

THE SCREENPLAY MECHANIC

SAMPLE NOTES

TITLE: **CONFIDENTIAL**

WRITER: Confidential

SUBMITTED TO:

ANALYST:

SUBMITTED BY:

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AGENCY/COMPANY:

LOCATION: Undisclosed

FORM/LENGTH SP/118p

CIRCA: Present

DRAFT/PUBLISHER: First

GENRE: Crime Thriller

LOGLINE: When the head of a mob family is hospitalized, his daughter takes over the business and thwarts a plot by a rival mobster to steal all their money.

OVERVIEW: The basic concept of a young woman being forced to step into her mobster father's footsteps and take over his criminal activities has the potential to breathe fresh air into a genre that has become rather stagnant in recent years. Thanks to *THE SOPRANOS* and many classic mob movies, this is one of the most difficult genres to tackle because there are few ideas which haven't already been explored. Yet a female stepping into this violent, bullet-ridden man's world could be extremely interesting. Therefore, the author would be wise to re-think the narrative he's built thus far because it doesn't focus on this premise nearly as much as it should.

At present, there are many generic ideas and elements driving the narrative and the result is a story which fails to offer audiences anything they haven't seen before. Ultimately then, the writer of this material has a choice. Polish what he already has and fix the story's grammatical, structural flaws in order to deliver a somewhat formulaic mob movie. Or, rebuild this story from the ground up and center the entire narrative around the character of Catalina. Pull the audience into her life, make us empathize with her, and have some explosive fun with the first mob family to be ruled by a female.

*** Development Notes ***

THE FIRST FEW PAGES

In any screenplay, regardless of genre, the first few pages are crucial. They establish the tone of the story, set up the world we'll be residing in for the next 90 minutes or so, and introduce the characters. The reason these early pages are so vital and must accomplish their objective is because many executives will make a decision about whether to continue reading in the first 5 – 10 pages. If the author hasn't grabbed his audience on paper by page 10, the entire project could be doomed. With that in mind, the opening scenes in this screenplay need some attention.

For starters, the writer could help ease us into his "world" far more smoothly by giving us an Establishing Shot. Instead of beginning the action inside the Proccacino computer room, show us the exterior and grounds of the entire estate. As-written, we see the inside of the computer room then move into Salvatore's office, but the audience won't know where on earth they are. The slug-line or scene heading may indeed say "Proccacino Estate" but the filmgoers in the audience don't get the privilege of reading this description. All they will see is two women (Catalina and Jewels) inside a room filled with computer equipment. They could just as easily be in a bank in Sri Lanka or a warehouse in Sydney, Australia. Therefore, a brief description of the estate's exterior will serve this opening scene very well. Alternately, we could follow Catalina through the grounds and hallways of this massive estate as she makes her way to the computer room. This would easily and effectively convey to the audience where the story is taking place and just how rich the Proccacino's obviously are. On the subject of locale, what city is the movie taking place? Are we In New York or Miami? Obviously, this is vital information but if the writer offers it, this reader missed it.

On a trivial note, the "insert" shot of the computer screen should be formatted differently. Capitalize INSERT: as if it were a slug-line, then describe the actual shot itself.

The first few pages should also be very clean and efficient. That means the writer should avoid extraneous detail or description. Of course, this is rule of thumb to be followed throughout the entire screenplay but it's even more important in the early scenes. For example, in this opening computer room sequence, the author describes Jewels removing the USB drive. That's ample description, so the author needn't go on to describe how she places the cap back on it. That information is worthless and serves only to add an unnecessary sentence. Instead, the author need only write "Jewels removes the USB drive and hands it to Catalina."

Before discussing the characters in great depth, it's worth mentioning efficiency when describing them. Audiences want to picture what the characters will look like. Therefore, if the author is going to incorporate a sentence or two to paint a portrait of his main players, it's worth choosing the right description. For example, some screenwriting guides will suggest emotive, descriptive terms like "fireplug" to convey a character who is tough, stocky, and strong in a single word. That's a great idea, but don't use "fireplug" because too many would-be writers have taken these suggestions literally and now the spec world is inundated with fireplugs. Still, the lesson is a good one to learn. In the case of DEN OF INIQUITY, the author employs concise description, yet sometimes it isn't effective. For example, Jewels is described merely as a "sensual librarian paradox" but that doesn't really help us. Other descriptions are stronger, such as Christopher as "Mr. GQ" or Vincent as a "teddy bear with muscles."

Consistency in description is another rule to abide by throughout the narrative. In this opening scene, however, the author describes Catalina as being in her “30s,” then near the bottom of the page, he refers to Christopher as a man in his “thirties.” This may seem like quibbling over minor details, but executives will notice this stuff and it suggests the author, perhaps unfairly, doesn’t pay enough attention to detail.

On a broader note, this opening scene doesn’t do enough to grab our senses. A thriller like this should open with a bang and the audience should be gripped by the throat and yanked right into the narrative. If the author were to re-conceive this story, in the manner suggested later, a more compelling opening would be to see someone get murdered in the opening scene. If the author chooses to center his story more closely on Catalina becoming Salvatore’s heir, perhaps the movie could open with her brother (Salvatore’s only son) being whacked by Kaufman. This could provide the narrative’s “disruptive force” which would give Salvatore no choice other than to groom his daughter, Catalina, to take control of his empire. But even if the author chooses to go a different route, or keep the story exactly as it is, the opening scene needs to be more exciting and should appeal to our primal senses. A shocking act of violence, or something more explosive, would pique our curiosity and we would be hooked. This picture is a thriller after all, so why not get the whole story rolling with a scene which delivers precisely that... i.e. a thrill.

It goes without saying that typos should be avoided from the first page to last, but it’s even more crucial to avoid mistakes on page 1. More typos will be listed later, but the fact that there’s one in the first paragraph of the whole movie does not bode well. On page 1, it should read “progress bars scroll” not “bears.”

PREMISE AND POTENTIAL

As aforementioned, the strongest ingredient in these pages is the character of Catalina. Her role, as a woman who takes control of a mob family, is the singular element which has the potential to make this a unique and original mob movie. We’ve seen lowlifes rise up through the ranks of the mob to reach a high position of power (think SCARFACE) or the sons of mobsters stepping into the role they were born and destined for. But we’ve never seen a young woman forced to take control of her father’s criminal organization and it’s a fascinating concept. To be fair, there’s a subplot on the TV show THE SHIELD about a young Armenian woman who has to control her elderly father’s gang while he’s in the hospital. Yet this storyline isn’t really competition for this project. In fact, it’s reinforcement that it is a compelling idea.

Sadly though, Catalina isn’t given the spotlight nearly as much as she should be in these 118 pages. All too often in the narrative, as-written anyway, Catalina takes a backseat to the maneuvering of Kaufman, or the actions carried out by Christopher, Williams, Mike and Tony. Consequently, she is often reacting when she should be proactive throughout the entire movie. Catalina is the movie. Act I, Act II and Act III should tell her story. If the writer develops his narrative from the ground-up and builds the story around Catalina from beginning to end, he’ll have crafted a crime drama we’ve never seen before. This will also make her character very appealing to actresses. Imagine Angelina Jolie playing a young woman thrust into the role of, and this is certainly not a title suggestion, The Godmother. If Catalina is brought to life as a reluctant mob boss, a woman who never asked for this violent life, she could offer actors a juicy role which they might love to sink their teeth into.

Having a sexy female filling Catalina's shoes and driving the entire movie also increases the commercial appeal of the picture. Today, 18-25 year-olds would much rather see someone like Jolie carrying the narrative, rather than a young Al Pacino. Again, this aspect also tells filmgoers it has something new to offer. They aren't being offered another generic "Tony waxes Marco then Jimmy waxes Tony" mob-themed soap opera.

THE CHARACTERS

It cannot be stressed enough how valuable Catalina's character is to the success of this movie. As aforementioned, the entire narrative should center on Catalina and explore her rise to power. If the writer opts to pursue this direction, then it might be smart to structure the narrative like a biopic. Perhaps Act I could feature a montage showing Catalina's childhood, how her parents shielded her from the truth about her father's business activities. Until she was a teenager, Catalina probably thought her dad was a legitimate businessman while her brother (if there is one) is shown the ropes. Girls don't belong in the mob and that's the central theme of the movie, even in its current incarnation. But when Savlatore grows sick and his son (again, if there is one) is murdered, the only option is to allow someone outside the bloodline to rule the Proccacino empire or defy tradition and allow a woman to take the reins. If the story were executed in the manner described above, it could be a compelling and highly-entertaining picture. At present, the author takes a few steps in that direction but becomes distracted and detours into more familiar territory. The narrative veers off into Kaufman's attempts to obtain the Proccacino fortune and too many secondary characters are introduced into the mix, all of whom draw attention away from Catalina.

Another concern is that Catalina fails to evoke our sympathy. The tragedy of her wanting to live a normal life and being tugged into this world of violence would be compelling. At present, however, Catalina might as well be a man because of the manner in which the author introduces and describes her. She lacks femininity, vulnerability. She's a tomboy who will willingly murder someone if it will prove to her father's soldiers that she's got the balls to do the job. But what's missing here is any form of inner-conflict, the kind of conflict which audiences will be able to empathize with. Catalina should be a woman who never would have picked this life, yet she loves her father and the family name so when he gets sick she is determined to carry on his work. This could be strengthened by her desire for vengeance, a motive generated by the murder of her as-yet-nonexistent brother or the mother we're told died years earlier. In other words, if Kaufman murders her sibling or her mother within the narrative (not in a backstory) then Catalina will have good reason to get involved and pick up the proverbial gun. This will make it easier for us, the audience, to become emotionally invested in her plight.

On a related note, we'd like to see Catalina be a little more charming. Let's see her win over some competitors or skeptics with her charisma, humor or natural charm. At present, she tends to feel somewhat one-dimensional.

Later, towards the end of Act II, the writer introduces a romantic subplot involving Catalina and Mike. Unfortunately, this feels like an afterthought which was never properly developed. The details about their past are sketchy at best. Worse though, the weakness and vulnerability Catalina shows while alone with Mike at the estate undermines her character. Although earlier it was suggested that Catalina possess these traits, they needn't be on display for all to see. The audience should see her vulnerability behind closed doors, but the men in the story – particularly her doubters and enemies – should never see her as weak as she is in these scenes. To be specific, on p. 96, Catalina is described as “a nervous, infatuated little girl.” Alas, all the author is accomplishing here is selling-out his hero. We don't ever want to see Catalina gush over a male character like this because it makes her appear submissive. Catalina is the head of the crime family and should act, in public at least, accordingly.

On a broader character note, there are simply too many of them. Right now, the author includes Kaufman, Ramirez, Bradd, Tony, Mike, Williams, Dominick, Christopher, Vincent, Fritz, Jewels, Hamlet, George, David and a couple more. When you take into account what each character brings to the table, it feels unnecessary to have so many of them. For starters, Mike and Williams could be condensed into one character. The role of the DEA agents is to become allies with Catalina to take down Kaufman but three DEA agents only serves to muddy the waters. Therefore, the writer should take a hard look at each character and really scrutinize what they bring to the narrative. As-written, it's easy to argue that the last third of the plot is really quite muddled and confusing. Characters like Fritz simply don't have enough of a function to justify incorporating them into the narrative. Scraps and Shorty Love are two more good examples. Is the narrative stronger and more entertaining because of their presence? Could the plot function just as well without these guys? It certainly seems so. After all, the two guys Christopher kills after the car chase tell him that Dominick called in the hit but they work for Scraps. Christopher then visits Scraps, gets the same information, then murders him. So unless Scraps can provide new information, what's the point of him being in the story? He does provide a body for Christopher to squish in the car-crusher, but this story beat (the violence of which the author presumably wants to keep) could be worked into the plot some other way. At the very least, don't let the two guys name Dominick, let Scraps reveal his involvement.

AGENDAS

Frequently, various sets of characters engage in dialogue which is cryptic and gives the audience almost no information. Take the scene in Williams' backyard, for instance, when he's talking to Mike and Tony. (side note: Tony Vicante is not an Irish name). This whole sequence, in which Williams reveals that “everything is set” offers us nothing. We learn no information aside from what these guys look like. On the page, we know that William is a DEA agent because it says so in his character's introductory description. But how is the audience going to know who these people are? Visually, this scene merely shows three guys grilling in a backyard and talking about revenge. Against who? We don't know. What they're planning to actually carry out? We have no idea. The point here is that the author needs to be aware of what information is being described on the page compared to what the audience will see and/or hear.

Williams' agenda seems to be an important part of this story yet the author doesn't delve deep enough into his motivation. He has a grandchild whose parents we can only presume were

murdered by Kaufman. If that information is buried in the script somewhere, it needs to be conveyed more clearly. We can only assume this is why Williams wants his revenge. But if Kaufman killed Williams' son, his determination for legal revenge seems ill-fitting in a mob movie or at least needs more explanation.

As for Kaufman himself, his agenda is somewhat muddled too. Does he want to destroy the Proccacino family because he thinks they're working with the DEA after the failed drug deal? Or does he simply want to take them out anyway so he can get his hands on the money? Initially, he seems content with a deal that involves Salvatore yet his agenda quickly changes. Another character whose agenda is hazy is Salvatore himself. His opinion about Catalina's competence at running the family is inconsistent and he seems to flip-flop.

In summary, the narrative needs to be slightly more coherent when it comes to defining who wants what. Earlier, a suggestion was made for a central theme in this story which could work well. If Catalina is forced to take over Salvatore's mob empire, the rival families could smell blood in the water and it's up to her to defend her turf with every last soldier, bullet and blade she has at her disposal.

ACTION SEQUENCES

Another area for the writer to focus on is the action scenes. Mob movies are about two things – the politics of the crime organization and the actions it takes. There's plenty of politics, power struggles and maneuvering in this narrative. There are also a few action sequences. Sadly though, most of the action is rather underwhelming. Think of the escalator sequence in *CARLITO'S WAY*, or the toll-booth shootout in *THE GODFATHER*. These are carefully-choreographed scenes audiences remember, but this movie is lacking anything which truly sticks in the memory.

If an action sequence is going to stay with an audience long after the movie is over, then it needs to offer them something they've never seen before. Here, the writer offers a car chase and a few shootouts but the details of each sequence are familiar. The execution of the description can be rather dull and flat too. As an example, take the scene where Catalina is trapped in the restaurant and a bomb planted by Kaufman is about to go off. The whole sequence is over very quickly and Catalina makes it out alive. This robs the scene of any real suspense. Why not have the entire restaurant sealed down giving Catalina, Christopher and Vincent a minute or so of desperation as they try to smash windows, or break through drywall to escape? Or have the bomb be an incendiary device which sets the restaurant ablaze, forcing them to fight their way out of an inferno.

Alternately, look at the car chase. The cars merely drive alongside each other as the occupants trade gunfire. Choreograph a wilder, more inventive sequence which spans a couple of pages and incorporates something we've never seen. Herein lies another perfect example of Catalina not having enough to do. She fires a couple of shots out the car window, but it's really Christopher who does everything. It's also Christopher who murders Dominick and eventually kills Kaufman. This is frustrating though because it's not his movie!

PAGES NOTES

- p.1 “bars” not “bears”
- p.2 Extra space before “to cancel it” in first chunk of dialogue.
- p.3 Grammatical error. There are a few of these scattered around. At the bottom of the page, Catalina says “you have no idea of what I am capable of” and Dominick’s reply is “No you can’t.” This wording doesn’t make sense because he’s not quite answering her question, not in the correct grammatical way at least.
- p.9 Extra space “George _falls to the ground.”
- p.10 Same grammatical error as p.3, only this time when Catalina first responds to patron. Her answers feels awkward and grammatically incorrect.
- p.13 Catalina grabs “Carlos’ medallion”. We never knew Carlos is Ramirez’s first name.
- p.17 A period (.) isn’t necessary after “street” in the scene heading INT. STREET. – DAY
This scene heading is unnecessary anyway as it only features Scooter’s dialogue.
- p.18 Possessive apostrophe missing in “boats small red and green lights”
- p.20 Arguably, the sentences “Keys,” “Total,” and “Cash” are all questions and should therefore end with a question mark.
- p.27 Missing question mark. “What do I mean little girl.”
Another common error. Comma in wrong place. “Catalina gives Christopher a look but, he doesn’t acknowledge it.” Comma should come after the word “look” or not at all.
- p.28 “Caress” should read “Caresses.”
- p.35 Missing question mark. “Why don’t we work with the family.”
- p.37 “Bias” should read “Biased.”
- Scene heading missing. We move from a scene in Salvatore’s hospital room to a scene in the “lounge area” with no transition.
- “...leave his side with out a fight.” Without should be one word.
- p.38 Why are we only just learning that Williams’ first name is Kevin? Why not put it in his introductory scene like everyone else’s name?

- p.39 "...her side in an united front..." "an" should read "a"
- Logic issue. No mobster would meet with a DEA agent in a room filled with audio-video equipment. They'd insist on going somewhere else.
- p.40 Catalina should say "...now Christopher he can't be joking." Without the word joking, her response doesn't quite gel with Christopher's comment.
- p.49 Extra space in "cross- hairs."
- p.50 Another scene which is cryptic and gives us too little information. What exactly does Williams want Jim to do?
- p.52 Missing possessive apostrophe in scene heading: SENATOR PARKS OFFICE
- p.54 Poor grammar: "Stops makes a time out sign."
- Missing character name (Christopher) over dialogue.
- p.55 Insufficient scene heading: "I/E."
- p.56 Overwritten description. "Catalina glances to William's card on her desk. Catalina picks up and displays the card." At least substitute second "Catalina" for "She." Will read much better.
- p.57 Missing a "—" in scene heading between day and later. DESERT – DAY LATER
Makes it seem as if a day has passed when it's actually the same day, only later.
- p.58 "...way to hot..." Should read "too" not "to."
"Engrossed with flames." Wrong choice of word. "Engulfed" perhaps?
- p.59 "...will met at the house." Should read "meet."
- p.61 Poor grammar. "...are standing outside home."
- p.62 The word "slide" is written in the wrong font.
Hyphenate "re holsters"
"...one side if the table." Should read "of the table."
- p.63 Poor grammar. "You think who the fuck you are."
- p.65 Extra word. "Catalina she takes control..." Lose the word "she."
- p.67 Don't capitalize OKAY unless character is shouting the word.
- p.77 Should read "suspended" not "suspends."

- p.79 Extra space. “Mike _gestures...”
“Scooters hand” missing possessive apostrophe.
- p.80 “The look of recognition” should read “his look...”
- p.85 “behind” written in wrong font.
- p.95 Should read “courtesy call” not “courteous call.”
- p.96 Dialogue missing character name (and cont’d) at top of page.
- p.98 Should read “tries” not “tires.”
- p.100 Extra space. “...up at the stars , physically...”
- p.104 “Drive way” should be one word.
- p.115 “My self” should be one word.

SUMMARY

At the end of the day, there’s a spark of a cool movie in this screenplay. If the author takes the idea which is really compelling, i.e. a woman taking control of a mob family, he could have an original and highly-entertaining movie on his hands. Therefore, the writer should seriously reconsider developing this story from the ground-up while focusing almost entirely on Catalina and making her the consistent focus of the narrative. Delve deeper into her character, force the audience to empathize with her, and take us on a rollercoaster ride as she is thrust into a violent world typically populated by men and men alone. Reduce the secondary characters and make the agendas and goals of those who remain more clearly defined. Also craft some memorable and inventive action sequences which audiences will remember after the movie has finished. If the author does all of these things and polishes the flow and technical appearance of his narrative, the result might be a picture with solid potential.