

SCREENPLAY COVERAGE

Project Hail Mary

Early draft, 12/15/22

WRITER

Drew Goddard (based on
the novel by Andy Weir)

GENRE

Science Fiction / Drama

FORMAT

Feature film

COVERAGE DATE

March 28, 2026

LOGLINE

A disgraced scientist awakens alone on a spacecraft in a distant solar system with no memory of how he got there, and must forge an unlikely alliance with an alien engineer to save both their worlds from extinction while confronting his own cowardice.

FINAL SCORE

7.60_{/10}

RECOMMEND

PASS · CONSIDER ·
RECOMMEND

SCORECARD

CATEGORY		SCORE	WEIGHT	WEIGHTED
Concept & Premise		8/10	20%	1.60
Structure		7/10	20%	1.40
Characters		8/10	40%	3.20
Dialogue		7/10	20%	1.40
Final score			100%	7.60/10

SYNOPSIS

Dr. Ryland Grace awakens from a coma aboard the spacecraft Hail Mary with no memory of his identity or mission. He discovers he's in the Tau Ceti system, twelve light-years from Earth, with two dead crewmates and only forty days of fuel remaining. Through fragmented flashbacks, we learn that Earth faces extinction: a microorganism called Astrophage is consuming the sun's energy, and Grace, a disgraced molecular biologist turned sixth-grade teacher, was recruited by the ruthless Eva Stratt to study the organism and eventually train the crew for humanity's desperate interstellar mission.

Grace's memories reveal he was not a volunteer. When he refused to join the suicide mission, Stratt had him sedated and placed aboard against his will. Now alone and facing certain death, Grace must complete the mission: discover why Tau Ceti remains uninfected while neighboring stars die.

His isolation ends when an alien spacecraft approaches. Grace makes first contact with Rocky, an engineer from the planet Erid in the 40 Eridani system, who has come to Tau Ceti for the same reason: his star is also dying. Despite their radically different biologies (Rocky breathes ammonia at crushing pressures and "sees" through sonar), the two scientists develop a communication system and form a genuine friendship. They discover that Tau Ceti hosts a predator organism, Taumoeba, that consumes Astrophage and keeps the star healthy.

After successfully breeding a nitrogen-resistant strain of Taumoeba that can survive in both their home systems, Grace and Rocky prepare to part ways. Rocky offers Grace enough Astrophage fuel to return home, a gift that reduces Grace to tears, as he had accepted his death. But when Grace discovers that the Taumoeba has evolved to penetrate xenonite (the material comprising Rocky's ship), he realizes his friend will die alone in space, his fuel consumed, his life support failing.

Faced with the choice between going home and saving Rocky, Grace launches the Taumoeba samples toward Earth in unmanned probes and turns back to rescue his friend. Sixteen years later, Grace lives in a specially constructed habitat on Erid, teaching a classroom of young Eridians. He receives word that Earth's sun has returned to full luminance: the mission succeeded. Grace has found his purpose, not as a coward who fled responsibility, but as a teacher who chose sacrifice over self-preservation.

ANALYSIS

Concept & Premise

8/10

The premise of Hail Mary operates on multiple levels of conceptual sophistication that elevate it well beyond standard science fiction fare. On the surface, the script presents a compelling survival narrative, a man alone in space must solve an extinction-level problem, but the deeper conceptual architecture reveals something far more ambitious: a meditation on cowardice, redemption, and the nature of heroism that uses hard science fiction as its dramatic vehicle.

The central conceit of the Astrophage, an organism that consumes stellar energy and uses light for propulsion, demonstrates the kind of rigorous scientific imagination that grounds the fantastical elements in plausibility. More importantly, the screenplay understands that the science must serve character rather than the reverse. The Astrophage isn't merely a plot device; it's the mechanism through which Grace's internal journey becomes externalized. His expertise in non-water-based life forms, the very theory that got him "fired in disgrace," becomes the key to humanity's salvation. This creates elegant thematic resonance: the outsider's perspective, rejected by the establishment, proves essential when conventional thinking fails.

The first contact element with Rocky represents perhaps the script's most commercially viable hook while simultaneously being its most emotionally sophisticated component. The writers sidestep the tired tropes of alien encounter narratives: no invasion, no incomprehensible otherness, no convenient universal translators. Instead, they present the painstaking, scientifically grounded process of two intelligent beings learning to communicate through mathematics, physical demonstration, and eventually a cobbled-together translation system. The choice to make Rocky "blind" in the human sense but perceptive through sonar creates genuine dramatic obstacles while avoiding the visual-effects-driven spectacle that often substitutes for actual storytelling in the genre.

The elevator test for this concept yields an immediate affirmative: "A scientist with no memory wakes up alone on a spaceship in another solar system and must team up with an alien to save both their worlds." The pitch contains inherent dramatic tension, clear stakes, and emotional accessibility. The comparables are strong (The Martian meets Arrival meets Cast Away) yet the execution feels fresh rather than derivative.

Where the concept truly distinguishes itself is in its structural inversion of the hero's journey. Grace is not a reluctant hero who rises to the occasion; he's a genuine coward who refuses the call and must be literally kidnapped into heroism. This subversion creates far more interesting dramatic territory than the standard "ordinary person discovers extraordinary courage" arc. The concept asks: what happens when someone who doesn't want to be a hero is forced into the role anyway? And more provocatively: can cowardice and heroism coexist in the same person?

Structure

7/10

The screenplay employs a non-linear structure that interweaves Grace's present-day survival aboard the Hail Mary with flashbacks revealing how he arrived there. This approach serves multiple functions: it creates mystery around Grace's circumstances, allows for gradual revelation of character, and maintains narrative momentum by alternating between action-oriented present sequences and exposition-heavy past sequences. The technique is well executed, with flashbacks triggered by associative memory rather than arbitrary insertion, giving the structure organic coherence.

The inciting incident operates on two temporal planes. In the present timeline, Grace's awakening and discovery of his situation functions as the catalyst, occurring within the first ten pages as required. In the flashback timeline, Stratt's recruitment of Grace establishes the deeper inciting incident, the moment his ordinary world was irrevocably disrupted. This dual structure creates satisfying dramatic irony: we experience Grace's confusion while gradually understanding more than he does about his circumstances.

The midpoint arrives with appropriate structural precision when Grace and Rocky successfully isolate the Taumoeba predator and realize they have found the solution to save both their worlds. This represents a genuine shift in the narrative's direction, from "can we solve the problem?" to "can we get the solution home?", and raises the stakes by introducing the possibility of success rather than merely staving off failure.

However, the structure exhibits some notable weaknesses in its second act. The extended sequences of Grace and Rocky developing their communication system, while scientifically fascinating and emotionally engaging, occasionally sacrifice dramatic momentum for procedural detail. The screenplay sometimes reads more like a documentary of first contact than a dramatically urgent narrative. Several scenes in the middle section, particularly the extended "show and tell" sequences where Grace explains Earth concepts to Rocky, function more as charming character moments than as scenes that advance the plot or deepen conflict.

The third act pivot, when Grace discovers the Taumoeba has evolved to penetrate xenonite and realizes Rocky will die, provides the structural climax the narrative requires. This moment forces Grace to make the defining choice of his arc: return home as planned, or sacrifice his only chance at survival to save his friend. The structure earns this moment through careful setup: we understand exactly what Grace is giving up because we've seen his desperate hope when Rocky offered him fuel, and we've witnessed his genuine terror at the prospect of dying alone.

The flashback revealing Grace's forced conscription arrives at precisely the right structural moment, recontextualizing everything we've witnessed. The revelation that Grace was not a volunteer but a

kidnapping victim adds moral complexity to both his character and Stratt's, while explaining his earlier claim that he's "not as brave as you think." This choice transforms what could have been a straightforward hero narrative into something more nuanced: a story about a man who becomes heroic despite, or perhaps because of, his fundamental cowardice.

The epilogue, set sixteen years later on Erid, provides necessary closure while avoiding the trap of over-explanation. We learn that Earth's sun has recovered, confirming the mission's success, but the screenplay wisely focuses on Grace's personal resolution, his choice to remain on Erid as a teacher, rather than dwelling on the global implications. The final image of Grace teaching Eridian children creates perfect thematic symmetry with his introduction as a sixth-grade teacher, suggesting that heroism, for Grace, was never about grand gestures but about showing up for others.

Characters

8/10

Grace is a genuinely three-dimensional protagonist whose complexity emerges not from contradictory traits artificially imposed but from the organic tension between his intellectual capability and his emotional limitations. He is brilliant enough to solve problems that baffle the world's leading scientists, yet so fundamentally afraid of death that he refuses to volunteer for the mission that could save humanity. This contradiction doesn't feel manufactured because the screenplay takes time to establish both dimensions: we see his scientific passion in the classroom scenes and his desperate self-preservation in the confrontation with Stratt.

The screenplay's treatment of Grace's cowardice deserves particular attention because it refuses the easy redemption arc. Grace doesn't overcome his fear through some convenient epiphany. He remains afraid throughout. What changes is his relationship to that fear: he learns to act despite it rather than transcending it. When he chooses to save Rocky instead of returning home, he's not suddenly brave; he's making a conscious decision that his friendship matters more than his survival. This is far more psychologically honest than the typical hero's journey transformation.

Grace's agency operates on multiple levels. In the present timeline, he drives the narrative through his scientific problem-solving and his choices in building the relationship with Rocky. In the flashback timeline, his agency is deliberately constrained (he's a pawn in Stratt's larger game) which creates productive tension with his present-day autonomy. The screenplay understands that agency doesn't require constant action; Grace's most significant choice is turning back for Rocky, a choice that gains power precisely because we've seen how desperately he wanted to go home.

Rocky functions as both a fully realized character and a mirror for Grace's development. Despite being an alien with radically different biology and perception, Rocky emerges as emotionally accessible through his enthusiasm, his loneliness, and his genuine care for Grace. The screenplay achieves the remarkable feat of making an eyeless, rock-skinned, ammonia-breathing creature feel more human than many human characters in contemporary screenplays. Rocky's defining characteristic, his engineering ingenuity, serves the plot while establishing his personality: he's a problem-solver, a builder, someone who responds to challenges by creating solutions.

The relationship between Grace and Rocky is the screenplay's greatest character achievement. Their friendship develops through earned moments rather than narrative convenience. The early scenes of painstaking communication establish mutual respect; the middle scenes of shared problem-solving build genuine affection; the late scenes of vulnerability (watching each other sleep, sharing stories of home) create emotional intimacy. When Grace chooses to sacrifice his return home for Rocky, the choice feels inevitable because the screenplay has done the work of making their friendship matter.

Eva Stratt presents a more complicated case. She functions primarily as an antagonist-ally, the force that compels Grace into action against his will. Her characterization walks a careful line: she must be sympathetic enough that we understand her choices while ruthless enough that her kidnapping of Grace feels genuinely violating. The screenplay largely succeeds, presenting Stratt as someone who has subordinated all human warmth to the demands of her mission. Her line "There is greater purpose to life beyond the self" encapsulates both her philosophy and her limitation: she's right about the principle but wrong about the method.

The secondary characters (Yao, Ilyukhina, Dubois) receive efficient characterization that establishes their presence without demanding excessive screen time. Their casual discussion of preferred methods of death establishes the mission's stakes while revealing character through their different approaches to mortality. They exist primarily to populate Grace's world and to make his eventual isolation more poignant, and the screenplay uses them effectively for these purposes.

Dialogue

7/10

The dialogue in Hail Mary operates across several distinct registers. The scientific exposition, which could easily become deadening, is rendered accessible through Grace's teacher persona: he's accustomed to explaining complex concepts to sixth-graders, and this carries into his explanations for the audience. Lines like "Think of it like... algae, right?" and "Bad space algae is eating the sun?" show the screenplay's strategy of using Grace's pedagogical instincts to naturalize exposition.

The classroom scenes establish Grace's voice effectively: he's warm but slightly irreverent, treating his students as intellectual equals while maintaining appropriate boundaries. His line "I'm not giving you points for that, Silas. It's written right here on the board" captures both his teaching style and his personality. These early scenes do essential work in making Grace likeable before the narrative reveals his more complicated qualities.

The dialogue between Grace and Rocky presents unique challenges that the screenplay navigates with considerable skill. The translation conceit, Rocky's whale-song language rendered through Grace's cobbled-together software, allows for both humor and pathos. Rocky's occasional malapropisms ("Fist me!") provide comic relief while his simpler constructions ("I alone. Sad sad sad.") convey genuine emotional weight. His limited vocabulary forces an emotional directness that would feel on-the-nose from a human character but feels authentic from an alien learning to communicate.

However, the dialogue occasionally falls into explanatory territory, particularly in the scientific sequences. Lines like "Astrophage turns energy into mass. Then, when it wants the energy back, it turns that mass into light" function more as audience education than character expression. There are moments where characters explain concepts to each other that both would already understand, violating the principle of dramatic naturalism.

The Stratt-Grace exchanges are the dialogue's strongest moments. Their verbal sparring crackles with tension because both characters are intelligent and neither is willing to concede ground. "You can't convince me" / "I'm not trying to convince you, Dr. Grace. I'm trying to help you understand what I'm about to do next" exemplifies the screenplay's ability to generate tension through dialogue alone. The power dynamic shifts with each exchange, and the dialogue tracks these shifts precisely.

The use of subtext improves as the screenplay progresses. Early scenes tend toward directness, but the later scenes between Grace and Rocky develop genuine subtext. When Grace tells Rocky "I'm not as brave as you think I am," the line carries weight because we understand what he's not saying: that he was forced onto this mission, that his presence represents failure rather than courage. Rocky's

response, "You are bravest human I have ever met," works as both a joke and a genuine expression of admiration.

The dialogue's primary weakness is occasional over-reliance on humor to deflect emotional moments. Grace's tendency toward quips sometimes undercuts scenes that would benefit from sustained emotional engagement. This is a character-appropriate choice (Grace uses humor as a defense mechanism) but the screenplay sometimes lets the defense succeed when it should fail, preventing scenes from reaching their full emotional potential.

COMPARABLE FILMS

The Martian

Ridley Scott, 2015

Proved the audience appetite for scientifically rigorous survival narratives.

Arrival

Denis Villeneuve, 2016

Showed that a thoughtful first-contact story can succeed with critics and at the box office.

Interstellar

Christopher Nolan, 2014

Audiences embrace emotional complexity in big-canvas science fiction.

Cast Away

Robert Zemeckis, 2000

A lone survivor whose isolation becomes the engine of character change.

Hail Mary is a sophisticated piece of science fiction that successfully balances hard science concepts with genuine emotional resonance. Its greatest achievement is the central relationship between Grace and Rocky, a friendship that feels earned, meaningful, and ultimately moving despite (or perhaps because of) the radical differences between the characters. This relationship elevates what could have been a competent survival thriller into something more lasting: a meditation on connection, sacrifice, and the nature of heroism.

Commercial viability is strong. It offers the spectacle expected of big-budget science fiction (alien worlds, space travel, extinction-level stakes) while grounding that spectacle in character-driven drama. The screenplay requires relatively minor revision. The second act would benefit from tightening; some extended communication-building sequences could be condensed without losing their function. Certain expository passages could be rendered more dramatically, and a pass focused on flashback transitions would strengthen the overall pacing.

Production demands are significant but manageable. The two-hander structure (once Rocky appears) limits cast requirements, while the confined settings, primarily the Hail Mary interior, allow for controlled production design. Rocky's lack of conventional features (no eyes, no mouth) simplifies certain aspects of creature creation while demanding creative solutions for emotional expression.

This is a screenplay that understands what science fiction does best: it uses the extraordinary to illuminate the ordinary. Grace's journey from reluctant coward to willing sacrifice resonates because it refuses easy answers. He doesn't become brave; he becomes someone who acts despite his fear, which is perhaps the only kind of courage that matters. The screenplay earns its emotional climax and delivers a conclusion that satisfies without sentimentalizing.

DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

2-3 weeks of polish to address second-act pacing and tighten expository dialogue. The architecture is sound: refinement, not restructuring.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommend for development and production.

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