

READER'S REPORT STANDARD

-SAMPLE-

medienboard
Berlin-Brandenburg GmbH

WHY A STANDARDIZED FORMAT FOR READER'S REPORTS?

A reader's report is a vital part of the creative process in the film and television industry, essential for gauging the potential of a new script. This begins with script selection, when a diverse group of professionals need to form a sound opinion quickly, relying on reports as the basis upon which they reach decisions. Editorial offices control content and give an indication of the scripts qualitative worth. Due to the significant resources involved in the creation of feature and television films editors should be looking to make the most of their own potential.

We would therefore like to draw your attention to further opportunities for exploiting the use of reader's reports – together with a recommendation for something new and previously lacking in Germany – a '**reader's report standard**'. Since it is not at all our intention to reinvent the wheel, similarities between the **sample report** below and some forms of coverage currently in use will come as no surprise. The report standard introduced here does, however, differ in at least one respect: its form and content are not left to chance.

Applying a reader's standard would offer users – writers, commissioners and buyers alike – an assessment which, in form and content, provides reliable and optimal information about the potential of a script. Our standardized form has been developed using available expert knowledge allowing insight into the essence of a script. A detailed questionnaire imparts expertise and clarity creating a common language beneficial in the discussion and assessment of scripts. Thus our sample form is not only useful for drawing up professional reader's reports, but also for drafting **story notes**.

The introduction of a qualified standard reader's report should create opportunities for efficient communication among the various partners involved in screenwriting, production and licensing. It is important to us that all the professionals involved in finding and examining scripts are equally familiar and comfortable with external and internal editorial practices. We hope that **standardized script reading** will soon have its own place in the routine processes of production, editing and financing, and that professionally prepared reports will improve the quality of work in the screenwriting sector.

Brigitta Manthey

Ralf Ruschewitz

STORY NOTES

Following the standard reader's report you will be able to turn out detailed script coverage. You can also use the detailed questionnaire itself as orientation for drawing up **story notes** and initiate a script development process inspired by 'critical' questions. Go to the **question sheet sections A – G** in the Appendix to the sample report and use them to draw up your Notes.

HOW TO USE THE SAMPLE REPORT:

The File

This is an .rtf file and is compatible for use with all computers, including Mackintosh.

Make a Copy

Before doing anything else, save the sample reader's report as a draft (e.g. under the name "sample reader's report"). Now you can call up the original sample at any time. Save a second copy of the sample file under the name of the script to be assessed: the report can then be typed directly in this file working within the sample.

Work in the Sample

Type your own text in **all the spaces enclosed in angle brackets** on the sample. To adopt the desired formatting automatically, start your text directly after one of the opening angle brackets. Select the first word of the sample and type your own text over it. Then completely delete any instructions left in the text, including the angle brackets and any footnotes (→ select superscript footnote number and delete), until only your own text remains.

Formatting

Your text should now be in **Arial font, font size 10** (can be adjusted using → Menu: Format/ Font/ Font: "Arial" + Size: "10"); it should **not be justified** and should be formatted as follows:

On the

- **Cover page** use **single line spacing** (can be adjusted using → Menu: Format/ Paragraph/ Spacing Before + After: "0 pt" + Line spacing: "single")

and from

- **Page 2**, beginning with content, change to **line spacing 1.5** (can be adjusted using → Menu: Format/ Paragraph/ Spacing Before: "6 pt" + Spacing After: "0 pt"; Line spacing: "1.5").
- Before submitting your finished report delete all pages before the cover page (pages 1–4) and the questionnaire (pages 11–17).

You will find further instructions within the sample form.

<COMPANY LOGO/ COMPANY NAME¹>

TITLE: <TITLE²>

AUTHOR: <Name³>

Submitted by: <Name, Company⁴>

Pages: <Number of pages>

Reader: <Name>

Version dated: <Number of version, and/or> <Date>

Date: <Date>

Project status: <in development⁵>

Document: <Script, Exposé, Treatment>

Requested by: <Name, Company⁶>

GENRE: <Genre>

LOCATION + TIME: <Location and Time>

LOGLINE:

<Storyline in one sentence (2 sentences at most), including the consequences of the storyline. What is the core/heart of the story? E.g.: *“Five-year-old Anna’s career-oriented parents are taken by surprise when their only daughter is diagnosed with cancer and fight for her life with all available means until they finally learn to face up to an unavoidable fate”*. Use strong modifiers (“only” daughter) and verbs of action (“fight”, “learn”). Write the logline in the present tense. Be brief and to the point.>

BRIEF COMMENTARY:

<Your subjective overall assessment in two or three sentences, summarizing the most important qualities of the script and including particular aspects of the story – positive and negative. Formulate your overall impression.>

EVALUATION:

	excellent:	good:	moderate:	poor:
Plot:	x			
Characterization:		x.....x	
Structure:			x	
Dialogue:				x
Originality:		x		
Market potential Cinema:			x	
Video:		x		
TV:			x	

¹ ...of the client in the title. Alternatively you might just enter the title “reader’s report”. – Limit the information on this cover page so that it fits on one page.

² in capitals, bold type and font size 12.

³ If the information is not available, enter “n.a.” (not available). Where appropriate add “based on the novel (play, etc.) by N.N.” Use bold type; font size 11.

⁴ Name either the person or the company, not both. Submitted by: e.g. author, producer, agency. If you don’t know who submitted the project to your client just enter “n.a.”

⁵ options: “in development”, “revision”, “final version”

⁶ Specific *person* to receive your assessment. Use the name of the company here only if you do not know the name of the recipient within the company and the client company is not specified on the cover (cf. footnote 1).

CONCLUSION:

recommended:

consider:

not recommended:

STORY:

 X

AUTHOR:

 X

DETAILED RÉSUMÉ OF CONTENT:

< Always begin a résumé of content on page two of your report. The résumé should not exceed one page. A shorter résumé may be preferable (approx. seven sentences). You will need to restrict yourself to the **main storyline** – without minor characters. The short résumé does not give details: it presents an overview. (Agree the amount of detail required in the résumé with your client.)

Your résumé should reflect the objective content of the storyline. Outline the main story with reference to the **actions of the main protagonist** and the **changes** the protagonist and other important characters undergo – insofar as these affect the storyline. Ignore minor characters and events unless they are central to the plot. Be sure to make the relationships between the characters clear. Indicate the typical spirit and tone, **the basic atmosphere** – without details and without quoting the script if possible. Simplify the content, but without giving order to a chaotic plot, for example. Allow its disorganized structure to show in the summary. - **Do not judge!**

Divide your résumé into paragraphs for ease of reading. Start with a paragraph describing **what the story is about**, taking into account the five w's: who? what? when? where? why? Define clearly **whose story** is being told. Describe the most important relationships of the main protagonist, if relevant mention **what kind of person** the protagonist is, and comment on their background.

(If there is an introduction or short background story, you could insert this before the description of the actual storyline.) Finish your first paragraph with a brief **outline of the conflict** if possible. If the main storyline is very complex and the secondary storylines fairly distinct you could present this information in a further paragraph.

At the end of your résumé you should collect the loose ends of the plot and describe them so that the reader can understand **how** the story reaches its conclusion. It is not enough to say: "Paul was shot, the end.", or just to finish with an ellipsis.

Further:

- Do not begin your résumé with: "This is a story about...".
- Type the name of the most important characters in capitals the first time they appear (and only then) and follow it with the age of the person in parentheses. >

⁷ Fill in this box. It is already formatted as the heading for a table and automatically shows your entries on all the other pages.

<TITLE>/ edited <Date>⁷

DETAILED COMMENTARY:

<Begin another new page⁸.

In about one to 1½ pages, give your opinion on the most important aspects of the script – positive and negative. Start with a short overview of the script. Recapitulate the story and address questions of genre. Then continue with the report.

Concentrate first on the **concept** and then on its **execution**. What is your first impression of the story? What kind of film is it? Could the film be promising? Make comparisons with other films (but only those which the reader is likely to be familiar with). **Justify** your opinion in such a way that the reader can follow your arguments.

The Appendix to this editing sample format contains a **questionnaire** about the quality of the script, designed to help you structure your ‘detailed commentary’. Structure your commentary sequentially, following the rubrics on the questionnaire. The list should ensure that the most salient qualities and characteristics of the script are recognizable and delineated, as are its hidden strengths and weaknesses. Of course not all questions will be pertinent to or valuable for the description of a particular script and provide insight into its qualities. Select for discussion those questions from the list which are appropriate for the assessment of your script. Always give your opinion in answer to sections “**F Audience/ marketing and potential for commercial exploitation**” and “**G Summing-up and conclusion**”.

Try to avoid polemics or the impression of condescension in your opinion, and do not lose yourself in a welter of detail. If you experience a strong emotional reaction to the story, say so. When assessing an obviously inadequate script, emphasize any positive aspects you may find in it, even if your overall impression is negative.

Your summing-up and **conclusion** should come in the last paragraph of the report. Summarize the report you have already made clearly, concisely and convincingly, covering all the crucial positive and negative qualities of the script. If you are rejecting a script, state why clearly at the beginning of your final paragraph being sure to elaborate on the any positive points of the story or writing. Conclude with the arguments for your opinion. If you liked the script explain why the project merits following-up and what could be the outcome of pursuing it further.

The final sentence of the summing-up in your report must contain a **clear statement** of one of three possible conclusions – you recommend the script, do not recommend the script or advise further consideration of the script.

Be precise about your overall impression!

⁸ For formatting reasons use paragraph markers to start a new page, instead of a manual page break.

Do **not suggest changes** to the story! If you find an author interesting, recommend him or her – even if you do not recommend their story. Talented writers are in demand!

Structure your text clearly by use of paragraphs. Emphasize the main aspects of your report using **bold** type.

FINALLY, WITH REGARD TO BOTH THE RÉSUMÉ OF CONTENT AND COMMENTARY
REMEMBER:

Try to write clearly and concisely. Avoid fillers and modifiers such as: “somewhat”, “perhaps”, “quite”. Use the active voice. Try where possible to express only one thought per sentence. **Concentrate on what is, not what could be!** Draw up the whole report – including the résumé of content and commentary – in the present tense.>

QUESTIONNAIRE

for reference when drafting

the “Detailed Commentary” in a **reader’s report**

or drawing up **story notes**

A Theme

Definition: The theme is the basic **emotional message** of a story or its **central idea**. Both can be conveyed by the main protagonist or other narrative means, or by the attitude of the author to his or her story. In any case the theme elicits an emotional response in the reader/audience which should trigger a learning process. In the film “Titanic” (1997), for example, her love for Jack teaches Rose that love can conquer the fear of annihilation and become ‘immortal’.

1. What is really important to the central character? Do we recognize his or her deeper emotional needs and can we learn from them?
2. Is there a fundamental emotional message? Is it strong? Universal?
3. Is the film judgmental? Does the author have an opinion about his or her protagonist? Does he or she have a vision?
4. Does the story have a central idea? If so, can it be described well in a few words?
5. Is the central idea – if there is one – original, i.e. new, fresh? Or is it well-known but related in a new and different way?
6. Are there other films on a similar theme?
7. Is the theme visually realized?
8. Does the theme have a ‘hook’?⁹ Does it show potential for a persuasive marketing campaign?

⁹ The ‘hook’ in a story is designed to ‘catch’ the audience’s attention like an angler’s hook, and arouse their interest and emotional involvement.

B Characters

1. Are the characters believable?
2. Are the characters well sketched, with their own biography? Do they exhibit a range of emotion, behavior and expression?
3. Is it clear whose story is being told? Is there a main protagonist?
4. Is the protagonist likeable? Is it easy to identify with him or her, or do we find this difficult? Is the protagonist the right hero for this story?
5. Is the protagonist motivated? Is he or she active or passive?
6. Does the protagonist have a goal?
7. Does he or she risk something, does he or she have something to lose?
8. Does the protagonist have an unconscious need?
9. Does the protagonist have a problem, a weakness, an Achilles heel which we recognize in ourselves?
10. Does he or she have an external as well as an internal problem?
11. Are you interested in what happens to the protagonist (conflict, tension)?
12. Does the protagonist develop (change, grow, gain in experience)?
13. Are the protagonist and the antagonist equally strong?
14. What decisions do the protagonist and antagonist take in critical situations?
15. How well are the personalities of other important characters developed? Is their behavior logical and convincing?
16. How do the most important characters act and react in relation to other characters?
17. Are all characters well orchestrated¹⁰?
18. Do the minor characters act as a foil for the protagonist?
19. Are all the characters expressed through action instead of dialogue? Or does the opposite apply?

¹⁰ Orchestration: different character-types within a story – each character contributes a different 'tone'.

C S t r u c t u r e

1. Does the story have a beginning, middle and end? – More precisely: is there an initial exposé of the protagonist and their conflict, a body in which the protagonist develops and pursues their goal and a conclusion resolving the initial conflict?
2. Do the exposé, execution and resolution each fulfill their purpose?
 - a) Is the beginning exciting? Does it draw you into the story? Are the main characters introduced promptly?
 - b) Does the second act contain a conflict?
 - c) Is there a climax, and does it fulfill the expectations roused at the beginning?
 - d) Is the plot resolved in the end? Has the script reached the finishing straight?
3. Does the story contain a conflict?
 - a) What is the main conflict?
 - b) Is there too little conflict, or is the conflict intense – maybe unusually (positively) so?
 - c) Do the conflict and the subject matter of the story become clear in the first pages?
4. Are there twists in the story, and do they take it in one or more unexpected directions?
5. Are there sub-plots, and if so, do they influence the main plot?
6. Are the main and sub-plots well elaborated and brought to a conclusion?
7. Is each scene significant, is each scene to the point?
 - a) Does each scene have its own beginning, middle and end, and does it finish with a point?
 - b) Is the structure balanced, or are parts of the story misplaced?
 - c) Do the scenes have a rhythm?
 - d) Is the entrance to the scene made as late and the exit as early as possible?
8. If the story does not have a classic, three-act structure, how is it constructed? Is it epic, episodic? Which narrative or dramaturgic element compensates for the classic narrative structure?

D Storyline

= what the story is about. Should be understandable and convincing. Main and secondary plots should be strong. (Some of the following questions complement those in the section on structure.)

1. Does the story have a plot?
2. Do I understand the story?
3. Does the plot draw the audience into the story?
4. Is the story exciting or boring?
5. Does the plot carry us along? Because of the strength of the main protagonist? For other reasons?
6. Is there a clear storyline? Is the course of events linear and chronological or is its linearity interrupted?
7. Does the structure of the plot work?
8. Must the main protagonist overcome obstacles and complications?
9. Is the course of events predictable or surprising? Exaggerated?
10. Is the plot convincing or does it seem improbable?
11. Does evil get its 'just' punishment in the end?
12. Is the ending convincing / is there a strong conclusion? Satisfying or just leaving the audience with a 'so-what' feeling?

E Dialogue

1. Does the dialogue read well – is it lively, dense, authentic; is it original? Is this the way people really talk?
2. Is there much (maybe too much) dialogue or is it used sparingly?
3. Does the dialogue characterize and define the person speaking: does it reveal their personality?
4. Does it also expose feelings and subconscious?
5. Does each character have their own language, corresponding to their personality, or do all the dialogues sound the same?

6. Is the dialogue sarcastic, ironic, cutting, pointed – or does it not exhibit any further qualities?
7. Does the dialogue serve merely to convey information? Does it replicate what has already been visualized, or does it convey essential information?
8. Is there a subtext, a message between the lines?
9. Is there a visual level which parallels the dialogues?
10. If the work is a comedy, are the dialogues really funny?
11. Does the dialogue flow, or is it stumbling?
12. Does it have pace?

F Audience / Marketing and potential for commercial viability

1. Will an audience be able to understand the story?
2. Will the audience identify with the story?
3. Does the script fulfill the expectations it arouses, i.e. does it actually trigger an intended emotional reaction in the audience?
4. Does the comedy make us laugh? Does the drama move us?
5. Does the script meet the requirements of a particular genre and thus satisfy the audience's expectations, or does it fail to meet these genre expectations?
6. Does the story have a 'hook'¹¹?
7. Are there attractive roles for attractive actors?
8. Is the story up to date? Is it in line with current trends? Is there a public awareness of or interest in the problem treated? Is the timing good?
9. What kind of audience will the story appeal to? Who will watch the film (age, sex, level of education)?
10. What form of commercial exploitation does the screenplay lend itself to (feature or television film, video exploitation)?
11. Potential for festivals?
12. Potential on the international market?
13. Potential for box-office success?
14. With which well-known films might the project be compared, and how positive is the comparison?
15. Would you recommend the film to your friends?

¹¹ Cf. footnote 9

G Summing-up and conclusion

Consider the following questions in the conclusion to your report or your story notes:

1. Does the submitted script offer a good basis on which to construct a film? Can it deliver a film? (Where appropriate: is the novel or play suitable for adaptation as a film?)
2. Is the script original? New, fresh?
3. Did you like the script? Did you enjoy reading it? If not, what exactly did you dislike?
4. Did the script trigger emotions or impart insights; was it exciting?

5. Does the story live up to the expectations it arouses or does it fail to achieve its aims?
6. Is there a convincing message? Does the script entertain? Is the story plausible?
7. What is the dramaturgic concept based on – if there is one? On imagination? On excitement? On entertainment?
8. Does the story have depth? Does it have a slant?
9. Is the story located in a specific place, a particular time, a particular social setting?
10. Does it reflect the *zeitgeist*? Does it have social relevance?

11. Is the script visual?
12. Does it have a style of its own?
13. Does the author show creativity? Is he or she convincing / plausible, does he or she know their subject? Have they done their research?
14. What potential for development does an unpolished script show?

