

The Science in Sci-Fi

Scientists have consulted on the superhero flick *The Avengers*, the sci-fi hit *Interstellar* and TV shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* The director of *Thor* brought in an expert physicist to help hammer out a plausible explanation for how the movie's hero travels so quickly across space. Scientists guide the creation of real-looking special effects. They can help make a story more accurate. And sometimes, their research even inspires the stories that end up on the Big Screen.

Improved access to real expertise has encouraged Hollywood to give science a bigger role. Since 2008, the Science and Entertainment Exchange has helped that happen by connecting scientists and filmmakers. The Exchange, based in Los Angeles, Calif., is part of the [National Academy of Science](#)^[1][s](#)^[1]. This nonprofit organization provides scientific expertise to the public "Each year since we started the Exchange, the number of consults we've done on film and TV projects has increased," says Rick Loverd, the group's director. In fact, the Exchange recently celebrated its thousandth match.

There is more science in Hollywood because moviegoers demand it. "Audiences are getting smarter," explains David Kirby. He trained as a geneticist but now studies the link between science and film at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. He's even written a book about it, called *Lab Coats in Hollywood* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

Kirby says that after more than a century of moviemaking, people are "becoming better at being an audience." They can tell what looks real and what looks fake. And audiences definitely want their films to look and feel authentic.

Or, as Loverd says, a movie has to pass the audience's "smell test." If the movie stinks, it bombs.

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