

# THE PLEDGE

David [REDACTED] & John [REDACTED]

106 pages

Drama/Thriller

Reader: Kelly Shaw

## Reader's Logline

When a new pledge dies unexpectedly, a college frat house is determined to find out what happened and make things right. . . for themselves.

## Comments

Overall, I really enjoyed this script! The plot twists are very well done, the characters are both enjoyable and believable, and the setting feels very familiar to the writers, which helps it come to life on the page all the more vividly. In addition, all of the jokes land extremely well; the writers clearly have a very strong command of comedic timing and joke placement in a drama. This, in addition to the writers' knack for visual storytelling, makes the script read like it'll easily translate to the screen, with some specific standout moments e.g. the reveal of Josh as Rachel's boyfriend near the end made me genuinely gasp out loud.

It might be a hard movie to market and sell to bigger studios, especially with most typical frat movies being comedies. I *do* think that selling it in a college town like Austin or Atlanta would be easier than LA or NY, especially because the fraternity in the story is a southern frat and that culture is very familiar to the people here (side note: seeing the phrase "all y'all" in the dialogue made this Austin reader *very* happy). For the pitch, I'd suggest a location-based angle, as well as mentioning that college students are a demographic that's been ignored by Hollywood for at least the past ten years. I'd also suggest a focus on selling to indie studios, where I think this script would be better suited and better taken care of.

For the first half of reading, I was going to suggest changing the movie's genre to comedy, simply because a dark frat comedy is an easy sell (especially one as unique as this one) and I have faith in the writers' comedic abilities. But, after finishing the script, I think the writers are actually making the right choice to keep it a drama. However, because it's a drama that also has some very strong jokes, the intended genre can be a little unclear at times. I would try to

fully make it a “dramedy” by adding just a few more laugh lines to clarify the intended tone for an audience. Up to the writers’ vision for the story, of course, but that’s my two cents.

My only main problem with the script was with the flashbacks and their timing. While I think the nonlinear storytelling is a strong choice for this script and should be kept, the flashbacks start over thirty minutes into the movie and are paced semi-randomly throughout the rest of it. I would try to keep them consistent and intentionally placed, as I think you did a good job of later in the movie, when the flashbacks got easier to follow and were used more effectively.

My suggestions for the flashback problems:

1. Start the flashbacks at the beginning of the movie and spread them evenly/consistently throughout the script. The way it’s paced now (thirty minutes of real time, fifteen minutes of flashbacks, ten minutes of real time, five minutes of flashback, etc.) feels a little confusing and throws the audience’s feeling of suspense off as they struggle to parse what’s presently happening from what’s in the past. I’d suggest a fifteen-five rule: fifteen minutes of the present, five minutes of the past, fifteen minutes of the present, five minutes of the past, etc..

2. Tell the flashbacks linearly. Within a nonlinear script, it’s important to keep the two timelines you establish, i.e. past vs present, easy to follow within themselves. This, of course, allows for the exception of the truly great reveal of Josh being Rachel’s girlfriend, which is so strong that audiences will understand why that specific flashback was withheld until the end.

3. Keep Trey and Rachel’s flashbacks together contained to Pledge Week as well, instead of trying to show their entire summer together. When there’s two sets of flashbacks happening (Trey and Rachel vs Josh’s Pledge Week), it’s helpful to have them both be happening at the same time. I make this suggestion only because I think it’d be an easy change since we already drop into the middle of Trey and Rachel’s storyline instead of the beginning and their flashbacks together are mainly conversationally-based anyway.

4. I know this is technically the director’s call, but I’d have a color palette change for the flashback sequences to keep it easier for the audience to follow what’s in the past and what isn’t. Because the flashback timeline is only a few days before the present timeline in the movie, it’s inherently going to be a little confusing to the audience: you won’t have younger actors, there aren’t subtitles explaining which scenes are flashbacks, etc.. The Trey and Rachel scenes specifically are little confusing to tell what is presently happening and what’s in the past, since they’re having the same conversation in both timelines.

5. I’d honestly open the movie with the first flashback of the wasps’ nest scene. It’s a great setup for the movie, both tonally and for a lot of the characters. That scene is such a powerful metaphor for the rest of the movie, too (“throwing rocks at a hornet’s nest”) that I think it would really have an impact as an opener. I also think showing Josh would have the impact of his death early on in the movie hit harder. It can be alienating for an audience to be *told* something is sad, instead of *shown* something is sad. I know this is more complicated because of the nonlinear storytelling and because you have his death at the start the movie (which I love) but I think this would help with the show-not-tell of the death’s impact. I’d stop this flashback with

them all running away and then start the movie with Trey, no longer running and laughing, so you get a similar harsh visual as you do with the current opening.

The only other problem I could foresee with the movie is with Rachel. She ticks a couple of the boxes for “strong” female characters that are clearly written by men: she doesn’t really appear until about thirty minutes into the movie, she doesn’t pass the Bechdel test, and she really only exists in regards to her relationship with Trey. I think fleshing her out more as a character might be a wise course of action, especially because she’s the only main female character in the movie, outside of the Dean (who I love, by the way). In addition, her plot feels a little unnecessary to me. Think of it this way: if she wasn’t pregnant, nothing would change about the plot. She would still have conflicting feelings about Trey because she had an affair with him, she would still feel abandoned by him when he made choices she didn’t understand, and she would still serve the purpose of being Josh’s girlfriend (side note: when she appears in the present day, she doesn’t seem that torn up about her boyfriend’s death, which feels odd even if she *was* cheating on him). I think she would benefit from having something added that makes her more relevant, even tangentially, to the A-plot of the movie.

Here’s my kind of out-there suggestion as a female reader: cut the scenes with Rachel’s mom and replace them with scenes of Rachel and a group of the frat boys’ girlfriends in one of their dorm rooms instead. The movie’s A-plot is focused on the strength of brotherhood, right? So make the B-plot focused on the *unrecognized* strength of sisterhood that flies under the men’s radar and bears all their consequences. When she’s not at work or with Trey, have Rachel be surrounded by friends who are in similar situations. Have one of the girls be someone who’s had to get an abortion before because her frat boyfriend wasn’t careful. Have some of the girls talk about how they think the frat is toxic, but they’ll stand by their boyfriends during it. Have them give Rachel love, even if she still feels alone surrounded by them all. She’s living the college experience just the same as the boys in the movie, except she sees the consequences of their actions even stronger, which is sort of the point of the movie. Just adding one or two scenes with her talking to her friends would fix almost all of the problems with her as a female character and make the moral of the story clearer. While I think the mother-daughter relationship is sweet, I also don’t think a young girl would tell their mom they were pregnant right off the bat, especially if they’re in college. They’d probably go to a trusted friend first.

Rachel also fits some of the more negative stereotypes for Latina women in film (you said “olive-skinned” so I assumed, but ignore this if I’m wrong and she’s just white), what with her being a service industry worker, having an accidental pregnancy, being poor, etc.. I think it’s important for her to be a woman of color (not only because representation is extremely important and 38.2% of Texans are Hispanic or Latinx, but also because it’s plot-relevant for her to feel like an outsider to Trey’s family and culture), but I would be careful with stereotypes. I think most of that would be fixed by fleshing her out: show her with a group of friends and with a life outside of Trey.

## Scene-by-Scene Suggested Edits

1- While it's strong visually, I honestly think this whole opening scene is a little redundant and unnecessary. It mirrors a scene later on with Rachel at her work and Trey coming in so closely that I thought it was the same scene when it cropped up again. I would just cut it. I made my suggestion above as to how I think the movie should start, so I'd cut everything up to scene 5.

6- This scene might benefit from putting "continuous action" in the header, since they're moving across multiple lawns and the camera's following them.

8- Cole's line that starts with "I'm not sure if I'm stopping..." might benefit from a change of tense. Maybe try instead: [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] It just feels a little more natural.

11- I'd be careful with Velma being seen as a racist stereotype, especially in maid's uniform. I get the realistic racism in frat culture, but I'd be careful with how it's perceived, especially with her not showing up again. I would suggest cutting this scene/character honestly and just having Finn give some throwaway contextual line for his later mention of her like, "You know Velma? Our housekeeper?"

12- I like the Newton joke, it's a good laugh line, but there's a stereotype for teens saying "\_\_\_ is so last year", which I don't think I've ever heard anyone actually say in real life. Maybe switch it to something like "[REDACTED]"  
[REDACTED] Just a thought; the joke is strong.

14- The joke with the breakfast burrito is solid! I might take the periods out of the sentences so they flow like one thought? Just to give the actor a little bit more direction into the fact that it's a laugh line. Maybe have it say: [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Not sure if that's leading the actor too much, but I think it makes the joke a little stronger and clearer.

15- The intro line of "So... what?" feels a little clunky when the final line of the last scene was "What's up?" Maybe try a different intro. Something like "Why did we have to come all the way in here? Seriously, what's going on, man?" Just a throwaway line explaining the transition.

35- I'd cut the line about the Dean's daughter. I get that acknowledging what frats culture can be like is important, but having a woman say that about her daughter while still being in charge of the school is a little off-putting.

39- I would have Rachel avoiding the hug- and later the kiss- be more explicit. Make it really clear she doesn't wanna touch him (or at least that she wants him to *think* she doesn't wanna touch him).

44- I'd make the joke of the Dean not knowing his name more of a joke. Maybe have her response to be changed to be something like, "Josh, that's what I said."

46- I might extend the conversation Cole and Trey have about the Winn Dixie run a few lines further. I think the stupidity of what the boys are doing for no reason is made even funnier if there's the juxtaposition of a casual conversation happening over it. Also, it might help to add context so that people not from the south will have a better idea of what Winn Dixie is (side note: all the Winn Dixie's in Texas closed down in 2002).

Cut out the "And" in the line "And take Johnny Football with you!" He hasn't said a line for a bit, so having him start a line with a continued thought feels clunky.

55- The line "We need to talk" is a little cliché, especially for a girlfriend character. Maybe try "Can I talk to you for a sec?" or "Hey, can we take a walk? I wanna talk to you." Just something that's a variation on the cliché that's a little more specific/in character for her.

58- This scene is very Trey-focused, instead of Rachel-focused. I get it, he is the main character, but this is the turning point where he realizes, "Oh, other people matter and my actions have consequences". I think it'd be really powerful for him to sort of realize that maybe he's NOT the main character of everyone's story by having her and her feelings be the focus of the scene. Let her talk and ramble for a bit; I have a feeling she'd have a lot to say, especially if this happened to her mom. If the point is to have him realize she's her own person, be careful to not make her a prop for that realization. Let the audience also see how affected she is, let the audience feel for her, so that when *Trey* feels for her, they get it.

I'd also let Rachel have a reply to his line claiming he'll make it work. I think that ending with him getting the last word is powerful, but maybe have one more line of her not believing him.

61- If you want to include the earlier line about the Dean's daughter here, I would agree with that. Maybe some throwaway line about how she could be busting them for something *way* worse; they should consider themselves lucky.

Also, I'd cut the line about speaking to them like men. Just have her say "I need a name." Women rarely reference "talking like men".

I'd also be careful calling Cole out directly for being black when she talks about how she'd frame each of them. It's a little unclear whether that's the writers or just the character of the Dean suggesting racism. Maybe cut the line about Atticus Finch and just have her vaguely say, "And Cole. Well. Which one of these is not like the others?" I like making her go, "You connect the dots". It makes the Dean is a little bit of a racist villain, too, which makes Cole turning Trey in later on a more motivated action. I'd also have Cole be the third person she addresses in the list of how she'd frame them, instead of the second. Closing with him and showing the racism he faces again motivates his later actions.

62- If you keep the mom scenes, I'd cut the last two lines and have it end on: "I don't love him". That's a devastating line to finish with, plus having the mom discredit her feelings because she's young makes the script side with the mom when I think the audience will be siding with Rachel. It's important to have those two line up.

67- Change the tense of "This isn't what happened, was it?" to "That wasn't what happened, was it?"

70- Change the second intro line to “Everyone is supposed to be having a good time, but they’re all not *sure* if they’re supposed to be.” Just to make it a little more clear.

Also, the script already told the pledge he was supposed to put down the pig, so maybe have the other pledge instead say, [REDACTED] and then have Porker reply with your line of, [REDACTED]

76- Unclear whether she’s implying an abortion or a miscarriage.

### Reader’s Script Analysis Grid

STORY	SCORE
Concept is fresh and/or original	86
Concept is/contains a strong or buzzworthy hook	70
Theme is well executed/interweaved well	65
First 10 pages set up the story well	90
First 10 pages are compelling	100
Script is well structured	50
Every scene in the script feels essential	80
Scenes are the appropriate length	100
Stakes are clear/conflict is strong or compelling	70
Characters’ choices drive the story forward	70
Pacing is strong and the story keeps moving	50
Story is not overly complicated or hard to follow	50
Story is not bogged down by exposition	95
Tension builds/escalates throughout	80
The climax/resolution is satisfying	95
CHARACTER/DIALOGUE	SCORE
Protagonist is likable and/or compelling	70
Supporting characters are likable and/or compelling	90
No characters were extraneous	70
Dialogue reads naturally/believably within this story	85

Dialogue reveals character	100
<b>READABILITY</b>	<b>SCORE</b>
Format/presentation adheres to industry standards	100
Spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage	60* (I know this is a draft sent right after edits, so this wasn't included in the average! I'd copyedit it before shopping it around, though.)
Action text is concise, not overly descriptive	100
Action text "shows" instead of "tells"	100
Overall readability	80
<b>AVERAGE SCORE</b>	81
<b>RECCOMENDATION TO STUDIO</b>	PASS/CONSIDER/ <b>OPTION</b>