

# WRITING A LOGLINE

**Log Line:** A one or two sentence description that captures the unique & conflicting elements of your screenplay.

**Purpose of a Log Line:** Identify a protagonist, genre, inner & outer conflict, and lead towards a climax, without giving away the ending. They need to be short, easily recited during a conversation, and highly unique. The log line is not intended to tell the full story. Instead, it promotes the story in as few words as possible with the goal of attracting enough interest from a Producer so he/she requests to read a treatment or screenplay, which are salable material.

Include the following 5 elements to write a complete Log Line:

1. **Protagonist** – Identify a main character along with his/her profession. (Avoid names)
2. **Genre** – Reveal the story's setting when presenting the Conflict.
3. **Inner Conflict** – A personal issue for the Protagonist to overcome.
4. **Outer Conflict** – An action from the Protagonist that threatens the Antagonist.
5. **Climax** – Lead towards a major conflict between the Protagonist and Antagonist.

**Below is a more in-depth description of the function of a Logline.**

Before you write a single scene of your 120-page screenplay, try to express your film's logline in 27 words or less. Putting your concept to this simple, early test can help focus your narrative, gauge potential and save years of wasted effort.

Write your logline at the beginning – not the end

Typically, screenwriters sweat for months or years over a screenplay, going through endless drafts, major revisions and minor refinements. Only when the script is “finished”, and even then only at the request of the producer, will they write the logline. This is arse about. Here's why.

Writing the logline up front could save you years

I was recently asked to produce script notes for a project that has been in development for several years. Yet after reading just 10-15 pages of the screenplay I knew the project was in trouble because the fundamental concept wasn't sound. Thousands of dollars could have been spared and years could have been saved – if only the writer had first written a logline.

## **What is a logline?**

The logline is a single sentence description of your film's basic story idea in 27\* words or less. You might also hear it referred to as the concept or the premise. It's the concisely written version of what you say when people ask you the question, "So what's your film about?".

### **Why the logline is a good test of story – simplicity**

Film is a demanding medium. You have just an hour and a half – 2 hours if you're lucky – to tell your story. That's nothing. The average 300-page novel might take 6 hours to film – which is one reason why book adaptations are so hit-and-miss in the cinema. So good movies tend to have simple story ideas. The plots might be complex, but the concepts are almost always simple. That's why the logline is such a great test of film stories. One sentence. 27 words. If your story's too complex to be told in 27 words, then it's almost certainly too complicated for a 90 min movie.

### **Why the logline is a good test of story – marketability**

Writing films is tough but marketing them is even more difficult. How do you arrest people's attention in a one-sheet poster? How do you hook them with a tagline? How do you open a window in their diary with a 15 second trailer? Again, it's going to need to be a simple, easily communicatable idea. But it's also going to need to be immediately compelling. If you can't hook me in 27 words you'll have no chance with the cinema-going public.

## **What should you include in the logline?**

Learning to write loglines is an art in itself. Here are some tips for what you should include in those precious 27 words:

**Who is the hero?** – You should identify the protagonist (though not necessarily by name), the person whose story this is, the character with whom we are meant to identify. e.g. an aging baseball player, an alcoholic lawyer, a struggling single mother.

**What is the Quest?** – What does the hero want? What is the overarching external goal that is going to drive the events of the second act at least and possibly even the third act as well. e.g. has to kill a great white shark, rescue the princess from a dragon, find the groom.

**What is the hero's flaw?** – Stories are plots that force the hero to grow. What is your hero's failing? Does he lack courage or compassion? What sort of opportunity is there here for emotional growth? e.g. selfish, cowardly, greedy, materialistic, immoral, womanizing, ruthless, workaholic, obsessive.

**Where is the conflict?** – Drama is all about conflict so we need to understand why this quest is going to be difficult for the hero.

**What's at stake?** – For audiences to care, the hero has to have a very strong motivation. If they don't achieve this goal, the consequences are massive – in their eyes any way. You will generally try to convey in your logline what's at stake .

**Who is the antagonist?** – You won't always include the antagonist – unless it's a romantic comedy – but it can be a good way to establish the conflict and the impossibility of the hero's quest.

**What is the tone?** – If it's a comedy, it's a good idea to try to convey that through either the title or the logline.

**What's the USP** – In advertising, they used to talk about Unique Selling Point (USP). The thing that set the product apart from its competitors. What is it about your film that is most likely to appeal to the audience? Your logline should attempt to convey this quality or element to us. How do you do all that in 27 words? Yeah, it's not easy but here are some clues.

## How to write your logline

If you've read any Joseph Campbell or Chris Vogler, you'll know that we meet the hero in their Ordinary World, that they get a Call to Adventure and that this quest presents a challenge to their character. Consequently, it's often effective for your logline to have a structure something like this: When < flawed hero at start of story> is forced to <call to adventure>, he has to <opportunity for emotional growth> or risk <what's at stake>. What you don't include in the logline

There's one thing you shouldn't include in the logline. The ending. It must tease, tempt and demand that the person reads your script. Give away the ending in the logline and you've removed that need.

You also shouldn't include a goal that isn't concrete. e.g. "must find true love". What is that? How will we know when they've got it? The goal has to drive the drama so it needs to be specific.

### **Examples of film loglines:**

Here are some examples of loglines for well-known films:

#### **Schindler's List:**

When a materialistic, womanising Aryan industrialist discovers his Jewish workers are being sent to Nazi death camps, he risks his life and fortune to save them.

#### **Groundhog Day:**

An egotistical TV personality must relive the same day in small town Punxsutawney and be denied the girl of his dreams unless he can become more selfless.

#### **Raiders of the Lost Ark:**

A dashing archaeologist must reunite with the ex he dumped if he is to beat the Nazis to find the all-powerful lost Ark of the Covenant.

#### **Little Miss Sunshine:**

When a dysfunctional family reluctantly embarks on a road trip to a Californian junior beauty pageant it's forced to address its serious underlying tensions or fall apart forever.

#### **When Harry Met Sally:**

When a cynical anti-romantic befriends a cheery optimist he's forced to challenge his belief that men and women can't have a Platonic relationship.

**The Hangover:** After a wild Vegas Buck's Party, a dysfunctional bunch of guys wakes with no memory of last night, a tiger in the bathroom, and no groom.

Judging your logline – try to be objective

One of the great things about the logline is that it's almost self-regulating. The 27-word limit will make it impossible to communicate ideas that are too sprawling or ill-focused for a mainstream movie. However, just because you've written a logline that complies with the word limit doesn't mean you've got a blockbuster on your hands. Be honest in your assessment of your logline. Better still, give it to someone who isn't your lover, spouse or mother. Does it intrigue them? Do they want to know what happens? If not, chances are your idea isn't strong enough for a movie. If you're disciplined, you'll rework the idea or ditch it altogether. If you're a

fool, you'll persist and potentially waste years on a project that has only the slimmest chance of success.

### **Write it early and write it often**

I would encourage you to put your film idea to the logline test very early in the writing process. Trying to express the idea in a single sentence of 27 words can help distil the essence of your idea.

- Whose story is it?
- What do they want?
- What's stopping them getting it?
- What's at stake?

Constantly revisit your logline during the writing process. Is your story still true to the logline? Or have you strayed? Sometimes during the writing process you'll come up with an idea that takes the story in a new direction that you believe has even better potential. If so, rewrite your logline. Move from logline, to story, to screenplay, then back to logline again. In this way, you'll hopefully avoid the all-too-common mistake – of spending years writing a screenplay that either no-one wants to make or no-one wants to see.