CONNECTICUT SCREENWRITERS / GROUP OPERATIONS
[revised March 2009]

THE PURPOSES OF THE CONNECTICUT SCREENWRITERS GROUP ARE...

1. To provide a nurturing and supportive cocoon for the creative process, in which Group members can feel comfortable in developing their talents and honing their screenwriting skills.

2. To give screenwriters friendly and constructive feedback on the ideas, plots, characters, structures and other elements of scripts or partial scripts that they submit for review.

3. To also give friendly and constructive feedback on submissions which are screenplay-related, such as treatments, synopses, or concept papers.

4. To provide a formal monthly group meeting for reviewing submissions, and for encouraging the cross-pollination of ideas that comes to a group from getting a variety of different individual perspectives.

INITIAL ENTRY INTO THE GROUP...

1. The Connecticut Screenwriters Group is sponsored by the West Hartford Public Library, and its monthly meetings are open to all members of the public. You do not have to be a resident of West Hartford, or even Connecticut. The Group encourages visitors and prospective members to attend a meeting or two to see if they would like to join the Group.

2. If after sitting in on at least one meeting you decide to join, phone Joe Cadieux at the West Hartford Public Library at 860-561-6998. Leave your email address and he will add you to the groupmail list (whscreenwriters@yahoogroups.com). You will then receive meeting minutes, notices of upcoming meetings and planned events, and screenplay scripts or treatments in the queue for review. You are always welcome to attend all meetings and events, but to become a full participating member of the Group and get your work reviewed, there are additional steps...

TO BECOME A FULL PARTICIPATING MEMBER OF THE GROUP...

1. Attend a minimum of three monthly meetings (they don't have to be sequential).

2. At the fourth (or subsequent) meeting attended, submit a short screenplay script or treatment (15 pages max) for review by the Group.

3. Commit to the Group your willingness to:

· Put in the time and effort to review materials in the queue for each meeting. Typically 2 to 8 hours per month is required.

· Learn the mechanics of the craft, if new to screenwriting. The focus (and value) of the Group is mainly on content; it's up to the individual to learn the form. The reference text used by the Group is David Trottier's The Screenwriter's Bible, 4th Ed.

4. After you have reviewed and commented on three submissions, you may submit your own work into the queue.

THE SUBMISSION PROCESS IS...

1. When you judge your work (script, partial script, treatment, etc) is ready for review, submit it to the moderator for the upcoming meeting (identified in the previous meeting's minutes. The minutes are posted on the Group's website (www.westhartfordwriters.org/screenwriterminutes.htm). The first script to come into the queue is the first to be reviewed, normally.

2. Once the moderator has accepted your work into the queue, send an email to the Group (whscreenwriters@yahoogroups.com) asking who wants to review it. Email your work to each respondent, to their personal email, not via the groupmail. This is for the writer's comfort and security in knowing who's got their material.

3. The moderator (for the upcoming meeting) tracks submissions into the queue and judges what can be reasonably accommodated in the meeting time available. Typically, one full script, or two partial scripts (approx 30-40 pages each), or two or three treatments.

4. The moderator advises you and the Group by email as to what will be reviewed at the upcoming meeting. Typically 2-3 weeks beforehand.

THE SCREENWRITER'S RESPONSIBILITIES ARE...

1. Submit your best work. This doesn't mean that a first draft needs to be perfect, but make sure you consider all the elements of your initial idea and present them as clearly as possible. Take the work as far as you can yourself so you can be comfortable submitting it to the review of others.

2. Submit new work, showing progression of ideas. If the Group has reviewed a first draft of one section of a script, then deliver the next section, not a rewrite of the first section. At a later meeting, submit the final rewrite of your script, all acts or sections, so that the finished draft can be reviewed in total. This is standard operating practice in most critique groups and is the preferred method for most producers who may read your work in the future and want to do a line edit. Of course, if you're having real trouble with a rewrite, or want to verify that a portion of the script works before going on with the rest of the story, by all means submit that to the Group for feedback and help.

3. In your transmittal email, if you have specific questions or hope to get specific things out of the review, state clearly what they are. This may be useful in guiding Group members to provide more focused feedback. Typically there are 3 to 5 questions that you would most like answered; some examples are provided in Addendum 1.

4. Submit your work to the queue in Microsoft Word rtf format, or in a format that can be opened by any common text processor software. Conversions of screenwriting programs like ScriptWriter or FinalDraft into rtf text may lose some of the formatting and increase the page count. That's okay, formatting is not particularly important for the purposes of this Group, so long as the flow of the story can be readily understood. Alternatively, you may submit your work as a portable document file (pdf). Some screenwriting programs have that as an output option. Free software is available to convert most documents to pdf format (see www.primopdf.com). The disadvantage of a pdf (as opposed to rtf) document is that most people don't have the capability to do an electronic markup of a pdf, which means they may have to print then mark up a paper copy.

5. Submit your work to the queue three weeks in advance of the meeting date whenever possible. It's helpful if you apply a document name in the form of Title_Author_Mo-Dy-Yr (e.g., TWilliams_StreetcarNamedDesire_4-18-06). This will avoid future confusion and help keep files straight when a follow-up portion of a script is submitted.

6. As a courtesy to any visitors or prospective new members, bring an extra paper copy of your work to the meeting if possible. Looking at hard copy helps them understand the meeting and review process, even though they're not commenting.

7. During the review of your work at the meeting, observe the zipped-lip policy as much as possible, so that the process can stay within the timeframe allocated and be fair to the other writer(s) being reviewed. That is...

Do not remark on, or respond to, any reviewer's comments, unless to answer a direct request for clarification.

Do not argue with a reviewer, or say "but that's not what I meant". Their opinion is on the work as written, as they perceive it, and should be valued for what it is. (Besides, other reviewers may fully understand what you meant.)

Remember that comments from other perspectives have such great value because they point out shortcomings or writer's blind spots. This is the point in submitting work for review -- as Bart Simpson says "no one can see his own butt". So keep a thick skin -- comments may be critical, but they're usually honest and rarely malicious.

At the end of all reviewers' comments, you may respond about any points you feel strongly should be clarified, but keep it brief.

THE MEETING PROCESS IS...

1. The Group meets monthly, typically the last Wednesday of the month, at the West Hartford Public Library Main Branch, Library Meeting Room, Lower Level, from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM. Members of the public are welcome to attend, whether or not they are residents of West Hartford or even Connecticut. Each meeting is run by a moderator, a rotating duty for which members volunteer.

2. Introductions/Announcements (15 or fewer minutes). Brief introduction of visitors, new attendees, comments on current events of interest, projects people are working on, Connecticut film-scene events, upcoming screenplay contests, comments on the state of the art (particularly good movies recently seen, trends observed in the industry), etc.

3. Group Business/Open Discussion (15 or fewer minutes). Suggestions for Group activities or things that should be considered for meeting topics, discussion and resolution of Group problems, etc.

4. Reviews (typically 90 minutes, but the moderator may elect to have discussions on other topics if the material in the queue isn't sufficient to take up the full

time). Submissions are discussed in the order received in the queue, unless the writers and moderator agree to arrange it differently. The review process runs as follows...

First, the moderator asks the writer to briefly answer four questions:

What's the logline? Express your story in one or two sentences, like a TV Guide tagline. This forces you to distill the story to its most important aspects and make the "pitch" better. It should contain the overall idea, and the main goal that you want to convey to the Group.

Why did you choose to write this story? Say why you're passionate about this story, why it's important to you, and why it will be important to others.

What's the theme? The theme is the message of the story, the lesson to be learned, what you are trying to tell us about life and the human condition.

What's the commercial genre? Western, comedy, horror, romance, etc. Who is your core audience? Art house, males, inner city, mainstream, slackers, teens, children, etc.

Then, the moderator asks the writer to briefly state the most important points they hope the Group's feedback will cover.

Finally, the moderator asks the Group if they have any brief clarifying questions for the writer before the review starts.

Each Group member electing to comment in turn offers POSITIVE COMMENTS about story first, followed by CONSTRUCTIVE CRITIQUES. See Screenplay Reviewers Responsibilities below.

Generally, the writer does not speak until all reviewers have offered their comments and critiques, except when the nature of what's being offered by a reviewer is unclear to them. This is primarily done in the interest of keeping the reviews within an allocated timeframe (in fairness to other writers being reviewed). See Screenwriters Responsibilities above.

5. Wrap-Up (last 5 minutes). The moderator states the time and place of the next meeting, and solicits a volunteer to moderate and another to provide snacks. Members of the Group frequently meet for informal social discussion at a local watering hole after the meeting.

THE SCREENPLAY REVIEWER'S RESPONSIBILITIES ARE...

1. If you ask the writer for a review copy, then review it. Give it the same careful attention you would like your own material to get.

2. Focus on substance rather than form, since that provides the most value. However, if you're doing a markup of the copy and come across errors in format, syntax, grammar or spelling, note those if you have the time -- it's helpful to the writer in polishing the work.

3. When giving notes or comments to the writer please begin with a positive comment. We are here to support each other, not tear each other down.

4. If the writer has asked you to consider specific points, try to do that. These are the points foremost on the writer's mind and we as reviewers can help by giving them our close attention. However, this should not be done to the exclusion of all else, because it might narrow the review too much. A list of useful points to consider for script evaluation is provided in Addendum 1.

5. If you feel strongly as a reviewer that there is a serious problem the writer should consider, take the time to either email them before or after the meeting directly (to their personal email, not to the yahoogroup email). You could also grab them after the meeting. Many members have shared phone numbers and have met outside of the group meetings to explore additional ideas.

6. If you just haven't had time to do an adequate review, you may pass. But keep in mind that the level of effort you put into a review will likely be reciprocated when you submit your own script to the Group for review.

7. If you can't make a meeting but still want to comment, that's perfectly fine, and is encouraged; just send the writer an email and/or a Word markup of the script (but to their personal email, not to the yahoogroup email).

8. Always, always bear in mind that creative works, particularly in their beginnings, are delicate things. They need to be nurtured and encouraged. There are positive ways to couch your comments and critiques. Useful guidelines are provided in Addendum 2.

9. If you've done a markup, or have written comments, be sure to give them to the writer after the review session. It's very helpful, in revising a script at some future point, to know exactly what a reviewer said. A writer's scribbled notes rarely catch it all.

THE MEETING MODERATOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES ARE...

1. In advance of the meeting, email any visitors/prospective new members (as identified in minutes and attendance list of the previous meeting) a copy of this document, a brief welcome and invitation to the upcoming meeting, and a copy of all items in the queue for review at the upcoming meeting. This is important because new members may not make it onto the groupmail list (assuring automatic receipt of emails and scripts and other materials) until several months after first attending.

2. In advance of the meeting, determine if any items of open discussion need some time allocated, and adjust the meeting agenda accordingly.

3. Keep the meeting on track. This includes keeping track of the critique process and watching the clock. As a courtesy to Library personnel who have to close up, the Group should begin exiting at 8:55 PM.

4. Cut down reviewer redundancy (politely) if necessary. Hearing the same point over again after it has been made once or twice slows down the process and is not particularly helpful to the writer. Reviewers can and should say simply that they agree with a previous reviewer on that point (unless there's another distinct angle to it, which of course they should share).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONGOING LEARNING...

1. The Group will take advantage of offers from guest lecturers in the screenwriting or movie business, to the degree reasonable. If a brief session is contemplated as part of a monthly meeting, the moderator for that meeting will determine how to include it on the agenda. If a longer separate session is needed, the Library representative (Joe Cadieux) must be consulted to organize it and reserve the space.

2. Members who have learned something of value about screenwriting method or technique are encouraged to share that with the Group. Brief presentations with useful handouts are encouraged; typically this can be handled in the Group Business/Open Discussion portion of a regular meeting, at the discretion of the moderator for that meeting.

ADDENDUM 1 / SPECIFIC TYPICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT SCRIPTS (adapted from Gotham Writers Workshop, with permission given for reproduction).

Characters – the people in the story

• Are the characters interesting? Sympathetic?

• Are the characters dimensional, or one-note?

• Are the characters well drawn? Are you able to "see" them?

• Is there enough character: action, dialogue, appearance, thought?

• Are the characters distinctive, different from each other?

• Does the protagonist have a strong desire?

• Does the protagonist grow or change?

Plot – the sequence of events

• Is the plot interesting? Dramatic? Is a good story being told?

• Is there enough conflict?

• Does enough "happen"?

• Is there a logical flow to the plot?

• Does the story move forward? Does the tension increase?

• Is there a strong enough climax?

• Are any parts of the plot unnecessary? Are any necessary parts missing?

• Is exposition limited, and provided effectively?

Description – the way things are described

• Are the descriptions effective?

• Is there too much or too little description?

• Do the descriptions utilize the senses? Are they specific?

• Are adjectives and adverbs overused? Are the nouns and verbs strong enough?

• How is the use of figurative language (metaphor, simile, etc.)?

• Are cliches being used or portrayed?

Dialogue – what the characters say

• Is there too much dialogue or not enough?

• Is there enough use of "scene"?

• Does the dialogue sound natural?

• Is the dialogue rambling?

• Is the use of "stage directions" – the staging of the dialogue scenes -- minimized?

• Does the dialogue reflect the characters?

• Is the dialogue too "on the nose" – where characters always say what they mean?

Setting – the place and time

• Is the story grounded enough in place? In time?

• Is there too much or too little setting description?

• Does the setting enhance the emotion or mood of the scene?

Pacing – the manipulation of time

• Are there sections that should be cut, or moved through more quickly?

• Are there sections that should be slowed down?

• Are there too many flashbacks?

Theme – the underlying meaning

• Does there seem to be a clear point to the story?

• Is the theme too heavy-handed?

• Is the theme dramatized by the plot?

ADDENDUM 2 / Guidelines on HOW TO GIVE SCRIPT NOTES Without Discouraging the Writer (by David S. Freeman, with permission given for reproduction).

1. Remember, you have just one function: to help. Are you truly helping or hurting (i.e., unleashing misplaced cynicism at the writer)? If you remember you're there to help, a lot of potential dangers to the writer will disappear.

2. Don't just point out problems; give solutions. And give good ones, or even brilliant ones. If you can't, become a stock broker or plumber. What are you doing giving script notes?

3. Even scripts with problems take time to write. It's always good to say to the writer something like, "I see you put a lot of time into this..." before going on to other comments. Even if the script seems poorly written, it probably took the writer a lot of time and this should be acknowledged and appreciated.

4. To only find fault is to make the writer feel he or she can't do anything right. Therefore, balance your critiques with your praises. (And usually lead with the praises.)

5. Don't say "These changes won't require much work." Sometimes it's true. But just as often, you have no idea how much work might be required. Often, when the writer changes one thing in a script, he or she now has to go ahead and make changes all over the place to make that first change work.

6. When focusing on a problematic area of the script, deflect the comments (especially the negative ones), from the writer to the writing.

7. No matter how gentle you are, the writer WILL feel a little let down after your notes, because he or she almost always thinks (before showing you the script) that it's just about ready and will soon make him or her both a lot of money and the talk of Hollywood.

8. NEVER forget it's much easier to give great script notes than to write a great script. Tell this to the writer if he or she is putting you up on a pedestal. Remind the writer that his or her job is harder. Mean it, and say it so they understand that in fact this is the truth.

9. Commend the writer for having the courage to pursue art; most people aren't nearly brave enough to do so.