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Finding the Core of Your Story

The quick and easy guide to
writing a great logline

by Jordan Smith

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To everyone who believed I could...

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Introduction — Why Should You Listen to Me?

Good question.

A year or two before this book was even a gleam in my eye, I joined in on a little logline contest on a filmmaking forum that I frequent. I'd never tried writing a logline before, so it was like jumping into the deep end and trying to swim.

With the help of some great mentors and lots of feedback from the other participants, I managed to place third.

That contest got me hooked on loglines. I began to study them in detail.

Later, the participants of the contest started a thread for logline critique. To my surprise, I quickly became known as one of the go-to people for logline advice. Others would post saying things like, "Just wait until Jordan comes along... He'll know what your logline needs."

And whether I believed I was a logline guru or not, I kept finding that long posts about logline issues and tricks would pour from my keyboard almost unbidden.

One day after writing such a post, I happened to think that it could be revised into an article. So I copied and pasted it into my blog, edited and expanded it, and posted it.

I couldn't believe the reaction. I had fellow filmmakers and storytellers contact me to say how useful the information was. Overwhelmed, but wanting to be helpful, I quickly sat down to think of any other logline tips I could share.

This book is the result of that post. I've dug through my experiences with writing my own loglines and helping others polish theirs, putting all that together into this quick little guide.

You don't have to be a filmmaker to use a logline. You just need a story that you want to tell. Whether you write novels, movies, comic books, video games, or even operas, this book is for you. Every storyteller should be able to say in one sentence what his story is about. This book will help you learn to do just that.

So, What Is a Logline in the First Place?

It's always important to start with a good definition, so let me explain what a logline is and some of the conventions of using one.

Let's start with the name. Who came up with that crazy *logline* thing, anyway?

Well, as far as I can make out, the term *logline* (or *log line*, as some people insist on writing it) originated in early Hollywood. Studios would stack scripts in vaults, which made it tough to figure out what was what without disturbing the whole pile.

To counter this calamity, some brilliant person came up with the idea of sticking a one-line summary onto the spine of the script. That way, you could read the loglines and quickly find the one you wanted.

Now we have digital screenplays, so loglines are a different kind of shortcut. Film professionals are busy busy busy people. They don't have the time of day to read all the screenplays that come across their desks, so they read the loglines instead. If one grabs them, they might just read the script. Maybe. If their coffee isn't too cold.

“Okay, that makes sense,” you say, “but I write comic books, not movies. I don’t need to convince a film professional to make my movie.”

You’ve just hit upon one of my pet peeves about loglines. Nobody outside of filmmaking seems to know about this powerful tool. And that’s a shame, because you can use it no matter what you’re writing. You may not have to pitch to a producer, but you will have to sell agents, publishers, illustrators, and readers on your masterpiece. So forget what medium you’re telling your story in. Just write a logline, okay?

Now. I didn’t know the interesting origin of the term *logline* until I began to write this chapter. Along the way, I discovered something else. Something terrible.

There are things called loglines out there that are not loglines! Or at the very least, they aren’t good loglines.

It seems that the people who write TV Guide and the descriptions for DVR listings have twisted the beautiful form of this indispensable device and made it something laughable. Really, go to movies.tvguide.com, skim some of these disasters that they claim are loglines, and you tell me if any of them are really compelling.

They tend to look something like this:

Megamind: Tom McGrath directed this animated comedy about a super villain who wants to try being the good guy. Will Ferrell stars as the title character.

The Adventures of Tintin: Jamie Bell is joined by Andy Serkis in this action adventure film which marks director Steven

Spielberg's animation film debut. Daniel Craig is brilliant as the villain Sakharine.

Those are not real loglines. And that brings us to a discussion of what a logline is.

A logline is a way to break your story down to its lowest common denominator. It's a sentence that tells what the story is at its core. You're trying to write the elevator statement version of your story.

"Got it," you say. "But what's an elevator statement?"

Glad you asked. (No really, or these next few paragraphs would be wasted!)

Let's say you and I get onto an elevator together and I ask what your story is about. You can do one of two things.

1. You could start from the beginning and pitch me your entire two-hour film (or 300-page novel) in a brief elevator ride. If you take this approach, you'll probably be eyeing the emergency stop button as the elevator gets closer and closer to my floor and you haven't even gotten to the story's hook yet. But, alas, you're too late. We arrive at my floor and I get off rolling my eyes and wondering why I asked.

2. Instead of trying to pitch your entire movie in such a short time, you could just give me your logline. In the time that it takes to ride an elevator, you've given me a succinct summary of your story's hook and key ingredients. Better still, you've likely tickled my fancy enough for me to give you my e-mail address and say, "I've gotta run now, but send me some more about this, okay?"

Powerful, ain't it? If you already knew about loglines, you're probably cackling like a villain with a destruct-o ray.

But can you do anything with a logline besides hit me with it on an elevator ride?

Of course you can!

A logline is like that great actor who never gets typecast. It's versatile and can play more than one role. Not only can you use it to tell somebody what your story is about, but you can also use it to tell *yourself* what your story is about.

"But I know what my story is about!" you protest.

Really? Can you tell me in one sentence?

Crickets chirp

That's what I thought.

If you don't know what your story is about in a single sentence, you run the risk of meandering your story into places where it doesn't belong. You fall into the trap of putting everything and the kitchen sink in because you don't know what your story is. (Though the latter is not usually admitted and often materializes with the excuse of, "But it's cool!")

By the way, while we're on the topic of single sentences, let me just square something away real quick. A lot of people quibble over the length of these amazing storytelling tools. There are those who will tell you that a logline can have two sentences (I've even seen people say it's three), but I am a very firm believer in the single-sentence logline. It's neater, it looks less intimidating, and it forces you to condense things

into as small a space as possible. And that means it's easier to memorize your logline for that mythical elevator moment.

There's another neat thing you can do with a logline. You can use it as a basis for marketing materials.

Once you know the core essence of your story, you can take your handy single-sentence logline and expand it with more details to create all sorts of things. Things like a summary or the blurb on the back cover. And we'll cover that in more detail at the end of this adventure, so stay tuned!

At this point, I hope I've convinced you that you're going to want to get your story into a logline before you write "FADE IN" or "It was a dark and stormy night." Tape it to your monitor (or typewriter if you're still in the dark ages) if you have to. Remember, you're promising us something with this story. Find your story's core and tell us your premise in a single sentence, then make us happy by sticking to it and delivering on your promise.

And if you've already written a draft or three, that's okay! Just decide not to write another draft until you can boil your story down to a logline. Your next draft will thank you. (It might even send you a card! Wait, what? Your drafts don't do that?)

Just so you know, you generally format a logline like this:

TITLE: My Great Movie

GENRE: Drama

LOGLINE: This is my logline.

For the purposes of this book, however, I'm going to write loglines like this:

My Great Movie: This is my logline.

And that's just because I think it looks neater. The reason you include the longer format is really for the genre section. Sometimes including the genre can make your audience think in a certain direction. But we're here for the loglines, so I'll be condensing the format.

How this book works

First, we'll jump right into the world of loglines in the very next chapter, which is a handy-dandy crash-course in logline building. Then, we'll take a look at the components of a logline and cover each in detail, rubbing our hands together with glee over the power of what we're learning. Once we're done there, we'll knock down some common pitfalls one by one, laughing in triumph as they fall.

You'll also find some exercises at the end of each chapter. Personally, I never do these things, but some people like exercises, so I threw them in just in case somebody wanted some to do. Your choice.

Let's start writing a great logline. This should be fun!