

This first draft of the Cowrite project is far better than it has any right to be. Despite being crafted by so many different writers, the story manages to stay on target and provide an exciting narrative. The plot is quite engaging, the characters distinct, and the tone generally consistent. Most importantly, the script has plenty of raw material from which to sculpt an even more satisfying, more marketable and tighter screenplay.

That is not to deny that the script as it stands has some serious flaws alongside its strengths. The plot severely tests the limits of both genre and reality. Some characters behave inexplicably, while others seem incidental and purposeless. The story never truly settles on a single target audience, at one moment seeming like a PG-13 teen comedy and at another like a family movie. Some of these flaws can be easily fixed by a simple polish and dialogue pass. Others are more serious; my notes will address these issues and suggest ways to resolve them.

## PLOT

The basic concept of the UCAV plans being stolen and falling into the hands of Jonas and Mr. Walters, while not groundbreaking, is a strong premise and offers plenty of grist for the story-breaking mill. I love the twist that Julian turns out to be an advanced AI—the very thing that makes the UCAV plans so dangerous—thus removing the heroes' hope for an easy resolution to their difficulties. The revelation that the Truth Camp is merely a training ground for junior-league terrorists also served as a very satisfying upset to my expectations, and Jonas' final confrontation with Cable establishes him firmly as a hero worthy of his triumph in the worlds of romance and espionage.

However, while the plot is built on a fairly solid structure, it suffers from two opposite, but not mutually exclusive, problems: lack of mystery and insufficient exposition. On the one hand, the script reveals too much too early; it does not keep the reader guessing. The early pages pose several implicit questions: Who is the MASKED SPY? What is the significance of the obsidian bar? Who is Cable Reign? What is his endgame? What is the true identity Mr. Walters? Answers to each one of these questions arrive almost immediately, leaving the reader with nothing to speculate about. While some of this information needs to come out early, so that the plot can have some framework on which to advance, much of it should remain a mystery.

For example, I feel it is a mistake to reveal too early the importance of the obsidian bar and the identity of The Masked Spy. Instead, let the first part of the movie be about Jonas and Mr. Walters attempting to uncover this information, with a major twist being their discovery that the Masked Spy is Mr. Walters' ex-wife and that she is on the run from rogue agents of our own government, protecting precious national secrets from falling into the hands of terrorists. This naturally would involve keeping secret the true identity of Cable Reign, making him thus more mysterious and terrifying.

While I am clearly suggesting some heavy rewriting of the first half of the script, this would also solve a number of character-related issues which I will address later. But before I move on to character, let me touch on the other major issue plaguing the plot of this script: insufficient exposition.

By "exposition" I do not mean the initial setup of the story. That is accomplished fairly well and does not require much change. I mean that as the story progresses, some questions are raised that should not remain unanswered, but do. For example, Helen McMann states she has "big ideas," of which "Julian is just the beginning," but she never reveals what they are. I would love to hear more about those big ideas, perhaps during the scene when Helen is taunting Ava in her cell. Perhaps she imagines herself overthrowing Cable and his Truth-camp protégés, or maybe she dreams of creating a Skynet-like supercomputer to control the world. Possibly she just wants to get rich. We need to know.

Another example of insufficient exposition comes near the end of the script, when Ava (holding a gun to Helen's head), commands Cable to "Tell them what you're really planning." What is Cable really planning? Does Ava know, or is she just making this up as she goes along? Is Cable really just using the "C.H.Y.N.E.E.S." to accomplish his own sole dictatorship of the world, or does he have some even more mysterious purpose?

There are other unanswered questions dangling from the story like out-of-reach carrots, but most of them have to do with CHARACTER. In fact, several of the problems with the plot of the script are more accurately problems with character, and I will address them along with my analysis of each of the individual characters in the story.

## JONAS

Like all the other major players in this story, Jonas is very well-drawn. His character is clearly established very early and remains consistent throughout. He embodies a wonderful dichotomy: nerdy but cocky, smart but unsophisticated, unethical but noble. His character may be the crowning achievement of this first draft of the script. The only issues I see with his character are unanswered questions. Where is Jonas' father? What is Jonas' relationship with his mother? Susannah is an unfelt presence throughout much of the script, but she only has one scene. In fact, I would almost prefer to never see her. Since Jonas' parents are such blank spots in his story, let his mother's absence remain as a symbol of how he has grown up too fast. But these are fairly minor issues. Overall, Jonas' character needs only a dialogue polish to make him nearly perfect.

## NORA

Nora has a fairly distinct, sarcastic style of speaking, but apart from that she is a little bit of a blank. Other than clearly having daddy issues (just like Jonas), there is little to identify her apart from Jonas' description of her at their first meeting (a bit of overly-precious dialogue that desperately needs to be rewritten). This isn't such a

terrible thing, as Nora reveals herself later in the story to be a strong, independent character, but her rather too prominent role in the story puts her out of her depth. And while for the most part she acts in a believable and consistent manner, her first interaction with Jonas stretches suspension of disbelief past the breaking point. What healthy, normal high-school girl finds a geeky boy photographing and spying on her and reacts with anything but revulsion? Yet Nora strikes up a casual and friendly conversation with Jonas, who can only be described at this point as a Stalker. Not believable. And while Jonas' seeming betrayal enrages and hurts her, she is easily won over by a simple apology, erasing any conflict in their relationship. What if, instead, Jonas at first repulses her, and has to prove himself to her before their relationship can really begin? Perhaps Nora gets sucked into the plot, not by her liking for Jonas, but because being seen with him has put her in danger? This early stage of Jonas and Nora's relationship is where the most work needs to be done on her character.

### FREDDIE

In addition to being a third wheel with Jonas and Nora, Freddie is a third wheel in this story. While he's a great character, consistent and entertaining, his continued presence in nearly every scene (along with Nora) gives the reader a nagging feeling that there are actually three main characters instead of one. I get the distinct impression that the writers kept having to invent things for Freddie to do instead of being able to organically work him into the story. I don't suggest that his character be cut, only diminished. Let him be the "Q" to Jonas' "Bond," a supporting character valuable to Jonas for his hacking ability and tech savvy. Freddie's absolute best scene is his one-on-one interaction with Raul, and that scene should stay. I think he should also be present when Jonas steals the Enigma machine. But many of his other scenes can be cut.

### HARRY WALTERS

I can't help feeling that poor Mr. Walters is underdeveloped. While his initial relationship with Jonas is quite intelligible, I never really got a handle on his personality or history. The setup of his having a tattoo with which he marked his trainees was never really developed, but I kept hoping it would be explained. And while he clearly starts out as a mentor of sorts to Jonas, he never gets around to any mentoring. I would like to see a period of time, during the first half of the script, when Jonas and Mr. Walters spend some one-on-one time with each other, Jonas learning from Walters the elements of espionage before being forced by Walters' absence to strike out on his own. The key obstacle to this is also a current problem with Walters' character: that is, that no one in his right mind would involve a teenager, however smart and driven, in the kind of intrigue Walters must know he is getting into. I do not believe for a second that Walters (or Ava) would allow Jonas to stick around and hear all about their plans; the knowledge would only put him at risk. The only believable way for Walters to involve Jonas in this plot is for him to be forced him into it. Instead of Raul returning for Walters the next day, he should come that night. And instead of torpedoing Walters' house (more on this when we discuss Raul's character), he should invade the house with a larger team. Jonas,

watching from his room, would rush to Walters' aid, and Walters would be forced to escape with Jonas for his own protection. This would give them some quality time together. The only challenge is to keep Jonas' character the focus, to push him to take charge of his own destiny, but I think that leaving Jonas as Walters' only ally should make that comparatively easy.

#### AVA

A fantastic character. Apart from wishing that her identity would remain secret longer, my only issue with her character is that I never got to see her really kick ass.

#### HELEN McMANN

As I said during my analysis of the plot, I think Helen's motives remain very unclear. Why is she working with Cable, and what does she hope to gain by giving Julian to him? Possibly the solution to this gap in our knowledge is simply to wait longer to reveal that she is not the ally Walters thinks her. If we don't learn that she is working for the bad guys until closer to the end of the movie, we have less time to wonder about her motivation. We can still have the scenes at her house, but instead of seeing Helen threaten Walters, the script could simply cut straight to our heroes being ambushed by the UCAV.

#### RAUL

While having a very clear image and personality, Raul makes no sense at all. Cable tells him to bring Walters in for a talk, so he sneaks into Walters' house with a murder weapon. Then Cable tells him (again) to bring Walters back alive, so he shoots a missile at his house. When confronted with a dog (in very cartoonish and out-of-place sequence), the man who was willing to blow up a house seems incapable of just shooting the animal. After that, Raul seems to vanish until the third act. This is a good thing. He needs to be less of a character; there are too many villains in this movie in the same way that there are too many heroes. And in this script he is neither one thing nor the other—neither an actual character with goals and purposes of his own, nor a mere cipher simply filling a role. He needs to be cut back to just "LEAD HENCHMAN."

#### CABLE REIGN

Cable is another character who frequently makes inexplicable decisions. Why, when apprised of Jonas, Freddie and Nora's involvement with Walters, does he merely have them followed at school instead of kidnapping them right away? Why does he continue to employ a fool like Raul? Why is he willing to fly the secret UCAV he isn't even supposed to have along a public highway, blowing up cars? I think the scene at the school needs to be cut, and Raul can easily be rewritten to not act like an idiot. Perhaps the solution to the UCAV is that Cable is getting desperate. But he does not seem like a desperate man. His character is established early on as cool and calculating. I think a better solution is to not see the UCAV in that scene. An ordinary car chase with regular guns would be just fine; the UCAV can come back into play when Jonas and his friends flee into the woods, where there is less risk of it being seen. Apart from these changes, I think the main

thing is to wrap Cable in a little more mystery (a drum I continue to beat). I especially do not think we should hear that he is planning on selling the UCAV to the Chinese. We should not know his purpose, only that he is the scary bad guy who is stealing national secrets. But when we do find out (at the end of the film) what his motivation is, it should be unambiguous. No need to leave any question about his true aims; good old-fashioned world domination is enough for me. As a bonus, keeping his purpose secret obviates the need for one of the script's greatest missteps:

#### THE C.H.Y.N.E.E.S.

What a fantastic idea, making the graduates of Truth Camp the villains, a secret society bent on world domination. But what a terrible idea, giving them this awful acronym. Let's just never mention the "Chinese," and then we don't ever have to hear about "The Company of High Yield ..." whatever.

#### TARGET AUDIENCE

As I mentioned earlier, I think the tone and target audience need to be considered in the next draft. However, for the most part this should merely involve adjustments to dialogue. The use of profanity, in particular, needs to be more consistent. As the script stands now, it mostly reads like a Family movie, but it has too much bad language to garner a PG rating. On the other hand, if a PG-13 rating is desired, much of the dialogue needs to be rewritten to remove the slightly corny, aimed-at-children feel.

The second half of the script, once the characters and plot have been put in motion, is very good. Once Jonas and his friends are truly on their own, the story really picks up and becomes very entertaining. The Spy Museum scene in particular is fantastic. Most of my notes involve the first half of the script, where I think most of the major missteps occur. As I have mentioned, I think many of the plot holes actually find their origin in character-related problems, and I think the next draft needs to carefully consider each of the main characters, their motivations and goals. Overall, this is a fun, entertaining script with a marketable concept that could appeal to a wide audience. The bones of the story are there. With a strong rewrite, this screenplay could easily provide the blueprint for an artistically and commercially successful film.