, you can

exponentially increase your chances of making the right choice for your career.

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