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FOR SCREENWRITERS

WRITE A LOGLINE

TO LAUNCH YOUR SCREENPLAY

WHAT TO INCLUDE, WHEN TO WRITE
IT, AND HOW TO AVOID THE MOST
COMMON MISTAKES

Welcome

Loglines. They strike fear in the hearts of writers. If you've tried to write them, you know: sometimes it feels nearly impossible to distill an entire movie into one pithy sentence.

Yet you keep at it. Because one great sentence can pitch your project, hook a reader, and open the right door.

And loglines aren't only for pitching your finished screenplay.

Working out your story idea in one sentence is also a valuable part of the development process. Meaning, writing a logline – that one sentence encapsulation of your story – can be a great way to start your screenplay. It's a low investment of time and effort that delivers real benefits.

The greatest benefit may simply be that it gets you started on your screenplay. This is your momentum builder. With just one sentence, you begin to shape your story.

If you've thought about writing a screenplay but don't know where to start, or if you've started and stopped one (or more), and found yourself feeling lost in the process, then this guide will help.

We'll cover a straightforward way to write your logline, the sentence that will launch your screenplay on the right foot. And we'll talk about a few of the most common pitfalls writers might stumble into, and how to avoid them.

WHO AM I?

Since I'll be your guide for the next 15 or so pages, I thought I should take a second and introduce myself.

Hi, I'm Naomi. I've been a professional screenplay reader and consultant for over a decade. I started out in development at Madonna and Guy Oseary's production company, and since then I've read thousands of scripts and worked with hundreds of writers through one-on-one consulting and teaching story structure for Save the Cat. I've also worked with producers internationally, including consulting on the 2016 Raindance Film Festival "Indie Film of the Year" winner, *Selling Isobel*.

If you find this guide useful, or have questions about anything it contains, I'd love to hear from you. Reach me anytime at naomi@writeandco.com

Thank you for allowing this brief introduction. Let's get started.

What is a logline?

A logline is the briefest possible description of the story contained in your screenplay. At its most basic, it's "Someone wants something and goes after it against great obstacles."

A good logline tells enough to convey a solid sense of the movie, but is succinct enough that the listener doesn't get bored or confused. It answers the "what is it" question, clearly and enticingly.

It's one sentence (two, if necessary) that tells us what we're in for when we watch your movie or read your screenplay.

WHEN TO WRITE A LOGLINE

There are two main reasons writers decide to write loglines:

1. They have a polished draft and are getting ready to pitch the project via query letter, pitch fest, networking, or other opportunities. In these cases, the logline serves as a selling tool.

2. They have an idea for a screenplay and writing the logline is part of fleshing out that idea. In these cases, the logline serves as a development tool.

Loglines for either purpose are essentially the same. As a selling tool you may want to give extra attention to word choice in order to "sell" the idea, and as a development tool you may include longer descriptions for your own benefit that you'd then pare down for a more streamlined presentation later. Either way you'll include the same basic elements.

However, each scenario brings its own challenges.

Once an entire screenplay is written and polished, trying to boil it down to one sentence can be tough. Such familiarity with a story can make it hard to identify just the essentials for a logline. It's like getting lost in the trees while trying to describe the forest.

In early development of an idea, not much is known about the finished screenplay. How could it be, if the screenplay hasn't been written. Most of the choices that will shape the final product haven't yet been made. So coming up with a logline that encapsulates the finished product can be challenging. These early loglines often start out vague because the details are still unknown.

But if you're going to write a screenplay, at some point you have to start making those choices. Later you may find the need to alter them but you'll never know that unless you start putting some stakes in the ground.

Loglines offer an opportunity to begin to test out some of those choices with a pretty small up-front investment. It doesn't take too much time or effort to put together a logline, or several. And with a logline you can begin to gauge if a story works, if there's enough there for a movie, if there's enough to hold your interest long enough to write it, and if it sparks any interest in prospective audience members.

How to write a logline

To write your logline, take the essential components of the story and craft the catchiest sentence you can. Easy, right?

Approaching it incrementally helps, since it allows you to focus on one thing at a time:

1. Identify the essential components
2. Put it all together in one sentence
3. Tweak and polish

STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

What are the essential story components you want to identify?

+ A character
+ A goal
+ An antagonistic force or core obstacle (i.e. the main conflict on which the story is built)

Let's get a little more detail on each of these.

A CHARACTER

The vast majority of movies (and screenplays) are about one particular person pursuing one particular goal. That person is usually the character in the story with the most to lose, who has the singular ability to bring about the story's outcome. Most likely, that's your protagonist and the one you want to make sure to include in the logline.

The protagonist should be active in the story. He/she should have the ability to make choices and take actions that will drive the outcome. This will be conveyed in the logline.

How you describe your main character in the logline will give us a sense of his/her function in the story as well. One go-to method is to define your character with a concise [personality descriptor + stage of life or career descriptor], like "bitter ex-cop," or "naive widower."

A caveat: Only include descriptors that are relevant to your story. When we can see the connections between the elements, the story has a sense of cohesiveness. But providing unnecessary details will overload and unfocus a logline.

A GOAL

We're talking about the specific, external goal that is the focus of the story. The pursuit of this goal is what moves the plot. And when the audience knows the outcome of the goal the story is essentially over (although there is usually some wrapping up or showing us the effects of the outcome, before the credits roll).

Movie goals work best if there's a visual barometer for them – a defining image that captures victory.

And a screenplay needs a goal that will take most of the movie to achieve. That means it should be difficult, either due to the nature of the goal itself, or because the opposition to the goal is so strong. Which takes us to…

AN ANTAGONISTIC FORCE

Without conflict, there is no story. As mentioned above, when the character achieves his/her goal, the story is over. If there's nothing significant standing in the way then it'll be a pretty short story.

Conflict in a screenplay can occur on many levels, but here we're talking about the main source, at a story level. The single biggest force of antagonism that's getting in the way of your character achieving his/her goal.

Antagonists are not necessarily evil or villainous, though they can be. Remember: whatever form it takes, the antagonist is simply the main cause of opposition or conflict that's keeping the protagonist from getting what he/she wants (the goal) in this story.

STEP 2: PUT IT ALL TOGETHER IN ONE SENTENCE

Yes, that one sentence will probably feel messy and grammatically incorrect and almost incoherent, especially at first. But it's going to contain the essentials and that's where you want to start. So you'll put them all together as best you can, and then iterate and refine until it flows.

STEP 3: TWEAK AND POLISH

Once you have the essentials and the sentence is taking shape, consider what additional context may be needed. This can include things like establishing the unique world or how the character pursues his goal, or what's at stake if he fails.

Think in terms of any additional information that might be needed to fully grasp the logic of the story or the appeal of the movie. And you may not need any additional information at all beyond the essentials.

Remember: character + goal + conflict forms the core of the story. Clarity and specificity of those elements is more important than catchy phrasing.

A quick example:

If we were to write a logline for the movie **The Ring**, we'd identify these elements:

A character — single mom and journalist
A goal — stop the curse
An antagonist — the mysterious curse that kills people in seven days

And a first stab at a logline might look something like:

"When a single mom watches a cursed videotape, she has seven days to solve the mystery and stop the curse before it kills her."

Now, this may not be the most elegant logline ever written. But you can see how putting just those basic elements together in a sentence conveys the story we'll see in that movie.

Common logline problems

As you might already have guessed, if a logline is missing any of the basic story components, that can be a red flag signaling weaknesses in the story or screenplay itself. But that's not to say there's definitely a problem – perhaps the logline just needs to be tweaked to better convey the essential elements.

Here are four of the most common stumbles I see with loglines, and some tips for avoiding them.

1. STOPPING AT THE SET-UP

Earlier I pointed out the essential elements of a logline as: "Someone (the protagonist) wants something (the story goal) and goes after it against great obstacles (the antagonist and the conflict)."

The "goes after it against great obstacles" portion is vital to a good logline, and the most often overlooked.

What does "goes after it against great obstacles" give us? Act 2.

Act 2 is where we show off the promise of the premise. It's the main action. The adventure. The meat of the movie.

If you're describing a sandwich, you don't stop after what kind of bread it's on, right? You'd tell us all about the delicious stuff in the middle. So if you're describing a movie, give us an idea of what we're going to bite into.

Often writers think a logline is more enticing if it's mysterious – and that can be the case. But a logline's function is to give us a true sense of the movie. It doesn't have to give away the ending, but it also shouldn't stop after the Set-Up. We should have an idea what we'll be watching on screen for the bulk of our time in the theater.

Get Out isn't about Chris getting to Rose's family's house. It's about what happens once he's there – figuring out what's really going on, and trying to get away intact. Trying to get out.

Hell or High Water isn't just about the brothers starting to rob banks. It's about them trying to keep it together long enough to execute that plan, before they're caught by the lawmen on their tail – to get the stolen money to their bank before the foreclosure deadline, come hell or high water.

Although it is necessary in a logline to include the Set-Up for context, don't stop there. Remember to include a description of what's happening in Act 2. That's what tells us what kind of movie we're buying.

And in the development phase, it helps you gauge whether you know what kind of movie you're writing.

2. NO ACT 2

"Wait," you're saying. "Isn't this the same as #1?" Though there may be some overlap, they're worth looking at separately because this is a sneaky pitfall all its own.

Leaving out a description of Act 2 is a different thing than not having an Act 2 at all. Thinking you have an Act 2 when you don't is what we're talking about here.

If Act 2 is all about pursuing the story goal, then that goal must be something that's difficult to achieve in order for the pursuit of it to sustain an entire screenplay. Forces of antagonism and other obstacles get in the way, but the goal itself should have an intrinsic degree of difficulty relative to the circumstances of your story.

Goals that can be achieved very quickly or easily are not going to be enough to write 100 pages about. And this is the problem we see in some loglines.

Loglines that hinge on a main action of "decide," or "choose," or "realize," or (sometimes) "discover," just might have a "No Act 2" problem. Not always, but often enough to double-check your work.

These are things that sound dramatic in a logline, but when you think about what they really mean – what they really look like on screen – you can see they don't bring much story stuff to the table.

A decision takes a second to make. Could coming to a very difficult decision be drawn out over a movie? Sure. But that's something you'll want to identify and begin to plan for early on, so you can find ways to dramatize it – and justify why the character isn't just flipping a coin so we can all go home.

So keep an eye on your logline for those sneaky phrases that seem more dramatic than they are. If the goal is something that can be done in a moment, you may find yourself running out of scenes to write.

How can you make sure that doesn't happen?

TEST YOUR GOAL

Once you've written out a version of your logline containing the essential elements, take a hard look at how you're conveying the goal.

+ What does pursuing the goal look like onscreen?
+ Can you picture the character completing this thing in one scene? (The answer, hopefully, is 'no'.)
+ What steps must be taken to achieve success? It's a good sign if there are several steps or phases required in accomplishing the goal.
+ Can you break the goal down into a few types of action that must be taken? In addition to a multi-step process to go through, it also bodes well for your screenplay if there's variety in the types of things the character will need to do to succeed.

For example, in **Die Hard**, if we identify John McClane's goal as "to save the hostages from the terrorists" we can see immediately that saving the hostages lends itself to a multi-step endeavor. Right? It's not just a matter of knocking on the door and asking for them to be handed over.

We can also see how that goal breaks down into several possible types of action. Act 2 might include:

+ Locating the hostages
+ Evading the terrorists
+ Attempting to signal for help
+ Causing a distraction
+ Disarming a bomb

If you can brainstorm several potential actions the character might need to take – even if you don't use all of them in your screenplay – you're probably on the right track.

So when you've written what sounds like a killer logline, give that story goal an extra look. Make sure it's difficult enough to sustain a screenplay.

3. DETAIL OVERLOAD

Including too many story details in a logline can be a challenge whether you're writing it in the development phase or after you have a finished and polished screenplay.

An overstuffed logline might result from being unable to clearly see the essentials once the whole picture is in place. That's an understandable instinct. You want to put ALL your movie's cool stuff in, and for good reason. You love the details of your story, and you're sure other people will too. Why wouldn't you include every last one in the logline?

Or sometimes it results from being unsure which ideas are essential because those decisions haven't yet been made. When you're still developing a story it's not completely solid in your mind. So detail overload can be an attempt to find the story in all the possibilities and a reluctance to rule anything out.

When it comes to loglines, brevity and clarity are your friends. A logline's first priority is to present the essential core of the story. Loglines can often support a few additional details, but not many.

Aiming for clarity and brevity will serve you well in any logline scenario. When you're developing an idea, writing a clear, straightforward logline can help you gain that solid grasp of the story that you need in order to flesh it out. When you're pitching, a logline that's too full of non-essential details hints at a writer who may not have a good grasp on his or her own story. Clarity and brevity make us feel like the storyteller is in command of the story.

How do you tackle a too-detailed logline? Go back to the beginning of the process. Identify the essentials:

Someone (the protagonist) wants something (the story goal) and goes after it against great odds and/or obstacles (the antagonist and the conflict).

Make it clear first… and pretty later.

4. NOT ENOUGH (SPECIFIC) DETAIL

Our final common logline stumble falls at the other end of the spectrum: not enough detail to differentiate.

Wait! But you just said —

Yes. You're right. I did say you don't want too much detail in a logline and that's still true. But neither do you want a logline that's stripped of anything that differentiates it from other similar ideas.

Sometimes when we boil a concept down too much, the logline becomes generic enough that it could describe any number of similar movies. Since the goal of the logline is to convey a sense of one movie — your movie — word choice is important and specificity is key.

For instance, when looking at the essentials of your story you might come up with a logline like: "A thief brings together a group of criminals with a plan to pull off the biggest heist of their careers."

This logline tells us the basic story, right? But it sounds like it could be any of about 50 existing movies. Is it ***Ocean's 11***? Or ***The Italian Job***? Or ***Now You See Me***? Or ***The Bank Job***? Or ***Heist***?

These are all very different movies that happen to share similar basic elements. Without enough specific detail in the logline, we wouldn't know which movie we were hearing about. But with some added detail and specificity of word choice we can see how each movie concept is different — and exactly what each offers in terms of cinematic experience and entertainment value.

Whether you're developing your idea or getting ready to pitch it, it's important to be able to identify what's unique and entertaining about your idea — and to include an indication of that in the logline as well.

Work your logline

WITH THESE 8 TEMPLATES

1. A [protagonist] risks [stakes] when he/she struggles against [antagonist] to [achieve goal].

2. After [an inciting incident], a [protagonist] must avoid [stakes] by [pursuing goal] against [main force of antagonism].

3. This one is based on Blake Snyder's famous logline template:

A [flawed protagonist] [takes action to pursue goal] despite [antagonist or obstacle], but when [midpoint that raises the stakes] happens he must learn [theme] before [all is lost].

4. [Title] is a [genre] about [protagonist] who [receives opportunity] and [pursues goal], in spite of the [antagonistic force] that jeopardizes the protagonist's [stakes].

5. [Title] is about a [protagonist] who [solves problem] by [main action to pursue goal], confronting [antagonist] in the process.

6. In the midst of [conflict or opposition], [protagonist] takes on [goal], but must [character arc] to get it.

7. [Protagonist] struggles to [goal] by [broad description of action] and experiences [opposition] that requires [character arc].

8. In order to [achieve goal successfully], [protagonist] must [character arc], but faces tremendous [opposition].

LOGLINE EXAMPLES

HELL OR HIGH WATER // Taylor Sheridan
Facing foreclosure of his family's farm, a divorced father and his ex-con brother team for a skillfully-calculated bank robbing spree that puts them on a collision course with two Texas Rangers determined to take them down.

Protagonist: a divorced father
Goal: rob banks
Opposition: determined Texas Rangers
Stakes: foreclosure of family farm

LARS AND THE REAL GIRL // Nancy Oliver
A grieving and delusional young man strikes up an unconventional relationship with a blow-up sex doll, despite his brother's disapproval and increasing demands on the doll's time as the community falls in love with her too.

Protagonist: grieving and delusional young man
Goal: relationship
Opposition: brother's disapproval and community's demands on doll's time

JAWS // Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb
When a killer great white shark begins to menace his small island community, the new police chief sets out to protect the town before more lives are lost.

Protagonist: new police chief
Goal: protect the town
Opposition: killer great white shark
Stakes: people's lives

Conclusion

Writing a good logline is an iterative process. The first attempt probably won't be perfect. Additional attempts may veer into each of the "problem" areas I described — and that's okay.

In fact, it's great. Try everything to see what works and what doesn't. It's all part of identifying the sweet spot for your particular logline and movie. And the nature of a logline means you can try every possible version since you're experimenting on a small scale of one sentence, rather than 100+ pages.

If you're working on a logline for your screenplay – whether to help with your own development, or because you're ready to pitch – remember the essentials. Identify the core of the story and describe it in one sentence. Add detail sparingly and deliberately to connect and complement the essentials.

Just as the essential elements and entertainment value should be clear in your screenplay, so should they be clear in your logline. A logline, after all, is a representation of your screenplay and your movie.

MY LOGLINE CHALLENGE TO YOU

Parts of this ebook were originally published on the Save the Cat! website in a blog post where I offered feedback to anyone willing to post their logline in the comments section. The post is still available for viewing and commenting, and if you'd like feedback on your logline you can post it there. Or, if you prefer private feedback, you can email me directly at naomi@writeandco.com

I can't wait to see your logline!

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