

## Curriculum Excerpts

1) Chapter 1 focuses on the random nature of Hollywood, and how nobody took the same path to success.

Choose one student to write a single paragraph that tells a story. Tell him/her that ten other students in the class will judge it. Send the writer out of the room to write their story. While the writer is gone, assign each judge a number from one to ten. That number will be the score for the writer's story, regardless of what they actually felt about the scene.

When the writer returns, have someone read the paragraph out loud. Then have each judge write his assigned score on the paper. All at once, have them hold up their score. Note the writer's reaction to seeing scores from 1 to 10 with no consensus.

The purpose of the exercise is to demonstrate how reactions to the writer's work will be arbitrary. Discuss how the students feel about being judged in this manner. How do they *feel* about not having control over how their work is judged? Could they handle this on a regular basis? Could they handle it knowing their ability to provide for themselves, and maybe their family, depends on this arbitrary behavior?

Then make the final point – because judgment is random, all writers must simply write the best work they can. That will have to suffice as being a goal in and of itself.

2) Select a show that everyone knows. Break the class into an equal number of groups with equal number of writers. Over whatever period of time you wish, have one person write a scene for the show that is 4 pages long.

Then hand that scene off to the next member of the group, who must cut the scene down to 3 pages.

The third group member will rewrite the scene to increase the dramatic conflict *without increasing page length*.

Then the last member of the group will do a dialogue polish, which is defined as follows: "to change the dialogue in any way to improve the scene".

Then hand the scene back to each member of the group to analyze. How did it change? Did the dramatic conflict become stronger or weaker? What about character development? Does it still reflect the original writer's intent?

3) Watch *Homicide – "Colors"*. Identify what each character wants in terms of the entire episode. Then identify what each character wants in various scenes. Have the students analyze how the goal of the character for each scene somehow serves their overall goal for the episode.

The lesson is that writing is a lot easier when characters have defined goals – both for the entire episode, and for each scene and each beat during the episode. If a scene feels boring or flat, it's probably because a character lacks a goal or is not actively pursuing it.

4) Watch *Deadwood – A Two-Headed Beast*. What is the theme of the episode? Does the title offer any clues? [Hint: The title refers to the mythological Chimera, and can also refer to a foolish fantasy. What foolish fantasies are at play in this episode?] Tell the students that Milch's overarching theme for the series was "how societies are formed". How does the theme of this episode play into the series' overarching theme? Then break the episode into scenes. How does each scene advance the theme?

5) Have each student discuss the most meaningful or inspirational movie or television show. Why do they hold it in such high esteem? What moved them about it? Why was it inspiring? What did they take away from it?

The lesson is to remind students of their inspiration, of the creative goals they aspire to, and to open a dialogue about how they think they can achieve them. This lesson is often best used about halfway through the course, when people may be discouraged, or after everyone has finished a presentation of their work.

6) Read Lynch's *Catching the Big Fish*. Discuss the role of spirituality – not necessarily God – in the creative process. Where does creativity come from? When you are writing, do you notice that you are immersed in the scene and not attuned to the outside world? This state, which I call the Zone, is the state of nirvana for writers. Have people share what they do to get into the Zone.

7) Watch *Twin Peaks – "Lonely Souls"*. How does the episode reflect what Lynch discusses in his book?

8) Goldberg's book *Writing Down the Bones* discusses the importance of listening. Have each student come back to the next class with the following assignment: Sit in a café or coffeehouse or restaurant and try to eavesdrop on a conversation. Sit as close as possible so as to hear as much as possible. Try to identify the nature of the relationship; what they are talking about; and what each person wants. Every conversation has a reason for existing because each person in the conversation has a goal. Identify those goals.

Pay attention to speech pattern. Pay attention to what the subtext of the conversation is. Does someone want to be heard and the other want to show they are listening? Is one person trying to impress the other? Is one trying to elicit sympathy for the other? Most importantly, notice if each person is truly listening to the other, or do they say something like, "That's interesting. Now let me tell you about me". Then have each student boil the scene down to 2 or 3 script pages.

The lesson is about observation, and that writing a scene is often just a distilled version of conversations we hear every day. Everyone has a goal in real life.