



***DA VINCI INTERNATIONAL  
FILM ACADEMY***

***HOW TO WRITE A SYNOPSIS:  
LOGLINE  
MASTERS MODULE***

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## How to write a logline: Masters Module

Without a great logline, one that sums up the core conflict of the story, it's pretty hard to write a great script. This is because a screenplay logline contains the foundational DNA the whole movie is built on. It's struggle between all the major characters and essence of what's at stake.

In this module, we'll show you not only how to write a logline, but how to write good loglines that will grab the interest of execs, managers and producers.

Learn how to write a logline the smart way and you'll save yourself months of rewrites in the future by addressing problems at the foundational concept stage.

### Here's what we'll be covering in the lesson:

- What is a logline? A logline definition that will demystify the process
- How to write a logline using a simple logline formula
- Bad logline examples and how to fix them
- Some quick wins to rescue weak movie loglines
- A key rookie mistake when it comes to writing a logline

So, let's dive on in with the first section.

### What is a logline?

Here's a quick logline definition:

A logline is simply the script's core conflict summed up in one or two sentences.

By "core conflict" we mean the struggle between protagonist and antagonist that indicates to the reader what's at stake, the reason why they should watch this movie.

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of exactly what is a logline, let's take a look at a few sample loglines from famous movies.

## Film logline examples.

### *Drama.*

When his brother dies, a depressed handyman is forced to return to his hometown and confront his horrific past having been made sole guardian of his spirited 16-year-old nephew. (*Manchester by the Sea.*)

### *Comedy.*

Three buddies wake up from a bachelor party in Las Vegas, with no memory of the previous night and the bachelor missing. Now they must put together the pieces of the night before and get him to the altar before it's too late. (*The Hangover.*)

### *Action/Adventure.*

In 1936, archaeologist and adventurer Indiana Jones is hired by the US government to locate the ancient Ark of the Covenant before the Nazis, and stop them from becoming the most powerful army the world has ever known. (*Raiders of the Lost Ark.*)

### *Thriller.*

Two detectives—a rookie and a veteran—attempt to catch a serial killer who uses the seven deadly sins as his modus operandi before he kills again. (*Se7en.*)

### *Horror.*

A young couple becomes increasingly disturbed by a seemingly demonic presence in their new suburban home and must figure out how to stop it before it's too late. (*Paranormal Activity.*)

Imagine these movie loglines are for films that are yet to be released. Would you want to watch them? Imagine you're an exec who reads one of these loglines in a query letter or hears it in a pitch. Would you want to read the script?

The answer is probably yes because each logline makes you want to see the movie or read the script by perfectly encapsulating the core conflict inherent in the story.

So let's now take a look at just how to write a logline that gets people excited, makes them envisage the movie and want to read the script.

There are three elements that go toward creating great loglines. If you learn how to write a logline using this logline formula you'll be putting yourself at a major advantage over the thousands of specs scripts currently floating around Hollywood. And potentially save yourself some major headaches while writing the actual script.

### **The 3-way triangle of conflict.**

There is a simple logline template you can use when learning how to write a logline:

**Protagonist + Struggle with Antagonist + Death Stakes**

We like to call this the “three-way triangle of conflict” between **protagonist and antagonist** and it's an essential tool in building the best loglines possible.

In fact, the reason why so many movie loglines fail at the first hurdle is usually that they've missed out one of the three steps in that equation. But before we go into each of the steps in more detail, let's apply our three-way triangle of conflict logline formula to the ones we previously looked at:

#### **Drama.**

When his brother dies, a depressed handyman [**protagonist**] is forced to return to his hometown and confront his horrific past [**death stakes**] having been made sole guardian of his spirited 16-year-old nephew. [**struggle with antagonist**] (Manchester By The Sea.)

## Comedy.

Three buddies [protagonists] wake up from a bachelor party in Las Vegas, with no memory of the previous night and the bachelor missing. [Struggle with antagonist] Now they must put together the pieces of the night before and get him to the altar before it's too late. [Death stakes] (The Hangover.)

## Action/Adventure.

In 1936, archaeologist and adventurer Indiana Jones [protagonist] is hired by the US government to locate the ancient Ark of the Covenant before the Nazis [struggle with antagonist] and stop them from becoming the most powerful army the world has ever known. [death stakes] (Raiders of the Lost Ark.)

## Thriller.

Two detectives—a rookie and a veteran [protagonists]—attempt to catch a serial killer who uses the seven deadly sins as his modus operandi [struggle with antagonist] before he kills again. [death stakes] (Se7en.)

## Horror.

A young couple [protagonists] becomes increasingly disturbed by a seemingly demonic presence in their new suburban home [struggle with antagonist] and must figure out how to stop it before it's too late. [death stakes] (Paranormal Activity.)

As you can see, the script logline template of **Protagonist + Struggle with Antagonist + Death Stakes** can be applied to any genre of movie. And as in the case of the logline to Manchester by the Sea, don't necessarily have to go in the same order.

What's important is that there is a three-way triangle of conflict that gives a sense of the pressure the antagonist is going to put the protagonist under and why we should care.

You may be wondering why a drama like *Manchester by the Sea* or a comedy like *The Hangover* contains “death stakes.” We use this as a catch-all phrase because ultimately all stakes are about death.

The only difference between the stakes in an action/adventure, thriller or horror and those found in a drama or comedy is that in the former they're literal, while in the latter they're figurative. But we'll get into this in more detail later on in the post.

### **The power struggle.**

Essentially, a movie is a three-way power struggle between the **protagonist, antagonist and what's at stake**, usually personified in a stakes character.

### **How to write a logline step #1: add protagonist.**

A concept, story, or plot isn't much without a protagonist to identify with, and this should be the first thing you establish.

### **The thumbnail sketch.**

The trick, though, is to make sure you define your protagonist (or protagonists) as clearly and evocatively as you can in a short thumbnail sketch, for example:

- A female FBI cadet
- A middle-aged beach bum
- An aspiring pop singer

And so on... This is a great way of giving us an immediate impression of who we're rooting for, as jobs and life statuses often tend to hint at

personality too. Don't be afraid to add an adjective too: "an uptight businessman," "a confused graduate," "a meek hobbit of the Shire," etc.

In either case, always lean toward the specific when writing a logline rather than the general. Write "a frustrated office worker," rather than "an office worker," as it says more about who we're dealing with.

The trick is to build as specific and as vivid a thumbnail sketch of your protagonist as possible in as few words as possible. *"A loving father of four who works as a mechanic enjoys playing online poker, and dreams of one day emigrating to the US,"* could obviously do with some trimming.

### Should you add names?

There are no hard and fast rules over this, but it's not necessary to add names to movie loglines. We don't need to know, for example, that your protagonist is called Cindy Schwartzman, just that she's "a hard-nosed New York Post reporter."

On the other hand, if you think adding your protagonist's name to the logline helps conjure up an image of them in our mind, then go for it.

**How to write a logline step #2:** add struggle with antagonist. We could've called this step "Add Antagonist," but that would be to skip over an essential factor in creating great loglines: the pressure the protagonist is put under while struggling with the antagonist. It's much easier to come up with an effective concept and screenplay logline if you do it from the perspective of a protagonist's struggle with an antagonist. Rather than simply "hero vs. villain," which feels static.

Your antagonist can be a physical person, a storm, a pack of wolves, an asteroid, or whatever you choose. What's important to get across in the logline is just how super frustrating this struggle will be for your protagonist.

By adding a struggle with an antagonist to any idea, concept or logline, it can be immediately improved.

### *Consider this logline.*

A failed novelist, still hung up on his ex, embarks on a wine-tasting road trip with a friend right before the latter's wedding.

It's not a bad logline for *Sideways*. It paints a good picture of who the protagonist is, and tells us the basic facts of what the story's about. But it's still missing something. And that something is the second step of the logline formula: **the struggle with an antagonist**.

The problem here is that "embarks on a wine tasting road trip with a friend right before the latter's wedding," doesn't give us any sense of the conflict. It's missing the struggle between the protagonist and antagonist.

### **A better version:**

A failed novelist, still hung up on his ex, struggles to handle his soon-to-be-married best friend's attempts to get them both together while on a wine-tasting road trip right before the wedding.

Once the protagonist has to struggle to do something, in this case "handle his soon-to-be-married best friend's attempts to get them both together while on a wine-tasting road trip", the logline immediately gains conflict and increases interest.

The stakes of "right before the wedding" are also increased because now we know the antagonist's intentions too.

Another popular mistake when writing movie loglines can be found below.



## Too vague.

A World War II nurse faces death at every turn in an epic story of love, loss and redemption.

These kinds of movie loglines summarize the conflict thematically but don't actually tell us what the actual conflict is. Or who the antagonist is. Make sure we can envisage how your protagonist will have to "struggle to overcome," "battle against," "clash with," "thwart," etc. an antagonist.

Adjectives like these really help the reader see the movie in a logline. They add movement to the story and are the best way of letting us imagine just what the protagonist's journey and conflict will entail throughout the film. If you have a hard time imagining who, or what, your protagonist struggles against, then you may need to go back to writing a logline which clearly addresses the conflict.

### **How to write a logline step #3: add death stakes.**

Many writers already appreciate that there needs to be something more at stake in a film than whether the protagonist buys a Ferrari or an Aston Martin, but still come unstuck producing major stakes for us to care about in the script logline. The reason for this is often that they're not applying **"death stakes."**

In order for a movie to have high enough stakes for an audience to care about, it needs in one way or another to be about the protagonist's death. Either literally, or figuratively. This is why we care so much about what happens in great films because they're about the highest stakes you can get: death.

### ***Death stakes in action/adventures, thrillers and horrors.***

These types of movies generally all involve literal death stakes for the protagonist (and often for others too—either their immediate family or the wider world.)

◆ ***Raiders of the Lost Ark.*** Indiana Jones is literally threatened with death at the hands of the Nazis, and so are millions of others if he doesn't stop them from capturing the Ark.

• ***Prisoners.*** Keller Dover has to find his missing daughter before she's literally killed.

• ***It Follows.*** Jay will actually be killed by the evil entity if she doesn't pass on the curse by sleeping with someone else.

### **Death stakes in dramas and comedies.**

The stakes in comedies and dramas, on the other hand, tend to revolve around the figurative death of the protagonist. This is because we know they're running the risk of never being healed or "complete" ever again. The stakes you need to focus on for protagonists in these genres are usually more personal and/or relationship related.

• ***27 Dresses.*** Jane will figuratively die inside if she continues to always be the bridesmaid and never find love herself.

• ***It's a Wonderful Life.*** George Bailey will figuratively die if he doesn't lead the life he wants, traveling and seeing the world.

• ***Planes, Trains and Automobiles.*** Neal's relationship with his wife and kids will figuratively die a little more if he doesn't make it home in time for Thanksgiving.

The number one thing you must do when writing a logline and considering the stakes of your movie is always ask yourself: ***How does my protagonist risk dying in this film, either literally or figuratively?***

### ***Add some death!***

If there's no clear sense of the protagonist's imminent death then a logline can usually be strengthened by adding it.

Many screenplays we receive for script coverage are weak because their initial concept is weak. In order to strengthen the concept, however, here are five quick wins that you can apply to any script.

### ***Ask yourself three key questions.***

If the concept is lacking, we advise writers to return to the logline stage and ask themselves the following three questions:

1. Who is my protagonist and what do they want?
2. Who (or what) are they struggling against while trying to achieve this?
3. What's at stake if my protagonist doesn't achieve what they want?

Asking yourself these questions should help show you what main areas need addressing in the logline.

### **How to write a logline: conclusion.**

When it comes to writing a logline you may have heard the phrase "concept is king." It's kind of a cliché, but that's because there's a lot of truth in it.

In Hollywood, you stand a much better chance of selling a spec screenplay with under-developed characters, but a great concept, than one with wonderful characters but an uninspiring concept.

Not all movies can be put in a box.

Yes, it's true that some movies that don't seem to have much of a three-way triangle of conflict and yet have been successful and/or gained a great following.