

10 Tips to Get Your Money's Worth from a Script Consultant

by Sheila Gallien

Writing is lonely work. And after months or even years on a project, it's easy to lose perspective. At some point, a writer needs feedback from a trusted source, either to affirm that your story is finished, or to help you find your way through to the end. If you have industry professionals in your circle of readers, you are a step ahead. But most writers, if they really want professional feedback, will need to look to a script consultant.

Using a consultant, however, can be risky. With fees ranging from \$150 to \$2500, the experience can be expensive. More importantly, it can be risky creatively. If you don't find the right match, despite everyone's best intentions, you might end up more confused than when you started.

If you are thinking about a consultant, here are some ideas to help you have the best experience possible.

1. *Be sure you're ready.*

Most consultants offer different services for different needs. Some offer feedback on treatments or outlines, when you are still fleshing out your ideas. Some offer studio-type coverage, meant to be a professional assessment of where you are now, not necessarily with suggestions for improvement. Some offer a blend. I offer something called a Snapshot Service, which is my best judgment of where your script sits in the professional spectrum, combined with story comments and questions. Almost everyone offers an in-depth consultation, which includes detailed story notes on the page, written formal notes, and often a phone consultation.

So depending on what you are looking for, you will need to assess your "readiness" differently.

My own preference is to work with the finished product, a fully executed script taken as far as the writer can take it. I usually shy away from working with outlines, or incomplete scripts. I do this because I know how hard and lonely and frustrating writing can be, and that breakthroughs often come at the lowest moments. I am also a big believer in execution as part of the value of a

screenplay, beyond just story. I like to see every aspect of the writer's talent fleshed out, and every aspect of the story explored to his or her best expression. In my experience, this leads to the very best consultation, especially if it is in-depth. We can find nuances that have not been exploited, and expose layers that are often lurking just below the surface.

On the other hand, many consultants enjoy working with an outline or treatment, trying to help you catch big story problems before you have invested so much time in them, or work through a sound structure. This process of brainstorming and collaborating can be incredibly productive and rewarding. I enjoy the creative process, and do this work occasionally, but I am not totally convinced it is the best way for a writer to go. I know in my own writing that I have found some of the best moments by accident, as the story outgrows the outline.

Other consultants like to be mentors, and be part of the ongoing process. My own process is slow and solitary, so I know this wouldn't work for me as a writer. But if you thrive on continued collaboration, this could be a great setup for you. I would only caution finding someone who absolutely respects your work and your vision, rather than someone who wants to impose his or her own. Otherwise you could end up truly lost.

Whatever your specific situation is, you need to know exactly why you are looking at a consultant. Then you can assess whether your work is ready. And I would always recommend that you take it, in whatever form you want to work, as far as you can creatively go before you send it to anyone.

2. Understand the limits of what a consultant can do.

I often get queries from people who have a "really great idea" and just want to find someone to "take it and run." If this is what you are looking for, you are not looking for a consultant. You are looking for a co-writer, or possibly someone to just take over and give you story credit. I have to say that you are probably underestimating how very hard writing is. And if consultants could wave a magic wand and turn good ideas into great screenplays, we would probably do nothing else. Good story ideas are not that rare. Good, fully-executed stories are extremely rare.

What a good consultant can do is help you identify problems with your story, help you find your way out, help you, hopefully, with moments of inspiration, and give you tools to improve your overall writing. We might be able to tell you if the scope of your story feels like a movie, or if it feels like too many movies, or if it feels like a play. I am skeptical of people who think they know what is selling, or what will sell.

We can also give you our best judgment about how close you are to where you want to be. This is of course subjective, but if you find a consultant who is experienced with produced screenplays, the assessment should be valid. There is always the matter of taste, and I will get back to that one. It does matter who you send your work to. But, a good consultant can tell you whether or not your script is at a professional level, even if they hate it.

3. *Unless you thrive on adversity, find a consultant who is known for constructive criticism.*

I have heard a few horror stories over the years about consultants who are just plain mean. Look for red flags of those who seem to enjoy making writers feel bad. There is plenty of negativity once you get through a door. I strongly advise against anyone who focuses on the negative side of the business, the act of writing, their own treatment in Hollywood, the success rate of screenplays, or general futility. That's their baggage, and you don't need it.

This does not mean to avoid "tough" consultants. Tough notes are just what you'll get in the biz and you need to know how to take them. Definitely read client testimonials and pay attention to exactly what they say. (For example, he is "tough but fair," as opposed to, "whew, that was a licking, but I guess I needed it!") Ask to see sample notes. And exchange a few emails, or have a phone conversation with a consultant to gauge their style. There is someone to fit every type of writer. I've been told that I'm tough but nurturing. I've heard that about female consultants in general, though I can't confirm it. Some people prefer a more tough love approach. Some like very theoretical, structured feedback; others respond to more intuitive notes. Make sure you interview your consultant about all of these things.

4. *Be skeptical of consultants who offer to "represent" or sell your work.*

My biggest problem with consultants who offer this service is that I don't believe them. Honestly, I just don't see many scripts that are ready for the marketplace. Almost none. And, if your script is that good, I believe with my whole being that it will find its champion, and you certainly won't need to pay someone to peddle it for you (your agent will do that, and you will get one).

I also have to tell you that a consultant's word is only worth so much. People know that we are paid to look at your work. I have my personal contacts who would believe me if I said the work was that good, and would read it. But I am skeptical about being able to run a business around it. That is more the job of a manager, agent, or producer.

5. *Find a consultant who knows what a produced script looks like, preferably as it has evolved through development.*

A consultant should know what a greenlit first draft looks like, and what a production draft looks like, and everything in between. How else can they judge at what level you are writing? I would look for someone who has been involved in development at different levels, whether through producing, or working with a studio, or working for a writer or director. Often writers have a problem in their script and say, “an actor can bring that to life” or “that’s a director decision.” The latter could be valid, especially if you are dealing with camera angles, shots, or maybe even pacing. I would not ever agree, however, that the actor should have to “bring it” to flesh out a scene. This is not my experience in professional “first drafts.” Those “first drafts” might be “fiftieth drafts” and while they may greatly change before production (or turnaround), they are intact, whole entities when they reach their first level of success.

By the same token, a draft by a professional writer on assignment can fail, and not continue in development. Seeing them fail is instructive as well. Sometimes the story turns out not to be what the studio is looking for. But even a professional and accomplished writer can miss the mark, and turn out a story that is not a movie. Having seen the kinds of problems that keep a movie from going forward can help a consultant assess whether your story has such problems.

6. *Find someone who will communicate with you and allow you to ask questions.*

Some consultants are available by email, some by phone, some not at all. Whatever form you like to communicate in, make sure your consultant can fit your needs. Also, be clear about the parameters of the communication from the beginning. With my consultations, after you receive the notes, I will email with you for as long as you like, but I am at my best in the few weeks following our consultation when the work is fresh in my mind. This works well as most writers have a flurry of questions just after, or in the week or two following their consultation. Often they feel they understood the note, then needed more clarification, or tried a suggestion and came up with a new problem. At any rate, it’s important, particularly if you have paid out for an in-depth consultation, to be able to run new ideas by the consultant.

If you are doing an in-depth consultation, I really believe in the phone conference. It allows a give and take, a brainstorming process that cannot be done any other way. In my early years, I often did conferences up to eight hours, based on the length of emergency development meetings I had been in. I have found that we

can get a lot done in two hours (a more usual meeting length), and that having a finite time helps focus both of our minds.

7. *Be clear about how they handle revisions.*

If you have a positive experience with a consultant, you may want to send them a revised draft to “sign off on” (hopefully) or to rework with new notes. Different consultants conceive of this in different ways.

Personally, I find it difficult to offer discounts on revisions. I read screenplays very slowly, and I spend at least as much time on a revision as I do an original submission. I often go back and compare notes on the two drafts afterward, adding another step to my process. What I offer are two different services, one about half the cost of the other. Often writers will begin with the in-depth consultation, and return for the snapshot, both of which are priced moderately.

Other consultants offer varying discounts on revisions. In some cases, the initial consultation might be a little pricier, but subsequent drafts are more affordable. This in no way means they are not thorough. We all have different ways of reading, just as we have different ways of writing.

One thing to watch out for is sending your revision back too soon. This is the most challenging for writers who have a little more money than they do time. It is tempting to whip through the changes and get back into collaboration—anything but face the blank page! My feeling is that you should take the same time to live with your revision as you did with your initial draft. Let it marinate. Give yourself time to make your own judgments before opening your work back up to another person.

8. *Find out who they are as a reader.*

Consider what kind of movie you have written, then ask questions of your consultant. Run your favorite movies by them, and see how they match up. I wouldn't insist on one who shares your taste entirely, but you want them to be honest and to be able to explain what they like.

Some people think about gender, but I am not a big believer in the differences in gender for a good read. I think it is less about gender, and more about taste. While I firmly believe that I can identify good writing in any genre, there are some I just don't feel expert in. I wouldn't be the right person for a horror film, for example, because I have not seen enough of them, and so many horror films reference others in the genre. I also think comedy is a special case, and that you

need to find someone who shares your sense of humor, or at the very least knows why other people laughed at Austin Powers even if they did not.

9. *Be serious about your work.*

I really believe that good consultants love writing, and are trying to help writers write great stories. For me, it is not only uninspiring but a little offensive to hear from a client that they are just trying to hack out an idea and sell it. As I said earlier, “ideas” are a dime a dozen. Staffs of underlings at agencies and production companies scour books, newspapers, the internet, their families, searching out ideas every day. An idea ultimately means nothing without execution. I would be wary of anyone who says they can help you shape an idea quickly, and make it “marketable.” I just don’t believe it can be done.

That said, not everyone can be a great writer. Some people want to pursue their vision as far as they can, even if it is just for them. I can only say that if the agony of searching and writing does not bring you joy, then this is a painful path to pursue. Most of screenwriting is failure and disappointment, regrouping, and going at it again. It’s a cliché, but it really is the process. You need to have a burning desire to fulfill your vision.

As a consultant, I will give your work the same focus whether you are an Academy Award winner or a first time writer. I may be the first gatekeeper you encounter, so you should use this opportunity fully. Make sure you prepare your script as you would for an agent, or a studio head. Proofread it carefully. Format it correctly. Take this chance to look like the professional you aspire to be.

And once you send it off, be ready to accept constructive criticism, and to work hard in the process. This is your chance to have an experienced reader completely inside your story, talking about your characters, your structure, your ideas, your cuts. You may not have this kind of focus on your work again until someone wants to make it. And you may never have someone helping you find your own vision.

10. *Prepare yourself creatively and emotionally for your conference or question session.*

Writing is an emotional process, and often our work is sacred. Most of us sacrifice free time, family time, sleep and other joys to get our writing done. Not to mention that often the work on the page is personal and raw. It’s important that you recognize and honor your own needs in order to make the most of your consultation.

When I first started consulting, I didn't do formal notes. I just scheduled a conference and the writer and I talked. But this was a terrible approach! The poor writer, hoping only to hear "It's brilliant! Can I send it to my agent?" instead had to recover from criticism and generate new ideas within the same phone call. I learned from my mistakes, and always give the writer time to recover before the conference.

Whether you are having a phone conference, or making a list of questions by email, be honest with yourself about how much time you need before you can discuss the notes objectively. For me, twenty-four hours is enough. By the next day, I am over my initial depression and ready to get to work. You might need longer, or you might need no time at all. The important thing is that you are in a place to get the most out of your time with the consultant.

If you are doing a phone conference, be prepared with a list of questions. In my own consults, we tend to cover "everything" by starting with the writer's concerns. This begins a dialogue and we find that we cover all of the page notes and conceptual notes in an organic way. But don't rely on the consultant to guide the conference. Conference time is for you. Notes are the work of the consultant.

In the interest of time, don't ask questions you know the answers to. If you know you don't agree with a note, and won't budge, don't go into it. If it is a real story problem, it will surface in other parts of the discussion. If it's a moment you love and you aren't letting go, you're the boss, and you will have plenty of other things to discuss.

Pay attention to the course of the discussion. In the process of explaining ideas, or searching for new ones, both you and the consultant will have stories to tell. This is part of what makes the process fun and creative. Just remember that it's your dime, and you want to stay focused on your work. Of course a good consultant will keep returning your discussion to the story, but we are only human, and we are storytellers. By all means, if the consultant waxes on, feel free to ask for extra time.

Record the conversation, or take time to pause and take notes. Nothing is worse than hanging up and forgetting that great line you came up with!

Don't be afraid to sound stupid. This is the time to bat around crazy ideas. Something might just work, or lead to a solution. But I do caution against bringing up a lot of the ideas you already discarded. Usually, there was a good reason to discard them. Instead of retelling the whole sequence you once had there, try to figure out what you were trying to accomplish with it. Then you and the consultant might come up with a fresh solution.

Never forget this is your story. If the consultant wants you to change your story into something you know it isn't, just keep guiding them back to where you want your focus. If you are to succeed as a writer, you will need to know how to create the story from start to finish. You may need help, but you don't need someone to take over.

Sheila Gallien has worked on some of the decade's top-grossing films, and developed stories and screenplays with A-list talent across the board. She can help ready your script for the professional arena.

Sheila Gallien worked for six years alongside Oscar-nominated screenwriter William Broyles, Jr. on projects including Unfaithful, Cast Away, Entrapment, and Planet of the Apes. Previously, she worked at CAA as a literary agent's assistant, and as a freelance reader. Most recently she consulted for Mr. Broyles on Shadow Divers, which was developed at Fox 2000.

Her original screenplay, Dropping In, is being produced by Susan Cartsonis (What Women Want, Where the Heart Is, Aquamarine) and her company, Storefront Pictures, and has the interest of a major star.

Sheila is repped by The Wachter, Rabineau, Sanford and Harris Literary Agency.

Sheila models her consults after years of experience in intensive script meetings with actors, directors, producers, and studio executives, while developing screenplays from inception to release.

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