

SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Paerangi | Video 8 – Writing Your Logline and Pitching Your Idea

[intro music]

Writing a logline

[0:00:10 Morgan Leigh Stewart, Producer] A logline is a one-sentence summary of your story that can be used for marketing and development. I know it's super hard to cram your whole story down into one sentence but it can be such a useful tool for marketing, for getting people onboard your project, and for developing it. If you're having problems summarising your story down into a logline, it could also indicate that you have problems within your story itself, so it's worth trying different ways of creating a logline so that you can really clearly express what it's about. There's a great resource that I often use for writing loglines and it's from Raindance. It's like a 10-step guide to writing a logline, so you can start with the very basics and, by the end of going through these steps, you'll have a solid logline to work with.

[0:01:04 Karin Williams, Producer] For many people a logline is a pain in the arse. A logline is a second thought, an afterthought, something that you have to do for a funding application. Actually, a logline should probably be one of the *first* things you think about when you start working on your script, because the logline is a brief summary of the movie that you're going to make, which hooks the reader and describes the central conflict of the story.

A logline can be two different things. In some ways a logline is a promotional tool, it's a pitch, it's the thing that you put on a funding application or in the *TV Guide*, or in the film festival programme that says what your film is about. A logline might be used by a reader, an agent, crew, cast, producers, distributors, exhibitors; all of those people may see your logline, and some of them may be making up their mind about whether they're interested in your project or not, based on your logline, so a logline is actually a very important promotional tool. A logline can also be a diagnostic tool, and this is something that most people don't really know about loglines, but it can be really, really valuable in helping you to focus your story. Essentially the logline describes your film or your web series or your television series in no other project – so, for example: 'A national manhunt is ordered for a rebellious kid and his foster uncle who go missing in the wild New Zealand bush'. Now, that can only be one film, it's *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*. 'A rebellious kid and his uncle go missing in the wild New Zealand bush and a big manhunt ensues' – we all know that that's Taika's big film.

A logline needs to be concise – people often say no more than 35 words. It should include your central character, although not their name (and I'll talk about that later) and it should include the central conflict of the story. There is actually a formula that you can use or a couple of formulas that you can use for writing loglines, which I'm going to present to you now, and it's worth giving these a go and seeing how your story fits or doesn't fit into these formulas. So, the first one which you'll often see, begins with a protagonist: a main character does some kind of dramatic action or confronts some kind of conflict or inciting incident, and then faces some obstacles. So, when a main character does a major event, conflict arises. An example of that might be: 'When the ageing patriarch of an organised crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son, a gang war erupts over drugs and turf' – and that would be *The Godfather*, 1972 Best Picture, Actor, and Writer at the Oscars. So, in that case the main character is the ageing patriarch, Marlon Brando. He wants to transfer control of his crime empire to his son, Al Pacino, who is very reluctant, and then everybody starts fighting about it. So, that in a nutshell encapsulates *The Godfather*.

The second way you can approach a logline, and this is a more demanding formula, is to put the inciting incident up front – so, when some major event or conflict happens, the main character must do something in response. When a major event happens a main character must do an action or try to meet a goal. So, for example: 'When a terrorist plants a bomb aboard a city bus, a young police officer must prevent an explosion by keeping the bus above 50 miles an hour' – that's *Speed*, Oscar for Best Editing and Sound in 1994 and it spawned a sequel. So, when a terrorist plants a bomb, the bomb plant is the inciting incident; the young police officer or a rookie police officer

has to prevent an explosion by keeping the bus going above 50 miles an hour, so that is where your inciting incident comes first.

When writing a logline you will sometimes discover that you don't actually have an inciting incident or a main source of conflict, and that is a problem. This is how a logline can be used as a diagnostic tool. When you go to write out your protagonist, your inciting incident or conflict and the dramatic stakes, if those are not strong in your script you will discover that you're going to have a hard time writing a logline, and that is how a logline can be a diagnostic tool.

It's also important to differentiate between a logline and a tagline, and people often get these mixed up. The tagline is what goes on the poster and it's just a sort of promotional cute catchy phrase. One of the most famous ones of all time: 'In space, no one can hear you scream'. Great tagline for the movie *Alien*, 1979 Best Visual Effects for the Oscars. The logline for that might be something like: 'when a merchant space vessel touches down on a distant moon, a sinister alien lifeform invades their ship and the crew must battle for their lives', or something like that. So, tagline versus logline, not the same thing.

Synopsis versus logline, also not the same thing. A synopsis is a short description of your story, it should include the beginning, middle, and end of the story. In a synopsis don't hold back on letting us know what your conclusion is, because a synopsis is usually being used not for an audience but for a funder or a producer or a financier or distributor. So, a synopsis can be short, medium, or long, and it should describe or encapsulate your story and what happens on the screen.

Some of the problems that we encounter in loglines: Lack of dramatic conflict – this is the problem when you go to write your logline and you find out that, actually, the stakes weren't very high and nobody really had to solve a problem. Too long – we don't want them to be any longer than 25 or maybe 35 words. Generic, vague, forgettable or boring – those are things you do not want your logline to be. Your logline should specifically accurately describe your film, so it's not a coming of age story about a young woman who faces problems growing up, it's got to be something more specific.

A logline must be concise and the words have to work really hard, so if you only have 25 or 35 words, saying things like 'it's a film about...' or 'this is a story featuring...' is redundant. We know it's a film because it's a logline, we know it's a story because it's a story, so you can get rid of all that stuff and just cut straight to the case. Your logline should not include your protagonist's name. Nobody knew who Walter White was before he was Walter White, it doesn't mean anything to people who haven't read the script and it's a waste of words. Your logline needs to describe the character, so he might be an alcoholic chef or a terminally ill chemistry teacher, but he isn't Bob or Walter. I'm saying that your logline shouldn't include the genre, that the genre should come through in the logline. If there's a murderer on the loose you know it's gonna be a thriller or horror, if they're in outer space you know it's a sci-fi, so make those words work really hard for you.

Finally, it's absolutely critical that your logline, your synopsis, and your script match. Often we'll see loglines that are old, that are not the same as the script that has been submitted, or a synopsis that doesn't match the script, so always update your logline and your synopsis after a rewrite. At each draft you should be updating all your documents. And lastly I beg you, *please* proofread your copy. I have seen thousands of funding applications and scripts during my career and I would say 20 percent of them are full of typos, errors, and grammatical mistakes. Not everybody is great at proofreading and editing. If you're not great, get somebody to help you, but do not submit your documents with errors in them, because when I'm reading them, what I think is, well if that person couldn't be bothered to get rid of all the errors and the mistakes in their application or their script, then what are they gonna be like when we get to production? What are they gonna be like about details later on down the line? So remember to keep it brief, keep it concise, embody your central character and your central conflict, and also proofread.

[music]

How to pitch in person

[0:00:10 Morgan Leigh Stewart, Producer] Pitching in person can seem daunting but the goal of a pitch is to open a dialogue. You should also always lead with the story, and then what makes you excited about it, because the excitement part of things is infectious. For me, I try to think about what the dynamic element is, what is the thing that sets your project apart, and include that in what you're pitching. You can also, when you're pitching in person, use visual aids, you can bring along a look book or an iPad and show things that indicate the mood or the tone of your piece as well. It can often be useful as a talking point.

In person pitching it can be as simple as like when you're having a coffee with someone who could give you money or come onboard the project as a collaborator. You might also find yourself in a formal pitching environment such as a DocEdge pitch or the commissioner's events. You might find yourself doing a verbal pitch to investors or broadcasters or commissioners. You might also find yourself doing a quick verbal pitch to get collaborators on board with you.

[0:12:03 Karin Williams, Producer] When pitching in person there are a couple of really important elements. The first one is, rehearse ... rehearse-rehearse-rehearse. You need to know that pitch off by heart and the way to really get in trouble is to try to do a pitch without having done any preparation or rehearsal beforehand, and I know because I've been there. You want to have written a script basically, and you need to be able to stick to the script. Again, you want a beginning, middle, and end, and if you get off track, at least you know where you're going. One of the biggest dangers when pitching is to go into too much detail. You really don't want to get deeply into that plot because it gets boring. If you have a strong logline and you've done a good job with writing your synopsis, then that's what you want to present, but keep it brief, keep it simple, and if you're in a like panel pitching situation people can ask more questions, but do not go wandering off into the woods of giving every single detail of your script – you don't have time and people are gonna get bored, and you can tell from watching them how quickly they're gonna get bored.

They call it an elevator pitch because, if you happen to get into the elevator with say an executive from a studio, or a producer, or somebody that you want to pitch your script to or your project, you've only got the time from the 1st floor up to the 5th floor or the 17th floor, or whatever it is, so you've got to be able to get that out really fast, and again, if you have rehearsed your pitch, then you should be able to do it in the time it takes you to get to the 7th floor. Typically filmmakers are asked to pitch in fairly formal situations. You might have got into a film festival with a market and you're asked to present your film at a market. In New Zealand we have DocEdge where they have a pitch and often there'll be pitches to network executives as part of a workshop or a funding package. In that case you've got time to prepare, you know that your pitch is coming on this day at this time, so you can go away, you can write your script and you can rehearse.

Sometimes, however, you will end up in a situation where you meet somebody or someone asks you, 'well, what's your film about?', and you have to do an impromptu pitch. The best way to be ready for that is, again, to have rehearsed, and I think it's a good idea to just practice on your friends and your family. Tell your mum, you know, tell your partner, tell the guy in the shop down the road what your film's about. Practice on them and then when you *do* end up in the elevator with the fancy Netflix executive who's here doing a great big series, you can do your pitch without stammering or getting nervous, losing the plot, or raving on. So, practice that pitch and you can use it both in an informal situation and in a formal pitch.

Making a video pitch

[0:15:12 Morgan Leigh Stewart, Producer] With a video pitch the same rules apply for a verbal pitch: lead with the story and make sure you talk about what excites you. Video pitches can be used often for crowd funding or for

sending to potential investors that you might not be able to have a face to face meeting with. When creating a video pitch you should be clear about who your audience is and what you want from them, so make sure you include that. For example, if it's for crowd funding, you want to make sure that they know to put money in or to share the project.

[0:15:47 Karin Williams, Producer] More and more we are being asked to pitch on video or pitch on screen because we're not going off around the world to markets or to events, so this is a skill that it's good to start honing. In a video pitch, what people want to see is not a lot of bells and whistles and fancy editing and graphics and animation and all of that sort of stuff; what they're looking for is your voice and your passion. So, when doing a video pitch tell us why you want to tell this story. Why is it important that this story is told above any other story? What is it that drives you to tell your story? What is your passion about this project? Why is the project different than all the other projects that are being pitched? You may be in a video pitch with 60 or 100 other pitches, so what is it about yours that's gonna stand out? And what they're listening for is your voice and your dedication, your passion, and your commitment to telling your story.

[music]

Homework

The homework for this video tutorial is to write a logline for your concept. You will need this logline at all stages of the project and you can continue to update it as the project develops. You can send this to potential collaborators to entice them to want to take part. Is it enticing?