



a question of TREATMENTS

With, rightly, much weight given to a director's ideas and creative insight, does the employment of a ghostwriter for treatments dilute that vision? We put the pseudonymous Alf, from creative services company The Moon Unit, in email contact with Friend London director, Ian Pons Jewell, and asked: is a treatment personally written by a director preferable to one that's been ghostwritten?

From: Ian Pons Jewell
Sent: Thu 20/04/17 08:55
To: Alf <alpha@themoonunit.net>
Subject: Treatments – ghostwriter vs director

I think this answer depends on who you are. If I was a creative, I think I'd prefer to have one that's been personally written. If I'm an EP at the production company, perhaps I'd prefer a ghostwritten one if it makes for a better chance of winning the job.

As a director, I try to write my own treatments as I feel it's far more personal and authentic. Sometimes it's not possible due to a heavy work schedule and there are certain projects that can be more suitable for a ghostwriter. It also really depends on who's ghostwriting... good ones can add a lot of ideas to the piece and that's only ever a good thing for everyone.

From: Alf <alpha@themoonunit.net>
Sent: Mon 24/04/17 14:37
To: Ian Pons Jewell
Subject: Re: Treatments – ghostwriter vs director

Yes, agree – it really does depend on who you are. Some directors are brilliant visually but aren't great writers. Others don't have English as a first language. Or are simply too busy. Should they be under-represented because of these situations?

Ad agency creatives might say they can always spot ghostwritten treatments but that's just sloppy writing – good ghostwriters can adopt a range of voices, tones and styles depending on multiple remits. Authenticity should never be an issue.

The real question here is what will win the pitch?

I also agree with your point about good ghostwriters adding ideas to the piece. That's where it gets interesting – when the writer becomes an extension of the director's core team, just like DPs, editors, composers or the VFX.

Broadly, the more battle-hardened/senior the director, the more open to collaboration they are. Occasionally junior directors find it harder to share creative ideas freely as they may feel their position may be somehow undermined. It definitely isn't, but comfort levels will fluctuate according to several parameters.



From: Ian Pons Jewell
Sent: Thu 27/04/17 10:17
To: Alf <alpha@themoonunit.net>
Subject: Treatments – ghostwriter vs director

Absolutely. I think not being fluent in English, or lacking writing skills shouldn't ever put a director at a disadvantage. After all, we're not hired to write, we're there to direct. But I do think that directors who are too busy to express their vision properly to a ghostwriter can (and should) be at a disadvantage for a reason. I've been there when a director has done a call with a ghostwriter, giving them almost nothing creatively and leaving them to write the entire thing blind. This ghostwriter, on another occasion, has also done an entire treatment that had almost no creative input from the agency and nothing from the director. They spoke to the production company only, and were left to come up with it all.

Though I know this is certainly not common, there are cases of directors getting away with not doing much in the treatment stage and in this scenario they absolutely should be at a disadvantage. We're paid high sums for the work, and this level of disengagement at the creative development stage shouldn't be supported.

Winning the pitch is, of course, the end goal, but the treatment is a creative contract with an agency and needs to have the director totally on board with each creative promise. That would be my concern, basically, with ghostwriting if I was agency side – is the director truly behind these ideas?

That's very true what you say about junior directors. I mean, the reason I was asked to take part in this was because *shots* got wind of my hesitation toward ghostwritten treatments. But actually, now I've done a fair few jobs in this early stage of my commercials career, I'm already of a very different opinion. I really enjoy co-writing with a ghostwriter, even if I have the time to write it myself, though this tends to only be for American commercials. I think one of my hesitations with it is the 'ghost' part. They go uncredited, and this is something I don't really feel comfortable with, especially if they're bringing lots of ideas to the table for the less engaged directors out there.

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From: Alf <alpha@themoonunit.net>
Sent: Tue 02/05/17 07:53
To: Ian Pons Jewell
Subject: Re: Treatments – ghostwriter vs director

A couple of points I'll pick up on here.

Disengaged directors: if you're a ghostwriter working with a director over years then there's a level of trust that builds up. You know the director's work and what's important to him/her and how they would approach said project, so a few words are sufficient, workflow is established. It's not lack of interest, it's pure trust.

As for uncredited ghostwriters: it's kind of you to feel empathy for those that don't get credit. But let's face it, ghostwriters exist in so many professions. Politicians and CEOs don't pen their own speeches, famous musicians don't write their own hit songs, famous artists don't paint their own pictures and famous writers often have sub-ghosts who emulate their style. So what?

What's really interesting as a ghostwriter is the almost total elimination of the ego. Directors win awards, we shut up. Not everyone wants to stand on top of the mountain and shout: look at me, I just won a Cannes gold Lion or an Oscar. There's a certain satisfaction to be found in looking across the bar and there's a director you've helped to secure several million dollars' worth of work and they have no idea who you are because you work under a pseudonym and you're always just a voice on the end of a Skype/phone call. We love that, it appeals hugely to our mischievous nature and we know we're not alone in this.

A question for you, Ian: just because a director writes his/her own treatment does that mean it's only his/her vision alone? How about the input of the DP, casting agent, art director, make-up artist, editor, VFX artist, audio composer, designer etc?

Creating compelling and meaningful moving images is a team game. Aren't we just blowing away the illusion of the single auteur, saying that every project is better when the power of a team is involved at every stage?

From: Ian Pons Jewell
Sent: Fri 05/05/17 14:22
To: Alf <alpha@themoonunit.net>
Subject: Treatments – ghostwriter vs director

My only contention is on those rare occasions it might overly prop up disengagement. On the question of vision, though, it certainly isn't one person, of course!

The comparison to other film roles is a really good one. I think this collaboration is indeed a great example of how a team is vital, including at the pitch stage. But it's the 'ghost' part that could add to the illusion of the single auteur. But more articles and conversations like this can help shine a light on this essential stage of the creative process! In short, I agree wholeheartedly, it's a team effort, always!

From: Alf <alpha@themoonunit.net>
Sent: Fri 05/05/17 20:36
To: Ian Pons Jewell
Subject: Re: Treatments – ghostwriter vs director

I think the only certainty is that there will always be contention around this issue as it's so open to misunderstanding and (often incorrect) assumption from various parties.