



# REFLECTIONS



## From script to screen and everything in between: a candid discussion with Jeff Vande Zande

Finding an idea that works in a short film is one of the biggest challenges in independent filmmaking. Rushing to get behind the camera instead of taking things slowly to ensure the script is fully developed is a close second.

Jeff Vande Zande teaches fiction writing, screenwriting, and film production at Delta College in Michigan. More than 200 national and international film festivals have accepted his award-winning films. He is the recipient of more than 20 awards for cinematography, screenplay, and directing. From comedy to horror, his short films embrace several genres but never disappoint.

Recently, we sat down with Jeff to talk about what it takes to make it as a short filmmaker. He offered up his best tips for the trade, and dished on some of the challenges and joys he has experienced in his 12 years as an independent filmmaker.

### ***Q. What first got you interested in independent filmmaking?***

When I was teaching my fiction writing students, several of them over the years expressed an interest in screenwriting. As a result, I went back to school to study screenwriting so I could teach it at my school, Delta College. We slowly expanded from offering screenwriting to offering a certificate in digital filmmaking to offering a 2-year degree in filmmaking. As our offerings expanded, I kept branching out and expanding my skills. I felt that I had no business teaching people how to make a short film if I wasn't actively making them myself.

### ***Q. What is the appeal of short film screenplays?***

Well, for me, as an independent filmmaker, I like to write short film scripts because I can actually shoot them by

myself. The money required for a short film is much less than the money required for a feature. Plus, I think the short film can be a beautiful form of expression on its own. Just like the short story is not practice for writing a novel, a short film is not practice for writing or making a feature-length film.

### ***Q. What is the biggest challenge of short films? How do you overcome it/address it?***

The biggest challenge is finding an idea that works as a short film. The other challenge is slowing down and not being in a rush to get behind the camera. The script is the place where changes can continually be made at no cost. A filmmaker wants to work out all the kinks at the script level because reshoots and re-edits get expensive at the production and

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post-production level. I have seen many short films, and I often think, “This is beautifully shot, but it never should have been made... or at least more time should have been spent with the script before shooting ever started.” Filmmakers can be in a rush to get behind the camera and that’s the challenge... to slow down and realize that every step (pre-production, production, and post-production) is equally important.

***Q. What is the biggest benefit of short films?***

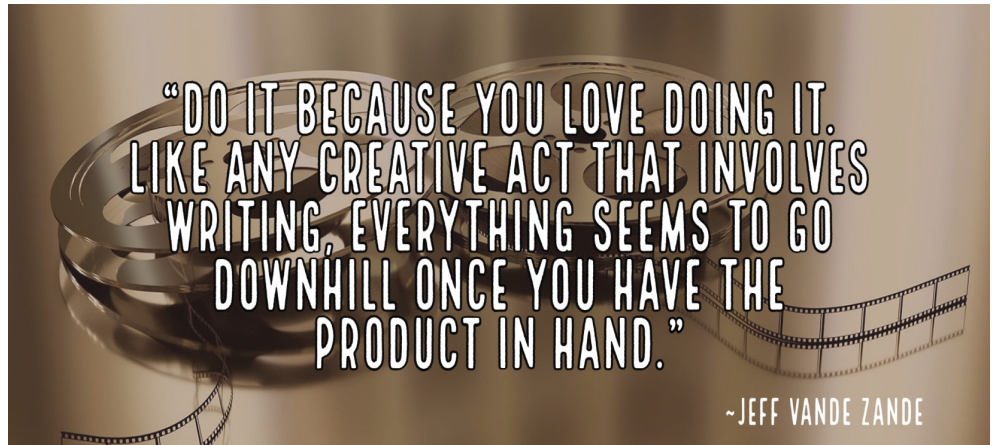
I can only speak to the benefits that come for myself. For me, the biggest benefit of making short films is that I then get better at teaching my students. But, short films can be a way for an indie filmmaker to get exposure through film festivals. Film festivals tend to program more short films than they do features, so a short film has a better chance at getting in. Plus, they are a legitimate form of artistic expression.

***Q. What do you look for in a good short film?***

The story. Does it work? Does the film have payoff at the end? My writing skills are stronger than my technical skills, so in my own scripts I look for a really strong story. I’m probably not going to dazzle anybody with my serviceable cinematography, but I like to think I can surprise them with my story-writing ability.

***Q. What is your process for writing the script for a short film? Take us from the first step all the way to the final process please.***

Well, one starts with a premise: “What if a kid found a cello out in the woods and brought it home, not knowing it’s haunted?” If one is following the traditional



pattern, one would then write a treatment. That simply means writing the film out in paragraph form, like an essay of what the film is about. It walks us through the major scenes of the film (not necessarily including dialogue). Lots of tinkering can happen at the treatment level (and should) before one starts the actual process of writing the film as a screenplay. The screenplay itself is where we get the specifics of dialogue/action description.

***Q. How do you come up with your ideas for short films?***

Since I make all of my short films on a very low budget, I usually start my scripts based on some unique location or prop that I have. For instance, for my film COLD SNAP, I knew I had access to a cello, so my question became, “what could I write that involves a cello?” Something about a cello being abandoned out in the woods stayed with me, so I worked from there.

***Q. Tell us a little bit about any awards or recognition you’ve garnered for your short films.***

I have had short films accepted into over 200 film festivals. I’ve won about 20 awards including for cinematography, screenplay, and directing.

***Q. What is your favorite genre for short films?***

I lean towards comedy, but also horror.

***Q. What are you currently working on and where can we find your previous work?***

Currently, independent filmmaking is difficult during the time of Covid. In May and June of 2020, I made a few one-minute films. I also made a comedy called *WE’LL BE IN TOUCH*. I haven’t recently made any short films but, as the weather gets better here in Michigan, I’m getting the itch. If one wanted to see COLD SNAP they could go to [this link](#). The password to watch the film is snap.

***Q. Give us your best piece of advice for anyone interested in writing or producing short films.***

Do it because you love doing it... like any creative act that involves writing, everything seems to go downhill once you have the product in hand.

Want to keep in touch with Jeff’s work? [Follow his blog](#), where he posts literary and screen reviews and espouses on fiction writing, screenwriting, and film production. You can also check out a review for his latest collection of short stories, [The Neighborhood Division](#).



## White Hat vs. Black Hat SEO



Figuring out Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is tricky. Most businesses and organizations know they need it, even if they do not entirely understand it. Toss in terms like white hat, black hat, and gray hat SEO, and the confusion level increases. That is why you must have an SEO copywriter and web designer you can trust. SEO experts not only comprehend the differences they can explain them to their clients in a way that will make sense.

### *What is white hat SEO?*

I may be dating myself here (but I am willing to take that risk for a good analogy). I grew up watching classic Westerns. You know, back when televisions only had 3 channels and you had to get off your duff to change them. My point is, I always knew who the good guys were in these films. From John Wayne to Clint Eastwood, their white hat gave them away. The good guys always wore them.

White hat SEO is a lot like those good guys from classic Westerns. They defeated the bad guys by playing by the rules. When you engage in white hat SEO, you are using ethical methods and following search engine guidelines. You never cut

corners to get quicker results.

### *What is black hat SEO?*

Going back to my Westerns analogy, the bad guys always wore black hats. No one had to tell you who was about to turn up in town and cause trouble. That hat signaled their intentions long before they engaged in any bad behavior. Black hat SEO is just like the bad guys. Talk to any SEO expert and they will tell you there is no doubt black hat SEO tactics work. They will get your brand right to the top of the Google search results in a hurry.

It can be a short-lived victory if Google catches you in the act. The search giant will issue a manual action report in [Google Search Console](#). Webmasters and other SEO experts use Google Search Console to check your website's indexing status and visibility online among other things. It also is how Google hands out penalties to organizations that are caught using underhanded SEO practices. If Google catches you using black hat SEO, it will put you in search engine "jail." What it translates into is lost organic search visibility, traffic, and revenue. Your brand simply will not turn up in the search results when potential customers search for your products or

services.

### *What is gray hat SEO?*

Somewhere in the middle of white hat and black hat SEO lies a gray area. There are differing opinions among SEO experts as to what, exactly, constitutes gray hat SEO. For our purposes (and so as not to totally confuse you), we will go with a simple explanation. Gray hat SEO is a mixture of the two techniques.

Just because it contains elements of white hat SEO does not mean it is any more acceptable than black hat SEO. Let me say that again for the people in the back. ***Just because it contains elements of white hat SEO does not mean it is any more acceptable than black hat SEO.***

Search engines – especially Google – interpret it as a blurred line. Search engines may or may not penalize a website using gray hat SEO practices. Their decision to punish comes down to one factor: intent. If you are using gray hat SEO with the sole purpose of helping your site soar above the competition in search rankings, you might get your wings clipped. We never recommend trying your luck with gray hat SEO for this reason. We recommend playing by the rules for the best long-term results, no matter how tempting those "quick results" promises are with black hat and gray hat SEO tactics. You will thank me later.

### *White hat SEO techniques*

White hat SEO improves search performance on Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) by using several proven techniques. Each of these methods falls within webmaster guidelines for Google and other search engines like Yahoo and Bing. Here are some of the most popular white hat SEO practices.

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### 1. Creating quality content

Creating fresh, engaging, and relevant content is the best way to keep your website ranking well organically. Your content should use SEO best practices, which include using keywords specific to your industry and products or services in all content. SEO copywriters are masters at crafting copy using SEO keywords that sound natural to readers. Search engine algorithms are adept at picking up poor quality writing. Invest funds into working with an experienced SEO copywriter to ensure you are getting the best content for your brand.

### 2. Mobile optimization

In the U.S. alone, [211 million people](#) use a mobile device (Smartphone, tablet) to search online. That means, if you are not taking a mobile-first approach with your SEO and website design, you will not rank well in search results. Google adopted a mobile-first indexing system in recognition of the sheer number of users accessing their search engine from a mobile device. Images that do not load properly or are too slow to load and website designs that do not display well on mobile devices are penalized.

### 3. Focus on user intent

Search engines, especially Google, make it a priority to serve their users with the most relevant results based on their search queries. Tailor your content to meet user intent, and you will boost its value with search engines. Any SEO copywriter worth their salt can do this.

### 4. Rich snippets

Rich snippets are all the rage in SEO land right now. If your website copy is superb, Google will award you the coveted “rich snippet” for your topic or industry. That means when users find your content, they not only see the standard title tag, meta description, and URL. Google gives them extra data that may

include reviews, events, or other enticing information about your brand. This makes your content and your brand more attractive to searchers and your chances of converting traffic to leads much higher.

### *Black hat SEO techniques*

We know what you must be thinking. Isn't black hat SEO illegal? Nope. Nada. Nuh-uh. If you fail to follow search engine guidelines, the police are not going to come a-knocking on your door. Well, they might, if you engage in nefarious black hat SEO practices like hacking. Otherwise, it is not illegal. But it sure is unethical. Here are some of the most common black hat SEO tactics that can get your organization in hot water with search engines.

#### 1. Keyword stuffing

Save the stuffing for Thanksgiving. It has no place in quality content on your brand's website. Keyword stuffing is what SEO pros call it when someone shoves keywords into content in nonsensical ways to get Google's attention. If you think about it long enough, you can probably recall an example of this practice. Let's say your keyword is “car batteries Pittsburgh.” Here is what it would look like if you were keyword stuffing content with that focus: *If you are looking for the best car batteries Pittsburgh look no further than Bob's Batteries for the best batteries Pittsburgh. We offer the best batteries Pittsburgh at affordable prices. Come on down to see us at 555 Bob's Street for the best batteries Pittsburgh.* Content written like this will get Google's attention. If you do it often enough, it will be the kind of attention that earns you a manual action report.

#### 2. Duplicating content

This is the nicest way we can call out the kind of blatant copying of content that some copywriters engage in shamelessly. They have a client who wants a blog

about a product or service, so that copy writer goes and finds a competitor with similar content and just mimics it. They may change a few words here or there, but the basic information is essentially the same. When you plagiarize another site, Google notices, and they will de-index your site as punishment.

#### 3. Backlink building

There is a right way and a wrong way to build backlinks to your website. Adding links back to your own website (blogs, pages) in all online platforms you can manipulate goes against both Google's and Bing's webmaster guidelines. This includes the comment sections for social media pages and news or other websites where public discussions are permitted. Paying for backlinks also falls into this category.

#### 4. Doorway pages

These are sometimes called gateway, bridge, or jump pages. They are designed with only one purpose in mind – to rank well for search queries. So why is this bad, exactly? Once a user goes to the page, they will find it lacks relevant or engaging content. In other words, it was just a ploy to get them onto the site without rewarding them for their visit.

#### 5. Content spinning

This is like outright plagiarism. The only difference is software – not a person – is used to take existing content from another site and rewrite it. Content spinning software is designed to replace individual words and entire sentences with synonyms or change the sentence structure around just enough to make it look or sound different. Ultimately, it is the same content someone else produced. No reputable SEO copywriter will engage in this shady practice. SEO copywriters who adhere to best practices know how to conduct proper research on a topic to create original and compelling copy that

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has educational value to a brand's target audience.

## 6. Private blog networks (PBNs)

PBNs exist for the sole purpose of manipulating search engine rankings. They work by building links back to a single website to appear that the website and the organization it represents have gained authority in its industry. Some SEO experts will argue this is a gray hat SEO tactic. At The Write Reflection, we think it is clear this goes against webmaster guidelines and will never engage in this practice on behalf of a client.

## What does Google say?

What does Google say about white hat vs. black hat vs. gray hat SEO? More importantly, why should we care what Google thinks? Whether you love it or hate it, it is hard to deny that Google is the king of the proverbial search engine castle. Google holds 85.86 percent of the [global search market](#). Bing is next up, with a paltry 6.84 percent of the global market share.

Google's search engine first launched in 1995. From day one, Google went out of

its way to differentiate itself from other search engines. Search engines like Yahoo placed a lot of emphasis on paid ads. Yahoo made no secret that it prioritized its paid search service, Overture. It required folks to fork over beaucoup bucks to earn the coveted top spot in their search results.

Google decided it wanted to level the playing field for all users. Its algorithm considers several factors, including page quality, backlinks, and relevance to a user's search (this is where SEO comes in handy). That is not to say Google is above accepting cold, hard cash from advertisers to earn a better ranking. It is just not the only factor Google uses.

Google provides [clear guidelines](#) for webmasters that SEO copywriters like me use to determine what is white hat, gray hat, and black hat SEO. Reputable SEO copywriters never cross lines, risking your website and your brand. When Google catches on to underhanded SEO tactics – and trust us, they will catch on eventually – you risk having your brand banned from their search engines. That can spell sudden death when the king of internet search engines banishes you from the kingdom.

## A final word on the best SEO strategies

For your own sake, never work with an SEO copywriter or agency that promises you quick results. When that happens, you can almost bank on the fact they are using gray or black hat techniques. While you might think you are getting the best bang for your buck, you could be risking your livelihood by making it harder for your brand to be found online.

We get it. Doing SEO the right way can feel painfully slow. You want new traffic and leads now. While niche businesses using SEO keyword topics with little to no competition may see results in a few weeks, the average organization can expect to wait up to six months or more for their return on investment. We promise, committing to working with SEO experts who value best practices pays off in the long run.

If you are ready to learn more about how white hat SEO copywriting can help boost your brand's visibility online, give us a shout-out at 724-713-3254 or [contact us online](#) to schedule your no-obligation consultation.

## White Hat SEO Techniques

Creating fresh, engaging, and relevant content using SEO best practices.

Mobile optimization website design that ensures your content displays well on any device.

Tailored content that focuses on user intent.

Rich snippets that earn you a standard title tag, meta description, and URL on Google search results.

## Black Hat SEO Techniques

Keyword stuffing - shoving SEO keywords into content in nonsensical ways to get Google's attention.

Duplicating content or spinning content from other competitor sites without offering any originality in services or content.

Inserting back links to your website in places they were not intended (comment sections, social media platforms) to draw attention to your site.

Using doorway pages that lack relevant or engaging content but simply exist to get visitors to your site.