**Logline**

**We’ve all had this experience … It’s Saturday night. You and your friends have decided to see a movie. One of you is picked to read the choices from the newspaper while the others listen and decide. And if you have ever been the one elected to read the film choices for the group, you have now had the experience of ‘pitching’ a movie – just like the pros. And just like the pros, you have been faced with the same problem. Yes, the film stars George Clooney; sure, it’s got amazing special effects: of course …**

**BUT WHAT IS IT ABOUT?**

If you can’t answer that question, you know it pretty quickly. If what the movie is about isn’t clear from the poster and the title, what are you going to say to describe it? Usually, what you’re left with, standing there, newspaper in hand, is telling your friend everything it’s not. What you heard. What a magazine said. And odds are that at the end of that feeble explanation, your friends will say what filmmakers everywhere fear most: “what else is playing?”

All because you couldn’t answer a simple question: “What is it about?” A good “What is it about?” is the coin of the realm.

**IT’S ABOUT A GUY (OR GIRL) WHO …**

A movie is not about an object. A shark (Jaws) or a sinking ship (Titanic) is not exciting enough to be the main subject of a movie. A story only becomes compelling when you involve people. A good story is told through the eyes of a main character.

Jaws as a movie becomes interesting when a lead character is included. Titanic becomes interesting when you care about the fate of the lead characters.

It has to be about someone. Why is this?

A movie has to have one or two main people we can focus our attention on, identify with, and want to root for. It’s like anything connected with trying to communicate an idea. The “who” is your way in. We, the audience, zero in on and project onto the “who” whether it’s an epic motion picture or a commercial. The “who” gives us someone to identify with.

It’s because it is easier to communicate an idea when someone is standing there experiencing it for us.

However, your lead character is not of any interest in his own right!

**CONFLICT – PRIMAL GOALS …**

We find people of interest, only when they want something but they cannot reach it (=conflict). How people react under these circumstances to achieve their goals whatever the cost, determines who they really are. This is what captures our imagination! Once you’ve got the hero, the motivation for the hero to succeed must be a basic one. What does X want? Well, if it’s a promotion at work, it better damn well be related to winning the hand of X’s beloved or saving up enough money to get X’s daughter an operation.

The perfect hero is the one who offers the most conflict in the situation, has the longest emotional journey, and has a primal goal we can all root for. It’s because primal urges get our attention. Survival, hunger, sex, protection of loved ones, fear of death grab us. The best ideas and the best characters must have basic needs, wants and desires. Basic!

Titanic: The dramatic aspect lies in the fact that Leonardo di Caprio is a lower class worker and Kate Winslett is born in high class. They fall in love but their love is impossible (=conflict). How will the find each other?

Let’s take out the danger. What if Titanic would not sink? Or if there was no love story? Where are the stakes then? To make an idea work you must have the fear of death. Give him stakes, real stakes. Primal stakes. Make the hero want something real and simple: survival, hunger, protection of loved ones, fear of death .. Otherwise it’s a corporate training film.

To make a filmplan work, you have to play with the characters in order to give your hero the most conflict, the longest journey, and the most primal goal to ‘amp up’ the idea for maximum impact.

Tell me a story about a guy who …

I can identify with

I can learn from

I have a compelling reason to follow

I believe deserves to win ..

And has stakes that are primal and ring true to me

**THE COUNTERFORCE**

Many times, the hero will do anything he is supposed to do. He’ll be proactive: he’ll seek out and overcome obstacles – and still we’ll be unimpressed. He’s such a nobody! He is so average, so unheroic, do insignificant! We don’t want to see nobodies onscreen, we want heroes!

We must throw a little more at him than he is able to take. So we need a bad guy. And making the bad guy badder automatically makes the hero bigger.

Think about James Bond. What makes James Bond a super spy isn’t the gadgets or the girl or the car. What makes him James Bond is Goldfinger, Dr No. How dull would 007 be if his enemy was a dull accountant who was juggling the books down at the local bank? Where would be the challenge in that? Suddenly the gadgets and the car and the charm aren’t necessary. James can just do a quick skip-trace on the internet and be done in time for Martini hour. He needs someone bigger to play with to make his own heroism bigger. He needs an antagonist whose powers match his own. Often the hero and the bad guy are two halves of the same person struggling for supremacy.

The protagonist’s conflict is caused by a counterforce. This counterforce can have many face and is called the antagonist.

In classic Disney stories this is often a cartoon character with an evil personality. However, a counterforce can also be abstract like ‘evil power’ or a social issue like in Titanic where ‘social class’ prohibits marriage between classes. In Batman “Dark Knight” conflict lies within Batman’s self. He no longer believes in himself (traditionally The Joker would be Batman’s antagonist)

**THE LOGLINE**

When you have found the perfect hero for your story and nailed down what his primal goal is, it’s time to build the logline. We discussed this ‘What is it about?’ in the beginning.

What’s the logline? A concise and informative summary of your entire screenplay in 20-30 words.

The logline tells the hero’s story. Who he is, who he’s up against, and what’s at stake. It is a one or two sentence pitch that tells you everything. It will become vital to your story as you continue to “beat it out” and eventually write it. By examining who your hero is and what his primal goal is, as well as the bad guy who is trying to stop him from achieving that goal, you can better identify and expand on the needs of your story.

A story is actually pretty simple. It’s about an interesting character who wants something badly and is having trouble getting it. And the logline should be no different. It’s essential that you have accomplished those three major components.

WHO is this interesting character in your film and why is he interesting?

WHAT does this character want? What is the central story line that drives the story forward?

OBSTACLE What is the main obstacle standing in his or her way preventing him or her from reaching their goal?

Argo: A CIA specialist concocts a covert operation to produce a fake Hollywood movie to rescue six American diplomats during the Iranian hostage crisis.

If you can’t say it in one sentence, you don’t know what it’s about!

So screenwriters first have to concentrate on one thing, on writing one sentence. One line. Because if you can learn how to tell me “What is it?” better, faster, and with more creativity, you’ll keep me interested. And by doing so before you start writing the script, you’ll make the story better too.

This one-line is called the logline. And it needs to be a good one! A logline is like the cover of a book: a good one makes you want to open it, right now, to find out what’s inside.

What makes it good?

The number one thing a good logline must have is irony. Irony gets your attention. It hooks your interest. It is a dramatic situation that is like an itch you have to scratch.

A businessman falls in love with a hooker he hires to be his date for the weekend – Pretty Woman

A land lubber sheriff tries to kill a giant shark to protect his family and seaside resort town - Jaws

The second most important element that a good logline has is that it has a compelling mental picture. It must bloom in your mind when you hear it. You must be able to see the whole movie in it. You see the movie, or at least the potential of it, and the mental images it creates offer the promise of more.

She’s the perfect woman ... Until she has a drink – Blind Date

I don’t know about you but I see it. I see a beautiful girl and a date gone bad and a guy who wants to save it because .. She’s the one.

Does your logline offer this? Does giving me the set-up of the movie make my imagination run wild with where I think the story will go?

It is incredibly easy to identify the weaknesses in your story before you’ve spent twelve weeks writing it.

If writing your log-line feels like herding cats, stop what you’re doing and go back to your story. Is it about someone who has no choice but to do something very difficult that he is uniquely unsuited to do? What is his plan to do it?

If your log-line is more like, “A high school football player moves to a small town to live with his grandmother and struggles to be accepted at his new school.”, I can tell that your story isn’t clear to you yet, because it should be way more specific than that.

A high school football star has to join the cheer-leading squad to protect his sports scholarship.

A high school football star falls for a nerd girl and has to become valedictorian to follow her to an Ivy League college.

Specific, rather than atmospheric. If you nail down your log-line BEFORE you write, it won’t bite you in the butt later

**THE PREMISE**

The difference between a photo, a sculpture or painting, and a film is ‘passage of time’. Action unfolds. Developments take place. Conflict leads to a resolution. And … character goes through changes! in film.

The protagonist’s potential TRANSFORMATION is fundamental

When you look at the value changed situations in the life of the characters at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value change at the end of the story, you should see the arc of the film, the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a change condition at the end. This final condition, this and change, must be absolute and irreversible.

This transformation is called the Character Arc. It reflects the way the character is transformed by the events of the story,

This transformation is what you capture in the premise. It can be simplified to: Something leads to something. The verb ‘leads’, shows the active component, the passage of time.

So it cannot be static like ‘power is greed’ but ‘power leads to greed’. ‘Uncertainty leads to beauty’.

Apart from a logline, every movie must have a premise.

A premise is something to be proved, something asserted as true; it is the writer’s truth concerning the great issues that confront human existence – the ideas and values that inform and confound us – love, death, loyalty, jealousy, prejudice.

A premise states what the story is about, what it means, rather than simply recounting what happens.

It conveys in a simple proposition the central truth of the story. Premises deal with universals, like love, courage, greed, freedom, justice, death, duty, play, the nature of our responsibilities to ourselves and to others…

A premise is a promise.

Your premise should point the direction and vividly illuminate the ultimate goal and meaning of the actions of the characters. It articulates for the writer and others the truth for which the screenplay offers evidence. If I say I’m going to tell you a story that proves love conquers everything, including death, I better make sure I’m giving you Romeo and Juliet.

**CONCLUSION: Lead character and primal goal are key to good storytelling**

It starts from the very beginning with that great logline that hooks us with someone to identify with as much as something. This is why in any good logline, there will always be a couple of good adjectives involved: a risk-aversed teacher who .. An insecure banker who .. Conjure an image of him or her that in some way epitomizes his essence or dramatic identity that has a bearing on his choices or actions. So you need an adjective!

This also goes for the antagonist who now must be described as an overprotective cop, a megalomanic terrorist, or a homocidal baker.

So, let’s add a few things to our list of what the perfect logline must include to be truly compelling:

An adjective to describe the hero

An adjective to describe the bad guy

A compelling goal we identify with as human beings. Is the action dramatic? What is at stake? Love? Death? Destruction of a way of life? The punishment of an innocent person?

By giving us even these thumbnail sketches of whom we are going to be following – as well as the bad guy who is trying to block our hero from achieving his goal – we get a better snapshot of what is involved so we can get interested in, and follow the story.

**The 10 Types of Movies**

**Monster in the house**

Jaws, Alien, Fatal Attraction, The Excorcist, horror ...

You’ve got two working parts. A monster. A house. And when you add people into that house, desperate to kill the monster, you’ve got a primal movie type that everyone understands. Stick the characters in a room, a building, a small village; put them in a spaceship, or on an island, or in a quarantined city. suddenly there's no place to run.

**Golden Fleece**

Inception, Star Wars, The Martian, Finding Nemo

The quest myth, often translated into road movies. A hero goes on the road in search of one thing and winds up discovering something else – himself. The essential ingredients are a road, which is the journey that must be made, and will provide signposts that indicate growth; the team or buddy the hero needs to guide him along the way, and who represents things the hero lacks, such as skill, experience, or attitude; and a prize to be won—going home, obtaining a treasure, securing a birthright, etc.

**Out of a bottle**

Groundhog Day, Liar Liar, What Women Want, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

This plot deals with wishes and curses.

On the wish side, we have a hero who makes a wish that gets unexpectedly granted, or gets it from an unexpected source. Then we get a classic wish fulfillment tale, although of course there's going to be problems.

On the curse side, we have the "comeuppance tales." Liar Liar and Groundhog Day both count. there "must be something redeemable" about the hero, because he's going to have to change his ways in order to survive. and, eventually, because he's finally worthy of it, the hero gets what he wanted all along (in Liar Liar, it's "the respect of his wife and son").

The three important ingredients are: a wish asked for by the hero or granted by another, and the clearly seen need to be delivered from the ordinary; the spell that sets up the situation, and which has "rules" that must be followed; and the lesson that is to be learned from the experience.

**Dude with a Problem**

Schindler’s List, Die Hard, Titanic, Baby Driver

An ordinary guy finds himself in extraordinary circumstances. as a man thrust into a situation you're ill-equipped to deal with, you've got the audience's sympathy almost from the get-go. as you try to defeat the aliens, or escape from the killer robot, or save your wife from the terrorists, we'll be pulling for you. and you'll eventually triumph over the villains

**Rites of Passage**

Moonlight, Juno, Never Let Me Go, Ordinary People

Every change of life story ... Here, the hero undergoes "pain and torment" from a vague force that turns out to be, well, life. Any sort of "life transitions" story fits under here.

The essential ingredients are a life problem that must be dealt with, a wrong way to attack the problem, usually a diversion from confronting the pain, and a solution that involves acceptance of a hard truth, and the knowledge that it's the hero who must change, not the world around him.

**Buddy Love**

Intouchables, Rain Man – every love story ever made ...

In general, the buddy love plot involves two characters who start off hating each other, realize that they need each other (and work well together!), hate that even more, conflict conflict conflict, have one big final fight... and then "surrender their egos to win.” the theme of this story can be boiled down to "my life changed for having known someone else"

**Whydunit**

JFK

Who cares who, it’s why that counts ... And the secret that the protagonist seeks to resolve ultimately forces him to take a dark turn somewhere, breaking the rules, even his own, in order to get to the bottom of the mystery. And once we've unraveled the mystery, we discover "something unexpected... dark and often unattractive" about human nature. this sort of tale makes us take a long look at ourselves and the things we're capable of.

**The Fool Triumphant**

Forrest Gump, Amadeus

An underdog... and an institution for that underdog to attack. The underdog, the overlooked, the ridiculous, and he's set against a goliath of an enemy, often an "establishment" bad guy. but they underestimate him, and because he's the fool, he's got the forces of luck and good nature on his side. he may not fully understand the danger he's in, but whatever his goal, he won't give up - and the villain doesn't stand a chance.

**Institutionalized**

MASH, One Flew over the Cuckoos Nest. Also family sagas ... American Beauty, The Godfather

This is about groups ... the story details the pros and cons of "putting the group ahead of ourselves." It honors the group - yet exposes "the problems of losing one's identity to it."

**Superhero**

Gladiator, Beautiful Mind

It's all "the plight of being misunderstood" and "gives flight to our greatest fantasies about our potential, while tempering those fantasies with a dose of reality."