Loglines: The First Essential Step to Defining and Elevating Your Story

Script Consultant Danny Manus shares the benefits of mastering your logline before you write your script, not after.

Your script's logline is its lifeblood. It's how you're going to get people to notice, understand, and love your story because it's the first thing anyone is going to see or hear. And if your logline doesn't give us the necessary information in an intriguing way, and highlight the best elements of your story, character and conflict, it won't matter how great your script is. Yet it's amazing how many writers struggle with this task.

A logline is a great predictor of a great story because it takes a really good writer to create the perfect logline. It should blend style, with substance. Conciseness with commerciality. It's also a great predictor because a strong logline will inherently get across a project's structure, hook, genre, tone, dilemma, major conflict, climax, and character arc.

Because your logline should get across all of that information in about 40 words, figuring out one's logline is also a great way to brainstorm your story and make sure it is going in the right direction. That it is original enough to stand out, and that enough happens within the story to sustain a feature.

Most writers make the mistake of writing their script, and then writing a logline and synopsis, when really, it should be the other way around. Once you have your concept and the story you think you want to tell – write the logline.

This will tell you if you have your major structural moments down, if your story is pitchable and what's original about it. It may change by the time you've finished writing the script – that's OK! But it can serve as a strong plotting tool to make sure you are keeping your story on track. And by reworking your logline, you can see where else your story can go.

For example, the first few words of your logline should basically tell us what the general world of your screenplay is and what the inciting incident is that thrusts us (and your protagonist) into the story. The first few words can also set up the stakes of the story. The best way to do this, I have found, is by starting your loglines with WHEN, AFTER, or AS.

Check out these beginnings to loglines of some movies I'm sure will sound familiar…

"After a powerful twister transports a lonely Kansas farm girl to a magical land…"

"When a Navy lawyer must defend two young soldiers charged with murder…"

"In a world where technology exists to enter the human mind through dream invasion…"

"When two lazy friends wake up to discover a zombie invasion in their town…"

"After terrorists launch a deadly attack on the White House…"

"When the government suspends all laws for a 12-hour period…" (Hint: it's the number 1 movie at the box office)

If you begin your logline with the incident that thrusts us into the story, it immediately grabs the reader, tells us something big happens and tells us your story has a structure. I will discuss in my upcoming webinar, you now have a clear setup for the other parts of your logline. These next parts will tell us who your protagonist is (if you haven't already), what they will have to do in the second and third act, what will stand in their way, and what their dilemma will be. And through telling us this action/conflict, it will also set up how the stakes are raised in your story as it goes on and what makes it special.

By changing and brainstorming these separate parts of your logline, you can see how your story could change as well. I would suggest doing a few exercises and changing each section of your logline to make sure your story is the strongest version it can be. Change your inciting incident, change who your protagonist is, change what they must accomplish, change what will happen if they do not accomplish their task, etc. If nothing else, it will prove you were on the right track to begin with.

Loglines are a great selling tool, but they can also be a great plotting tool. They will make it clear if you know the best parts of your story and if you know how to exploit and pitch your hook succinctly. Writing a tight, sellable logline isn't easy, but writing your loglines is just as important as writing your script.

Daniel Manus is an in-demand script consultant and founder of No BullScript Consulting, and was recently ranked in the Top 15 "Cream of the Crop" Script Consultants in 2010. He is the author of the E-Book No B.S. for Screenwriters: Advice from the Executive Perspective. He was the Director of Development for Clifford Werber Productions (Cinderella Story, Sydney White), a Development Consultant for Eclectic Pictures and the DOD at Sandstorm Films, which had a first look deal at Screen Gems and a development deal with Top Cow Comics. Daniel is still attached to produce several projects independently. He is also a columnist for The Business of Show Institute and teaches seminars to writers all across the country. Follow him on Twitter @dannymanus.