



# How to Write with a Partner

*From the 70-Beat Outline to the Final Rewrites*

by Dana Weidman Dorrity

Hollywood likes writing partners. They are more fun at pitch meetings, and it's twice the number of people for the same money. Partners are also good for writing. Alone at our computers, screenwriters will often accept a scene and move to the next one, but if you're sending the scene to your partner, you'll double check, and make sure it's good. Good partners sharpen our skills and make us work harder. In comedy writing, partners laugh at our jokes. If they don't laugh, we need to come up with something funnier.

Writing with a partner can also be difficult and partnerships can destroy friendships. So it's important that you choose the right partner, ideally someone you can be honest with, but also maybe someone you're not that close to. When the project is done, you might want to walk away. If your partner is your little sister, walking away isn't an option.

## Choosing the Right Partner

We all have strengths and weaknesses as writers, negotiators, and navigators of the industry. I'm an introverted wiseass, so I try to find

partners who are friendly, outgoing, and unafraid to make contacts in the industry and pitch our project. What I can offer is a good pedigree and a strong understanding of screenplay structure. My perfect partner may not have the fancy degree but she knows people and she's worked in the industry.

As strange as this may sound, I also tend to look for partners with normal life experiences. I'm not married, never had kids, didn't date much, and never made it to the prom. I wasn't a nerd, more of an intellectual and a loner. While I was sipping wine and reading Faulkner, my ideal partner was trying out for cheerleading, playing spin the bottle, and getting her heart broken. I don't want to claim that I missed out on all the keg parties, but as far as my students need to know I was studious and aloof at least until I got to college. Good screenplay stories evolve from real experiences that we can all relate to, so for me, collaboration often means that the premise for the story comes from my partner.

## The Method

With my first writing partner, we developed a team writing method that worked well, so I want to share it with you. I'm using it again with my second partner, and it's still a good way to get to a decent first draft. Both of my partners were initially suspicious of this method, as they had their own screenwriting books and techniques. My current writing partner loves *Save the Cat*, and we use ideas from this book, but "the method" controls our overall process.

## The 70-Beat Outline

My method is based on the 70-beat outline which came from one of my AFI teachers. Syd Field has a slightly different number, but the same basic

idea. If you haven't lived in the land of screenwriting, you might not know the laws.

The first law of screenwriting is **Outline**.

A screenplay begins with an outline. My AFI teacher and I believe that the outline must include 70-beats – in other words, you need to have 70 things happen before you have enough action for a screenplay. A *beat* is an "element of action." A beat may reveal character or push the plot forward. If it does neither of these things it's not a beat. This is the difference between beats and scenes.

There might be three beats in a scene, but there should never be a scene without a single beat in it. "*Jim walks down the street*" is not a beat. It might be the way a scene starts, but in that scene, on that street, something needs to happen. "*Jim walks down the street passing store windows. As he passes the window for Schimminger's Department Store, he pauses. Inside, past the mannequins and shoppers, he sees Ginny.*" The beat is "*Jim sees Ginny at Schimminger's*." Whoever these characters are whether they are spies trading information about a nuclear attack or high school kids choosing a date for the prom, this element of action will change the direction of the story.

When you're working with a partner, you absolutely need an outline that you both follow as you write, and you need a clear goal for when the outline is done and when you're ready to write. My rule is that you're not ready to write until you have an outline with 70 Beats.

## The Big Beats

Over the years, as a screenwriting teacher, I've used McKee and Field and all the other great screenwriting teachers to come up with what I call the **Big Beats**. In the 70-Beat Outline, every tenth beat is a **Big Beat**. Nine smaller things happen then there's a major event.

*The Big Beats are:*

**(1.)The Opening:** The beat that introduces your main character, his or her central crisis or conflict and the world.

**(2.)The Inciting Incident:** The beat (page 12 in *Save the Cat*), where something critical changes in your character's world. In *Shaun of the Dead*, it's the zombies.

**(3.)Entering the Special World:** Your character has decided to take action, the second act begins, the first act ends, and there's no turning back. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, this is where the kids go through the wardrobe.

**(4.)The First Big Obstacle of the Second Act:** A battle that your character wins or loses. In this battle they make allies and enemies. In *A Knight's Tale*, this is when William wins his first joust. He makes an enemy in Count Adhemar and an ally in the king.

**(5.)The Midpoint Crisis:** Your character wants to give up and go home, they know that they can't win and that they are probably going to die in the final battle, then they realize that if they

are going to die they will go out fighting. They find their last reservoir of strength and prepare to take on the bad guy head on. This is the hotel scene in *The Gauntlet* with Clint Eastwood and Sondra Locke.

**(6.)The Supreme Ordeal:** The battle with the Death Star in *Star Wars*. It's the scene that always seems like the big ending, but it's not. It's your character's external battle.

**(7.)The Climax:** The climax is the third act of the screenplay. The climax always connects back to the first act and resolves the character's central crisis. This is your character's internal battle. In *Ray*, the climax is Ray Charles' final battle with heroine and his own demons and issues surrounding his brother's death.

## Writing

Once you and your partner agree that the outline is done, you are ready to write. In my most recent collaboration, the outline took six months of meeting once or twice a week and working out our characters and what would happen in the screenplay. After we worked out the climax and added a few ideas to the end of the second act, I said, "We're ready, let's each write 5 scenes per week, you take odds, I'll write evens, and we'll be done in 7 weeks." No matter how busy we were during the week, there was always time to write a scene. Sometimes she was ahead and I was behind, then I'd catch up and she'd get stuck, but it evened out and we were done in a month. This was during the winter, when we



were both busy with our lives and jobs, so we just cranked out the first draft.

It was rough, but it was done quickly and we had something on paper that we could read and respond to and work with.

In my first partnership, I spent one day dividing up the beats between us. I tried to give my partner the beats that she came up with and liked the most, and I kept my favorites. I made sure that of the 70 beats, we were each responsible for 35. Sometimes there are two beats in a scene and since this is a beat outline not a scene outline, those two beats would go together. By the time we started writing, my partner had landed a job as a writing assistant on a TV Show, so our face-to-face meetings were limited to the weekends. I took on the responsibility of maintaining the Final Draft copy of our screenplay with all the corrected scenes and would make sure to email it to her before our meetings. We would each write at least two scenes during the day then email them to each other. In the evening we would rewrite each other's scenes and send them back. Then on the weekends, we would sit at her dining room table with our laptops open and go through every scene, every word, every murder, until we both agreed that it worked. The first draft took about a month and a half, thirty-five writing days plus weekend meeting days.

## Revising

All writing is rewriting. And this is particularly true of co-writing. During the first draft, my partners and I are usually pretty cautious and considerate, but once the first draft is done, we gain objectivity. We can look at the scenes

## Rewriting

After the notes come in, the writers need to take time to work together again. It usually makes sense to set up the laptops and do the rewrites as a team with our readers' notes stretched out on the table in front of us. This is the time to really rethink story and "kill your darlings." In other words, this is the time when you throw out the jokes and scenes that you love, but they may not belong in the script. A real rewrite is not a polish; partners should find that at the end of this draft they are in a radically different place than where their outline originally directed them to go. The climax should shift, the point of view character might be different, the main character might be different. The outline only gets you to the end of the first draft, it doesn't define where the story will go in two or three rewrites. There is the freedom in rewriting to find out what story the characters want to tell.

This rewrite ends the partnership to a certain extent. The screenplay is now ready to go out into the world and see if there is any interest. It may be submitted to a screenwriting contest. It may go to one partner's agent. It may go to producers. Before it goes anywhere, the partners should send one copy to the Writer's Guild of America, West and register it. This means that somewhere in a vault or virtual vault our screenplay and partnership exist. If either of us wants to continue work on the project, we need to gain consent from our partner. And for this first draft or story, we will always have a shared credit, no matter how much it might change in the future.

My first partner went on to write for TV shows and has written other

screenplays. She's currently based in Vancouver and I'm back on the East Coast. Every few years, someone will read our screenplay, *Vicious Games*, and she'll call or Facebook message me and we'll respond to the notes and do some rewriting.

My current partner wants to direct, so as we complete this draft, she can now take the screenplay to producers and investors as a director and even make changes on the script as a director, and I will retain my screenwriting credit. If she actually sells the project to a producer who wants changes, I will share the responsibility to work with her to do two rewrites changing up to fifty percent of the story, which is the

standard agreement when there is a sale. Of course she won't be able to make the sale without my consent.

Partnership can be a long-term commitment. So long as your screenplay is out in the world being read and considered by producers, you have a responsibility to your partner to respond and rewrite when necessary. It can be a difficult process especially as each of you move on in your lives and take on other projects and responsibilities, but it's also a great motivating tool for writers.

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