

4 ways to overcome writing setbacks, from the writer of ‘Lincoln’

By [Michael Sebastian](#) | Posted: January 11, 2013



This morning, “Lincoln” screenwriter Tony Kushner earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Since the movie’s release, Kushner has given a number of interviews about the enormous difficulties of writing “Lincoln.” In December, for instance, he described his reaction to Steven Spielberg’s having asked him to write the script.

“I had said ‘no’ to writing the screenplay,” Kushner [told a crowd at the Jacob Burns Film Center](#). “I just thought this is impossible ... I [couldn’t] imagine writing lines for Abraham Lincoln to say.”

Although you’re not tasked with writing a film about America’s greatest president, there certainly comes a time when you think an assignment is impossible—whether because it’s too large, too time-consuming, or too tedious.

Should that ever be the case, take inspiration (and solace) from Kushner. Here are tips from the writer of “Lincoln” on powering through a difficult writing assignment:

Re-evaluate—don't give up.

When he turned in the first draft of the film in 2007, it was a whopping 500 pages. (One page in a screenplay equals about one minute of screen time; that means Kushner wrote an eight-hour movie.)

According to a [story about Kushner in Harvard magazine](#), the massive script alarmed Spielberg and dispirited the screenwriter.

“I realized that this was simply not a story you could compress in a way that would be dramatically effective,” he told a group of Harvard students and faculty in November. “I reached a point in 2007 where I said to Steven [Spielberg], ‘Maybe I should just give up. I don’t know what to do.’”

What Kushner needed was perspective. He found it thanks to the five-month Writer’s Guild of America strike, during which he couldn’t touch the script, according to [Harvard magazine](#).

Tip: Before you chuck that writing assignment—or phone it in—walk away for at least a few minutes to consider what you’re trying to accomplish. Clear your mind of the difficulties with a walk, a cup of coffee, or a chat with a friend or co-worker.

Embrace ‘insane’ ideas.

“Lincoln” isn’t a traditional biopic; it doesn’t follow the 16th president’s life from birth until death. Instead, the movie delves into a portion of Lincoln’s second term, as he fought with Congress to pass the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery.

This idea didn’t occur to Kushner when he set out to write the film—it came from Spielberg, who thought the entire movie could be about the first few months of Lincoln’s second term.

“We both laughed about that—it seemed like an insane idea,” Kushner told the Harvard crowd. Considering the House is so deeply unpopular today, the notion of making a movie that devotes so much time to that body of government seemed “completely insane,” he said.

However, Kushner trusted his writing skills and delivered scenes of “a lot of guys talking,” as he put it, which rival the battle scenes in many war movies.

Tip: Attack your assignment from a different point of view. Tired of writing the same old press release or blog post? Consider a new approach, one that focuses on a new angle or, like “Lincoln,” narrows the story.

Research exhaustively.

A common cause of writer’s block is lack of information. How can you write about a topic well if you know little or nothing about it? “The more you know, the more you can communicate,” Syd Field wrote in his seminal work, “Screenplay.”

Kushner had to know more about Lincoln.

He read Doris Kearns Goodwin's "Team of Rivals," on which the movie is loosely based, but that was only a starting point. As his research continued, Kushner spent a weekend with prominent Lincoln scholars and, later on, studied Lincoln's coinage as well as the vernacular of the 1860s. It paid off.

According to a [Boston Globe story](#) by language expert Ben Zimmer, "Kushner so immersed himself in the president's earthy yet powerful language that he eventually felt comfortable coining his own Lincolnese."

Remember his initial misgivings? "I [couldn't] imagine writing lines for Abraham Lincoln to say." A lot of research goes a long way.

Tip: Read up on the subject. Interview the necessary people. Check out the data. You should have more information than you put in the story. Don't start writing until you know the topic as well as you can. You'll be amazed at how much easier it makes the writing process.

Invest in a good dictionary.

As part of his research on 1860s vernacular, Kushner leaned on his 20-volume print edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, according to [Zimmer's story in the Globe](#).

The complete set "includes deep histories of all its entry words, with examples," Zimmer wrote. Kushner bought the dictionary with his first paychecks from his 1993 Broadway play, "Angels in America," which earned him a Pulitzer Prize.

Tip: Stop using the same old verbs and adjectives. Crack a dictionary, or visit any of the number of free online dictionaries, to discover uncommon, vibrant words.