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**I HAVE A FEW NOTES ABOUT GIVING NOTES**

Most notes come out of two scenarios: peers or students getting feedback on their work from their cohort, or a professional situation in which producers, studio executives, or streamer/network executives give paid writers their thoughts on the material. Well, maybe three, but that's between me and my wife when I do the dishes. While I can't help you with that, I hope that my advice is useful in the other two cases.

I'm using my own area of expertise - television writing - as my frame of reference. However, I strongly believe that the advice below is applicable in most situations calling for feedback on creative work. I also and always encourage you take what works for you and leave what doesn't.

Even after the rise Netflix and its ilk, CBS has remained enormously successful for one single reason: its brand identity is iron-clad. CBS is understood to be the home of *CSI* (which begat *CSI: Miami*, *CSI: New York*, *CSI: Cyber*, and the oureobourusian current reboot of *CSI*) *JAG* (which begat *NCIS*, *NCIS: Los Angeles*, *NCIS: New Orleans*, *NCIS: Hawaii*, and *NCIS: Sydney*) *FBI*, *FBI: Most Wanted*, *Criminal Minds*, *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders*, *Criminal Minds: Evolution*, as well as *The*

*Mentalist*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Equalizer*, *Navy Seals*, and *S.W.A.T.* CBS's executives are pretty much trained to know exactly what sort of programming succeeds in their network: procedurals usually centered on an idiosyncratic strong male lead espousing traditional American values of law and order and four-camera sitcoms espousing traditional gender roles - and they commission accordingly.

The job of an executive at CBS, then, is to develop scripts in accordance to the network's brand and to actively guide creators toward success in hitting the tentpole characteristics of their successful shows. The job of executives at studios hoping to sell to CBS is, similarly, to understand the needs of the network and to find creators with ideas providing just the right amount of novelty within the brand identity.

Even in the streaming era, most successful streamers follow some version of this model. It's no surprise that CBS's streaming service is anchored by red state manly-men-doing-what-manly-men-have-to-do dramas evoking traditional American values, sprinkled with a little *Star Trek* to hook in the pinkos, or that the internal structure of a colossus like Netflix is smaller semi-autonomous divisions each with a specific programming mandate: high-concept tent-pole entertainment, lower-budgeted alternative dramas, evolved big ticket network-style entertainment derived from overall deal talent like Shonda Rimes and Ryan Murphy, and so on.

I bring all this up to make a point: successful and useful professional notes are those that are given intentionally and in accordance to a prescribed set of goals. I believe that the same is true of notes given in an interpersonal or educational context.

Of course, the professional realm is no worker's paradise. It is a shibboleth among writers that all executives are obstreperous nitwits whose notes do little else than slow everyone down. This is also a profoundly stupid shibboleth that has probably strangled an untold number of potentially fruitful partnerships in the cradle.

That much said, just as in any freshman-level creative writing course, there have always been legions of poorly-trained executives operating under the delusion that good, helpful notes are about what they like and dislike in a piece of material. This

is the root cause of the great scourge of notes and feedback:  
Bullshit Amateur Dramaturgy (B.A.D.).

Just in case the name isn't a dead giveaway, the entire purpose of this essay is to stamp out as much B.A.D. in the world of notes-giving and feedback as it is possible given my meager powers. As I said before, B.A.D. is the result of the ego-centered belief that individual taste has anything to do with giving good notes to a creative person.

Is individual taste important? Of course it is, for executives, your taste is the reason you are hired: you are relied upon to bring good writers whose skills you can see, you are hired to use your taste to bring in material that works both in and of itself and within the commercial aims of the enterprise. In the interpersonal range, taste is not just why you have been asked or chosen to give notes, it is also what guides you to understand the why and how of your feedback.

Which leads to my first note about giving notes and feedback:

**YOU ARE HERE TO HELP, NOT TO BLOVIATE**  
**So think before you uncap that red pen.**

A great man, either Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius or noted psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter, once said: "Of each particular thing, ask what is it in itself? What is its nature?"

This is the first and most important question you must ask yourself after reading a piece of material for notes and feedback. Don't pick up the script with a red pen in hand and start ticking off which lines "bump you" and what character turns "makes you hate him/her." No one gives a shit and it's not helpful.

The first order of business when reading a script is to fully understand what the writer is trying to accomplish and to discern whether they accomplish it. I often ask myself this question as "does the script declare itself?"

Answering this question might require that you read a piece of material more than once. Yes, I know. You're a busy and important person with a full schedule of meetings or writing classes. Sorry, not sorry. Do you want to be good at this or just another spewer of carbon dioxide?

Good feedback consists of you putting your considerable taste and intellect to the task of helping the writer create the best possible version of the thing they have set out to make.

The sort of questions you should be asking yourself as you read a script for the first time should follow the following lines: what sort of a story is the writer telling? In what genre? Do the setting, events, and characters effectively communicate that genre? Does the script provide enough information to make its setting and characters sensical within that genre? What are the thematic concerns of the script? Do the wants and needs of the characters register within those thematic concerns? Do the twists in the story feel motivated by the wants and needs of the characters? Does the sweep of the story indicate a journey at the end of which something significant has shifted in in the characters?

That was in no way an exhaustive list, I only provide it to give an example of the immediate, view-from-10,000-feet-above features you should be trying to discern on your first read. In effect, all of these boil down to one question:

What does the writer want you to feel?

If after the first reading of a piece of material you cannot put this together, then that is your first and only note, and the entirety of the following discussion.

Let's use the example of a network executive reading a first draft of the pilot episode of a theoretical broadcast show... let's call it *LDC: LA (Lawyer Doctor Cops: Los Angeles)*. Having read the pilot, that executive should feel the inspirational and aspirational rush of seeing a brilliant investigator with doctorates in jurisprudence, medicine, and criminology being called out of a premature retirement precipitated by the tragic death of his wife at the hands of an evil criminal lawyer masquerading as a surgeon to lead a team of flawed but promising young, multi-ethnic triple doctorates in investigating a case that eventually leads him to re-discover his passion for justice and re-commit to the good fight for approximately eleven seasons and three spinoffs.

Naturally, the exaltation of the team's initial victory must also be tempered by the knowledge that the evil genius criminal lawyer

who murdered the brilliant investigator's wife is still at large and committing medical fraud.

Whether they are coming to a network procedural, a Bela Tarr film, or a Philip Glass Opera directed by Robert Wilson, audiences meet material with a narrative expectation. A procedural like *LDC: LA* might as well be American Kabuki. The forms of the genre have literally been codified and understood both by the audience and the corporate managers who commission shows for generations. The sorts of notes an executive needs to make that sort of material work are very clear.

In the absence of that clarity from a brand perspective you have to find that clarity for yourself before you start giving opinions and suggestions.

You can only give useful notes from an understanding of the writer's goal based on a considered understanding of what's on the page - combined with a judgment of whether they have fulfilled that goal. On your first read, then, it doesn't matter that you like or dislike the story, characters, and presentation, it matters whether the writer has succeeded in fulfilling the narrative expectation with which you met the script.

To put it bluntly, if you start by analyzing the why and discerning the whether, you are helping. If you start by telling the writer what you like and dislike, you are bloviating... and bloviating is one of the defining characteristics of B.A.D.

So banish the words "I like" and "I don't like" from your notes and feedback vocabulary. There's too much CO2 in the atmosphere as it is.

### **DON'T SWEAT THE LITTLE THINGS**

**No, really, don't waste your sweat.**

My first job in television was as a junior executive at NBC. I was apprenticed to a seasoned current executive to learn the hows and why of network television is made. The job of a current executive is to ensure that the show being made remains on brand with the network from episode to episode and season to season.

One of the shows in this executive's portfolio was *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Part of her job was to attend the Monday morning table reads of each new episode and give network notes.

After my very first table read, my mentor turned to me and asked if I had any notes. I opened my copy of the script to the first page, revealing enough red to fill the third act of an Eli Roth movie. Seeing this, she put a hand on my shoulder, gave me a knowing but vaguely annoyed look, and said something that changed my writing life:

"Javi. These people are professionals. If you give three good big-picture notes, you've done your job."

The reason for her admonition was this: to this day, four-camera sitcoms like *The Fresh Prince* are workshopped from Monday through Friday afternoons and shot on Friday nights. During the week, the director blocks the script like a stage play and the writers watch daily run-throughs to gauge what works and what doesn't. Their work through the week is to rewrite the scripts accordingly so that by Friday night, the actors can perform the entire thing like a stage play in front of the cameras and a live studio audience.

So while I could have given every last one of the notes I scribbled on that first page, by the time the director was done blocking the show that day and the writers had seen the first run through that afternoon, every single line on script would have probably changed. My notes would have been irrelevant, and worse, but a waste of the writers' hearing.

In short, I was about to commit some serious B.A.D.

I was also about to prove that I utterly clueless, and in doing so I would have also insulted a group of experienced professional writers, and dinged the network's credibility. Notes are diplomacy, and there is no better way to signal a studio, network, or streamer's lack of confidence in a writer than to swamp them with note after note. Similarly, there is no better way to lose friends and alienate colleagues.

By the time your big-picture advice, and that of every person doing a first read, has been put to practice, the material will most likely be so changed as to make any of your notes on things like the shape of individual scenes and lines of dialogue completely superfluous. Useful feedback, especially on a first draft, focuses on the gross anatomy: is the story clear? Do the actions of the characters support their changes throughout the story? Do the scenes operate in a credible chain-of-cause and effect so as to make the plot airtight and inevitable?

The second lesson I took from this encounter is one all writers know, yet need to have reinforced at all times. Good writing is iterative. Greatness doesn't spring fully formed from anyone's brow, it is the product of much trial and error, and rewrite after rewrite.

When you give a writer notes, you have to assume that you are one of many in an ongoing process of distillation. On every read, you should still be asking yourself the big picture/gross anatomy questions: if the script properly declares itself and you can answer those questions for yourself, then move into finer detail.

But don't sweat the little things. Trust the writer and the process to get to them when the time is right.

#### **DON'T PITCH IDEAS - ASK QUESTIONS**

**It's not your circus and they are not your monkeys.**

If you really, really want to piss off a writer, just say anything to the effect of "what if THIS happens instead of WHAT YOU WROTE?"

If you don't like a choice a writer has made, the single worst thing you can do is pitch an alternative. It's just not your job, even if you are a writer giving notes to another writer. Pitching "alts" is one of the many heads of the hydra that is B.A.D.

The divide between writers and executives is not the artificial and, sadly, much exaggerated contest of wills between smart people and stupid people (if you are a writer, you are the former and the executives are the latter, if you are an executive you are the former and the writers are the latter): what divides writers and executives is their individual agendas, which are supposed to work in tandem and cooperation. The agenda of the executive is to intelligently, and diplomatically, point out issues of branding or story integrity. The agenda of the writer is to come up with creative solutions to these issues while preserving their artistic goals.

When an executive, or a colleague, starts pitching "why don't you do THIS instead of THE THING YOU WROTE" they are failing their agenda, the collaboration, and the diplomacy.

When an executive says "why don't you do THIS instead of THE THING YOU WROTE" the writer's answer - spoken or not - is inevitably "asshole, you do ten years as an assistant to some tyrannical narcissistic showrunner while writing specs in your free time and hustling everyone you know to help you get an agent, climb the dog-eat-dog world of television staffing, walk in one or two ruinous WGA strikes while barista-ing out of town because you don't want people to know, then come to the writers room, break the story, write the outline, take the notes on the outline, write a fucking script, and then you can pitch me things to put in my script."

Writers see their job as the hard-earned privilege to say what goes and doesn't go on the page.

Executives have the hard-earned privilege and prestige of being part of an enterprise much larger than themselves, to be in a partially managerial, partly partnered role with writers creating on a world stage, and to give notes so that the product will be one of a piece with the greater realities of the corporation funding and presenting it.

If you are a colleague, your role is to use your taste and intellect and give the writer an objective opinion that will help them better realize their own hopes and dreams.

Tell a writer what to put in their script, and much like me wanting to tell the *Fresh Prince* writers every single one of my notes, you will be insulting them and revealing yourself as a dilettante. Especially if your pitch sucks - and most likely it will.

Wanna know why? If you are an executive, by the time you get any piece of material, the exact same writer to whom you are giving notes has probably spent weeks in a writers room with a LOT of very intelligent and highly-paid professional writers (call up your business affairs execs and ask what they earn, that's another privilege of yours) trying to run every possible scenario and coming up with one that works. Pitching alts is you saying you don't trust their process, which, again, blunts your ability to effect positive change in the material where it matters.

So what is the alt to pitching alts?

Think.



Don't just ask yourself what you would rather see than what you just read, ask yourself "why don't I like what I just read?" When writers get a note they dislike, or don't understand, or consider to have come from left field, they often talk about finding "the note behind the note." This means amateur-psychoanalyzing the executive to figure out why they would rather see this thing rather than that thing; what is the greater systemic flaw that this executive pitching an alt is trying to fix.

Trying to discern the "note behind the note" is a wasteful and often fruitless endeavor. Sometimes the writers figure it out, sometimes they wind up looking through tea leaves and entrails for a really long time only to find a completely wrong solution. Your job as an executive - or as a truly invested colleague - is to remove that ambiguity from the equation: to give clear and actionable advice that will actively improve the material and help the material be the most itself that it can be.

Good notes givers don't pitch alts, they ask questions about why the writers made choices. Good notes givers open spaces for the writer to think through what they have put on the page from a fresh perspective so that they themselves can come up with alternatives that reflect their own vision.

Consider the aforementioned pilot episode of *LDC: LA*. The writer has a scene where the malfeasant criminal attorney who murdered the lead investigator's wife is revealed as actively stalking the lead investigator by watching him through a series of cleverly placed closed lipstick cameras and by hacking the city's CCTV system. In the scene, the only one in the script in which the villain appears, he is shown sitting in front of a bank of monitors - a vast array of technology that glitziy illustrates his wealth, power, and reach - watching and nodding slowly.

Now imagine that you are the executive and during the notes call you say "I don't think it's scary or weird enough that he's just watching - can he be standing in front of the bank of monitors doing NAKED TAI-CHI?"

Here's what happens next. The showrunner puts the phone on mute while you keep talking and EVERYONE LAUGHS AT YOU.

Why? Well, first of all, you just pitched the opening scene of *Die Hard 2: Die Harder*. Have some dignity, man.

Yes, I have on multiple occasions seen an executive, aware or unaware that they were pitching a scene from a well-known movie, putting forth something like this as if it were their own brilliant idea for fixing a scene. The difference between a writer doing it in the writers room and being mocked for it by his fellows versus an executive is that the executive is a representative of a billion dollar conglomerate and shows of ignorance undermine the credibility of that enterprise.

In a writers room, a writer might make this mistake, or pitch the naked Tai-Chi as a "take off point." From there, however, the other writers will either reject it outright or pick up the ball and make something like it work. It is work that is not suitable for a notes session, or for an executive's frame of reference, or how they are expected to interface with writers.

Now, think about the first part of that botched note: "I don't think it's scary or weird enough." That's the real note. That's the thought you needed to develop instead of throwing out your naked Tai-Chi idea. It's not enough to find it not scary enough. You must consider why you don't find it scary enough.

Is one time enough for the audience to know who he is, and know to be scared? Has the trope of the bank of monitors been shown too many times to be effective (avoid words like "clichéd," "tropey," or "cheesy" - just out of courtesy and because you don't want to trigger the writer into going on the defensive)? Is there a way to thread a greater presence for this particular character in the main story in order to show his face more and present a greater sense of menace?

This, again, goes back to the idea of banishing the words "I like" and "I don't like" from your professional vocabulary. What's helpful is your knowing why you like and why you don't like something in the text, and thinking that through into an interesting enough question so that the writer's search for the answer yields an even better result.

It may seem, in the aggregate, that I am just a bitter old hack shouting "stay in your lane." Be that as it may, there is one final reason why staying in your lane is a good strategy. There will come a time when you do have an idea about which you feel so strongly that you will have no choice but to risk the respect of others and throw it into the shark tank.

You win the right to do that by only doing it when you absolutely have no other recourse. Prefacing your pitch with "I never do this, and I'm sure you thought of this already but..." doesn't hurt either.

What "staying in your lane" buys you is respect. Your writers will know that when you change lanes it means something, and they will listen accordingly.

And for shit's sake, never pitch naked Tai-Chi.

No one will ever do it better than *Die Hard 2: Die Harder*.

### **AVOID GIVING NOTES ON DIALOGUE**

**Yes. People really do talk that way. They're called actors.**

In the current parlance, and for the last fifteen years or so, executives giving notes will frequently stop at some piece of dialogue and say "I'm bumping on this line." This means they don't believe the line, they find the line tone deaf, or they don't think that "people talk that way."

Whenever I hear or read that statement, the answer that I shout in my head is "I don't give a fuck, do you have anything useful to tell me?"

Why? Because what do you want me to do? Sit in my office and write you a memo with ten different versions of the line so you can pick one that fits YOUR perception of how people should speak in the world I created? Fuck. You.

There are three reasons to avoid giving notes on dialogue. First, all dialogue is stylized. No writer writes "the way people talk." You know why? Because people don't talk in the service of highly crafted busts of dramatic narrative with a deliberate beginning-middle-end structure at the end of which there is a change in attitude that propels them into their next pivotal life decision.

If you wrote the way that "people talk," you would have a script in which no scenes would really come to any conclusion and 75% of the words on the page would be "uhm," "ah," "well," and "you know."

Naturalism and realism (yes, they are different things) are styles and aesthetic choices no different from Shakespeare

writing in iambic pentameter (which, by the way, was NOT the way people spoke back then). Amy Sherman Palladino, who created *Gilmore Girls* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (or Paddy Chayefsky, or David Simon, or Shonda Rimes) isn't a great writer because her work depicts the rhythms of every day speech with undying fidelity. She is a great writer because she successfully performs the trick of creating a universe in which every character speaks like an Amy Sherman-Palladino character.

When in doubt about how a line will sound, keep it to yourself. The material on which you are giving feedback takes place in a world in someone else's head where people talk like that.

Second, there are people who do indeed talk like that. They are called actors. The good ones are trained to make what's on the page come alive in practice. Actors are the reason people who have never studied Shakespeare can go watch a production of one of his plays and understand his dialogue, even though his vernacular is significantly removed from their own.

Here's a more current example. A young actor named Harrison Ford once gave a director the note that "you can type this shit, but you sure as hell can't say it."

Soon thereafter, he proceeded to sell the shit out of the following shit:

"Traveling through hyperspace ain't like dusting crops, boy! Without precise calculations we could fly right through a star or bounce too close to a supernova and that'd end your trip real quick, wouldn't it?"

That line was spoken in a little low-budget film called *Star Wars*. The reason you have heard of it is that it is the single most influential film of all time: the take-off point of a franchise that has practically become sacred scripture to four generations.

If a line of dialogue "bumps" you, ask yourself these questions: "am I a trained actor?" "Do I have experience working with trained actors either on a stage or film set?" And, most importantly, "Is my way of reading this line the only way this line could possibly be spoken?"

If you are an executive working on a show already on the air, you may also ask yourself "how many episodes have there been of *LDC*:"

LA? Is the show successful? Has the dialogue always sounded this way? What am I really trying to accomplish by giving this note?"

Some of the greatest, most profitable, and most beloved films of all time - the *Star Wars* saga, *Titanic*, the *Avatar* quartet - are all frequently lambasted for their allegedly tin-eared dialogue... but dialogue - especially on the page - is not the only thing that goes into a production. Good storytellers deliver success in spite of their deficiencies, and you need to show faith in how they do: the page is only the beginning of a long process that includes a lot of other creatives.

Whether that process is the week-long rehearsals leading to the Friday night taping for *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* or the eighty-nine years it takes to make an *Avatar* movie, part of your diplomatic mandate is to show that you can trust the process while providing the creative with actionable guidance, see the big picture, and not get hung up on the low-hanging fruit.

This is the third reason to avoid giving notes on dialogue: dialogue truly is the low-hanging fruit of notes. Dialogue in scripts, dear friends, is surrounded by this stuff called "prose" - a.k.a. the stuff you aren't reading in hopes that the dialogue alone will give you all the context to the story.

You read that right. You are hereby busted.

Look. I get it. I do it. We all do it. We are all busy and influential people. We have all this shit to read and sometimes we have to cut corners and not read EVERY LITTLE THING on the page.

The problem is that when you give note after note on dialogue, you are proving to the writer that you didn't really read the script mindfully and with an eye to their thematic and narrative goals. Excessive notes on dialogue are one of the many red banners the stampeding brigades of Bullshit Amateur Dramaturgs carry into battle. They are a way of trying to convince your audience - be that the writer or your fellow executives - that you are present, accounted for, and justifiably in their company.

I assure you, writers know better. When you reach for the low-hanging fruit in a volume disproportionate to useful actionable feedback on the story, you come across as persnickety, nitpicky, and lazy. Yes, we can tell. It makes us not want to trust you,

and it makes you part of the problem of animosity between executives and writers.

But let's say you genuinely feel justified in giving a note on a high percentage of the dialogue in a script... what exactly are you trying to accomplish? You aren't going to turn George Lucas into Aaron Sorkin this way, you're just going to annoy them and make them feel like you are trying to rewrite them. Notes don't fix a writer's fundamental talents and sensibilities. Stick to what you can fix.

Finally, no matter what happens, for no reason, and under any circumstance, **EVER READ A WRITER'S DIALOGUE BACK TO THEM.** Especially if you think that by doing so you will "prove" to the writer that their dialogue is no good.

If I have to explain this to you, you're most likely a fucking asshole and maybe you should change careers. If you do it, I hope your insurance covers treatment and rehab for compound fractures and traumatic brain injury.

Read the prose. Mind what truly matters - the sweep of the story, the integrity of the plot, the transformation of the characters - and let the process of actors acting, directors directing and writers rewriting take care of whether or not the dialogue can or can't be spoken by "people."

And if you absolutely must give a note on a line, do it knowing that the line may not be bad, you may just not be reading it right. Don't be the kind of person that, after we hang up the phones, we agree is just trying to justify their paycheck.

**ASK THE WRITER WHAT THEY NEED**

**They don't bite... mostly.**

Whenever a mentee or colleague hands me a script to read for notes, I always ask "do you want praise and congratulations, or do you want actual notes and feedback."

I ask the question in jest. Except not really.

There's this weird misconception that when a writer hands another writer a piece of material, there's a handoff and then everyone goes into a black box until the notes show up... but who's to say

the writer can't tell you where they are in the process, what sort of feedback they are looking for? They may even want notes on the dialogue, in which case have at it.

It shocks me how frequently writers just don't engage in this very useful form of pre-flighting a read, especially when reading an advanced draft.

In the professional context of television, material is delivered in steps: concept documents, outlines, writers drafts, studio drafts, network/streamer drafts, production drafts, and color revisions. This means that everyone knows implicitly where they are in the process, and what sort of notes are appropriate. It is part of the reason the system works, even in the hands of extremely dysfunctional showrunners, executives, and organizations (remember, dysfunctional is a very different state from non-functional).

A network executive getting a network draft of an episode of *LDC: LA*, doesn't have to ask a question like "hey, is this action sequence too big for your budget?" They know that by the time the script has gotten to them, there have already been multiple internal drafts read by the other writers and the production, they know that the experienced showrunner they hired has either discussed that action sequence with the line producer to see if it is feasible, or that at least, the number of panic and heart attacks experienced by the production staff upon reading the action sequence have already sent the writers the message to tone it down a little.

At the beginning of this essay, I made a big to-do about how you need to discern the script's thematic and narrative aims in order to give good notes, you do... but there's no shame in going in with a little cheat sheet either, especially if that guidance is provided by the very person who created the material.

Entertainment industry executives have that cheat sheet given to them in the form of a standardized production process, the network's mandates for their shows, the mutual goals and understandings negotiated during the development process of films and TV series, and - hopefully - the idea that everyone involved is uniting in the common goal of supporting the show's writers in creating something art-adjacent in order to reap filthy lucre.

College professors and workshop students have that cheat sheet from their own interactions with the writer, and their knowledge

of their process based on their colloquium. As an individual who has been asked for feedback, you have the right to ask all the questions outlined in the section that opened this essay and get the answers before you read so that you can judge them from a different perspective.

Whether you know what the writer is trying to accomplish or not, you will know upon reading the material whether the material declares itself upon reading. The writer can always say "I'd rather not answer that and see what you think without any spoilers," and that, in and of itself, tells you exactly what kind of feedback the writer wants.

So talk to the writer. It is one of many guardrails you have against being an avid practitioner of B.A.D. You may even be pleasantly surprised by how well we understand own needs.

#### **T.H.I.N.K.**

#### **It's not just for online bullying anymore.**

The acronym T.H.I.N.K. was developed as a tool to curb online and social media bullying. With very little deviation from their original context, these words are also an incredibly powerful tool in considering how and why give to give a writer a note.

The T stands for "True." That's the hardest one to adapt to notes giving because all art is subjective and you are reading a piece of fiction. I have already driven into the ground the admonition that like and dislike are not especially welcome in the context of feedback unless you are able to use that reaction to examine a deeper issue in the material. Applied to the T in T.H.I.N.K. then, the definition of "true" in a note - at least for me - is "is this note germane to the aims of the text or is just an expression of my like or dislike."

In a network/studio/streamer context, "is it true" means both "does this note guide the writer to turn in a script that better reflects the corporation's goals," and "does this note address a real issue within the text?" In the interpersonal or collegiate context, it is only the latter. Either way, the writer has furnished you with a piece of fiction: the content and content of that fiction is the truth you have to address in giving a note.

The H stands for "helpful." This should be self explanatory: does this note suggest or encourage an actionable solution to the



problem it points out? That's the difference between "the third act really sucks and makes me feel like nothing happened" and "the third act doesn't properly bring together all the conflicts described through the body of the story, can you come up with ways to make sure that A, B, C, and D have scenes in which the different characters finally have it out?" Opinions aren't helpful as notes: opinions should be what leads you to identify a problem and ask questions leading to a better version of the story the writer means to tell. A helpful note is one that moves the writer to solve an issue rather than be upset by a negative emotion about their work.

The I stands for "Inspiring." This one's my favorite. When you are asked for feedback, even if you are faced with a piece of material that offends your sensibilities and suffers from a complete lack of craft and talent, your acceptance of the task of notes-giving should put you in the role of enabler of dreams and cheerleader of artist, not crusher of souls.

One of my favorite signs ever put up in a television writers room read "DON'T KILL ANYONE'S INNER CHILD." Take that with you when you read a piece of material: does that mean you have to mollycoddle the writer and lie about their work? Of course not, but there's a difference between "this sucks, why did you even bother?" and "you have a lot of work to do to get where you seem to be going, here's some ideas and questions that might help."

The N stands for "is it necessary." Let me tell you a story to illustrate what that means to me. I was once faced with a showrunner who spent twenty-five minutes explaining to me how my script missed the entire point of his series, utterly failed at delivering a story that served the show's premise, and how I was rehashing a number of stories and characters that had been way more successfully executed in previous episodes.

Then he said "now let's move on to page notes."

I politely suggested that, given his rather extreme response to the big picture, the necessary course of action was to adjourn, pull the story apart in the writers room, re-conceive the episode from the ground up, and see if the premise could be salvaged from my botched execution. The showrunner went on to tell me that he wanted me to know "where my head's at" and proceeded to use the next twenty minutes dissecting the first five pages of the script as proof of my failure.

His whipping arm then grew so tired that he left the room to find an Advil and a massage gun and never came back.

You know what happened next? I pulled the story apart in the writers room, re-conceived the episode from the ground up, and examined whether the premise could be salvaged from my botched execution. A week or so later I delivered a rewrite the showrunner deemed acceptable and the episode was filmed and aired.

I was also exhausted, burned out, hated my job, and while I continued to give the show my best efforts, it was grudgingly and at a great expense of emotional capital.

If you have given a big picture note on a script it is not necessary to go through every scene and keep giving the same note in different words. Give the big picture note, use one or two scenes to illustrate your point, let the writer know that this applies to the entirety of the script, and move on. The writer needs to be informed, not beaten.

Giving and taking notes requires energy from both the person giving the notes and the person receiving them. A writer who has been subjected to an excruciation like the one I described above will leave it mentally exhausted and discouraged. "Necessary" walks hand in hand with "Inspiring."

This is the lesson I learned from my network mentor: "do your job." Your voice may be beautiful to your ear, but this is not your time. It's the writer's.

Lastly, there's the K. It stands for "kind." Does this mean you have to zip up your homespun cardigan and act like Fred Rogers? No. It means that notes are not the time to exercise your Dorothy Parker-like wit. Notes are not about you. It is incumbent on you to do unto the other writer as you would have other writers do unto you. There is not a single valid criticism, however damning, that cannot be expressed in a way that is encouraging and which expresses confidence in the other writer's ability (regardless of whether you think they have any).

In apropos of this, "brutal honesty" is a worthless and demoralizing posture that most frequently is a show of ego by the person deploying it. If you think of yourself as "brutally honest," consider how much better an artist's community you could

foster by replacing it with "helpfully honest" and "inspiringly honest." If you are an individual, meanness only dilutes your credibility and reputation, if you are an executive, it also damages the credibility and reputation of the organization you represent.

Finally, the phrase "I'm tough but fair" is the pitiful, self-serving justification of lazy assholes who can't be bothered to take the time to actually think of anything useful to say. Stop being tough but fair. Start doing your fucking job.

In short: Think.

And also T.H.I.N.K.

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Giving notes is a privilege.**

If the entertainment industry and college-level creative writing seminars have anything in common it is that they both have a richly-earned reputation for callousness and cruelty. Much of this horror expresses itself in the giving and taking of notes.

We all owe one another better. Executives and writers should be trusted partners, educators should be nurturers of students, and colleagues should offer one another support in the service of success.

A network lets you give notes to artists because, in hiring you, they have shown that they can put their trust in you to protect their brand. An educational setting lets you give notes either because you are a committed educator entrusted to turn out a class of great writers, or because you are a promising young creator worthy of mentorship and encouragement. A colleague lets you give them notes one-on-one because they trust your taste and respect your craft so much that they believe your feedback will improve this little piece of their soul they've put on the page.

These scenarios are not to be taken lightly. Being asked for notes is an invitation to creative generosity offered in the belief that what you have to contribute matters. Practicing B.A.D. is a betrayal of that trust. Notes are not a stand-up comedy performance, a demonstration of your creative superiority, or the power vested in you by the organization funding the

enterprise, or a way of asserting your own value in the company, and they are most certainly not an invitation to give that Chayefskian monologue about artistic integrity that you've had in the chamber for years.

The call to give notes is a compliment to your skills. Leave your ego at that lovely banquet, and while it feasts, set yourself to the task of humbly, thoughtfully, and kindly elevating a fellow artist, or a creative whom your organization has chosen to showcase, or a colleague whose help you may need in the future.

In any of these contexts, you need to consider the possibility that the piece of material before you - however great, mediocre, risible, or excreable you may secretly believe it to be - could connect with a significant audience and change the world. Take this work seriously, approach it unpretentiously, express it with compassion, and you may just find yourself thanked in an awards speech.