

## **Action / Reaction... and the lack thereof! ... from *Your Screenplay Sucks.com!***

I make this mistake too! That's a wonderful thing about teaching... you automatically get better at writing. Good news! While your students may drive you to the looney bin, at least you get there a better writer.

Okay, this Action / Reaction. *Was ist das?*

For one thing, it's Newton's Third Law of Motion. "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." "Yeah, so?" you say. "How does that apply to *writing*? Dude's been dead, for like three hundred years. Were movies or books even invented? Duuh."

In story, something happens. That's the Action. It causes something else. Reaction.

My stomach growls... I make a sandwich.

I'm sweating... I wipe my eyes and now see the President through the telescopic sight.

I kiss a woman. She slaps me.

What's bad is when you have an Action with no Reaction. Be alert.

It can be as simple as, "What happens after someone presses a button?" If a film editor says, "Let me show you." and presses "Play"... then, the director and producer discuss the scene... We miss what they saw. Action: pressing the button. Reaction: we see the scene in the monitor.

If a stone mason is getting an EKG and the nurse rrrrips the electrodes off his chest... Action! What would you do if someone did that to you?! Don't you think there'd be a Reaction?

And forget *equal* and opposite! What works in physics stinks in drama. In fiction, an Action can have an opposite Reaction that is way, WAY, *unequal* to the Action.

Want a "F'rinstance"? N.P.

In BREAKING BAD, when Walter White is about to have surgery and is under pre-anesthesia... kinda stoned, actually, his wife asks him a simple little question... "Did you pack your cell phone?" He says, "Which one?" A tiny little answer. A tiny little Action. But hoooo boy, that Action causes a REACTION the size of the Bikini atomic bomb test. That tiny "Which one?" Action will lead to the cataclysmic Season Two finale Reaction.

Because it's good writing, Walter's Action *had a Reaction*. This doesn't always happen in early drafts.

If you introduce a character and she's got a half finished tattoo across her back... well, that's an Action. The reader takes note and waits for the explanation... a Reaction. If you don't have one, the intern / C.E. / agent / producer / studio head (if your Actions have no Reactions, *forget 'em all*) will make a little black mark by your name...

Which, trust me, you do *not* want.

If your character phones his elderly friend and gets no answer... that's an Action. Every normal human being is going to race over to her place, or call a neighbor, or the cops, but if your guy does nothing, it's going to be a bump for the reader. An Action with no Reaction.

The opposite is also true. You can have a Reaction with no Action to make it happen.

If your character badly burns herself on coffee, but you never established the coffee as scalding... that's a Reaction with no Action.

Reaction: De Angelo shouldn't say, "I desperately miss my friends from home." with no Action of his being lonely, wandering around an unfriendly city, to trigger that emotional response.

If Connie's father moves into a nursing home without the requisite arguments, anger, recrimination, agony, etc. *first...* to drive the Aged P out of his house... you have a Reaction with no Action.

In my 5 Page Script class, we do an exercise that impresses on the students, big time, that Action / Reaction is a very real problem... even in their own perfectly-honed perfect little screenplays that every student is perfectly certain is... 100% *perfect*.

Well, late in the semester, not *so* perfect. Late in the semester, they're terrified. By then they realize that the teacher's right about damn near everything and they'd better listen *good* or the movie they're about to make from that not-so-perfect script is going to be *dreck*. At best.

But I digress.

Partway through the semester, every student gets out their five page script and passes it to the writer on their left. The instructions: "Circle every action that does not have a reaction and circle every reaction without an action to cause it." They find *tons of them!* Like termites, everywhere. All around the room, students hunch over, feverishly gushing red ink all over their neighbor's pages. *Gleefully* gushing red ink! Everybody likes to crucify the other guy's work.

It's amazing. The expression on the students' faces when they get *their* script back and find out how often *they* made this simple error...

Action followed by a Reaction? Or *not*? Take a hard look at what you're writing. If you've got the nerve.