

THE WRITE STUFF

by James Fry

(In which internationally renowned screen writer, James Fry, gives away one of his many secrets.)

I am constantly fascinated by the notion that the complex art of filmmaking begins with a simple idea. A situation, an event, a character, a gesture; whatever. Without the idea, nothing happens. No one goes to work. It is from this fickle and fertile seed that all other filmmaking activities grow.

A good idea is perhaps the hardest part of the entire process. So where do good ideas come from? A conversation?, an experience?, a newspaper? Truth is they can come from anywhere, at any time, in any form. They can slither under your door and sit quietly in the corner unnoticed, or they can sneak up behind you and whack you in the nape of the neck with a baseball bat. The thing here is to keep your eyes and ears open and take notes. I have no advice to offer concerning this truly mysterious process. This is not my secret.

My secret is to do with The Love Encyclopedia.

In September of 1993 The Love Encyclopedia was a pile of fragmented notes, half baked ideas, and a few character sketches. I had been procrastinating on where it was going when New Views '93 was announced. This is a competition funded by the N.F.B., Telefilm and B.C. Film that awards one million samolians to a first time feature film director. My shrewd partners in Blue Sky Productions, Jeff Fuhr and Lloyd Chesley, liked what they had heard about the story and decided that it was our best bet for an application. The deadline was four weeks away. All I had to do was write the screenplay.

Many books have been written on how to organize ideas into a coherent story. You can read volumes on plot structure, character development, crisis/climax points, etc. There are as many different techniques as there are writers. Go read all the books and take what works for you. I would recommend Michael Hauge for one. His system is extremely useful for getting you over the humps and figuring out what goes where and why. But his method is no secret. You can buy the book anywhere.

My secret comes into play after you've played with your 3x5 cards. Once the structure is set, and you know what a scene is supposed to achieve. Then there is only the description of action and dialogue.

There is nothing like a deadline to spur you on. So after working with Michael's plot structure analysis for a couple of weeks I went to work writing scenes. With only a few weeks to come up with a completed script, I didn't have the luxury of waiting for the muse or the indulgence of writer's block. So I sat at the computer for 7 or 8 hours a day and wrote. How did you keep going? I hear you say. Where did the ideas come from? How did you come up with all that snappy dialogue and meaningful action? Good questions.

This is what worked for me: Self Hypnosis.

The trick to writing believable scenes is to be there. Film is a visual medium and you can only describe in a screenplay what an audience will see. So when I get to a point where I don't know what a character will do or say next, I go into a hypnotic state and put myself in the scene. Then I have only to look around and describe what I see.

Hypnosis is analogous to a dream state, and like in a dream, we observe the action around us as continuous. In a dream we do not go blank and wonder what will happen next. Our subconscious does not stop to think about it. In a hypnotic state we access the subconscious directly and by doing so we bypass the self limiting and critical conscious/discursive mind with all its neurotic preoccupations and preconceptions. It'll nobble you every time. Look at most people's lives.

Hypnosis is basically relaxing to the point where we can let go of the conscious mind and let the subconscious percolate to the surface and weave its magic. This response, once learned can be accessed instantly with the use of a trigger or key word. Mine is this:
5,4,3,2,1, SLEEP.

Self hypnosis can be easily learned by anyone. You can learn it from a book or get lessons from a hypnotherapist. Lucky for me, my wife, Virginia, is a hypnotherapist. She could teach you how to do it in a couple of hours.

So there you have it. Gotta go. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ...