

HIGH CONCEPT

By Bonnie Orr

What does the term "high concept" mean in the film business? It's simply a term used to describe a script or a film that a person can easily understand after hearing just a few words. Robin U. Russin and William Missouri Downs define "high concept" in their book *Screenplay: Writing the Picture* as "a movie's premise or storyline that is easily reduced to a simple and appealing one liner."

Jennifer Lerch in her book, *500 Ways To Beat The Hollywood Script Reader* tells us that we want to shoot for high concept scripts because they **sell**. She says, "A high-concept screenplay can be sold without lengthy explanation by the Hollywood Reader or the Executive Reader." In addition, Ms. Lerch, a Hollywood Reader herself, says that readers refer to those stories that have a catchy idea and broad appeal as high concept.

One thing is certain, a high concept script will sell before a low concept script. For example, *Liar, Liar*, a script in which a lawyer has to tell the truth for 24 hours was said to be an easy sell.

Here are some one word film titles that fit the definition of high concept:

Godfather
Splash
Gladiator
Braveheart
Jaws
Twister
Armageddon
Speed
Alien
Titanic
Godzilla

Two word examples include:

Top Gun
Lethal Weapon
Star Wars
Independence Day
Pearl Harbor
Rock Star
The Matrix
Runaway Bride
Home Alone
King Kong

Most blockbuster films (those big action movies that generally come out in the summer) are high concept. Think *Terminator*, *Con Air*, *Air Force One*, *Die Hard*, etc. But not all high concept movies are big blockbuster-type movies. Movies like *The Sixth Sense*, *American Beauty*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *Goodfellas* are high concept, but not blockbuster.

Of course, there's another element to studio execs, agents, and producers thinking a script is "high concept." I could write a script called *Bored Housewife* and we'd all get that it's about a bored housewife, but it wouldn't be "high concept." High Concept also implies that at least some of the following elements are present.

1. The hero must be dealing with a BIG PROBLEM. Good scripts are about conflict and great scripts are about both internal and external conflict!
2. Some of the visual scenes are huge. We don't see a couple of fighter planes in the sky. We see dozens!
3. We either see an ordinary man in an extraordinary world or an extraordinary man in an ordinary world. *Top Gun* is about an extraordinary man. *Jaws* uses an ordinary man.
4. The concept must be original. There may be several movies about an asteroid hitting earth, but if there are, they probably went into development about the same time or they are spaced years apart.
5. An 'A list actor' would find this movie an appropriate vehicle for his/her career.

Some say that all the dependence on high concept or blockbusters began with *Jaws* in 1975, but a quick look at AFI's list of 100 Best Movies of all time reveals this may not be so. Only one of the top ten best-loved movies of all times was made after 1975. All of these are certainly high concept movies, blockbusters of their time.

AFI 100 Best Movies

1. *Citizen Kane* (1941)
2. *Casablanca* (1942)
3. *The Godfather* (1972)
4. *Gone with the Wind* (1939)
5. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)
6. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)
7. *The Graduate* (1967)
8. *On the Waterfront* (1954)
9. *Schindler's List* (1993)
10. *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)

Let's look at last year's Academy Awards® nominees for Best Picture:

1. *Chocolat*
2. *Crouchin Tiger, Hidden Dragon*
3. *Erin Brockovich*
4. *Gladiator*
5. *Traffic*

See any high concepts in this list?

One of the key elements in creating a high concept script is broad appeal. What does that mean? It means that the script appeals to young and old (those under and over 25) and both sexes. How do you appeal to all of those target groups? Find something that has a universal appeal.

Some possible themes that will work:

fear (*Jaws*)
loneliness (*Citizen Kane*)
family (*The Godfather*)
lost love (*Lethal Weapon*; *Casablanca*)

Another key element is that we must like the protagonist. We want to see Tom Hanks get the mermaid! We want to see Mel Gibson save the country! And we want to see Dustin Hoffman get the girl (in *The Graduate*). We like our heroes super strong (able to leap tall buildings in a single bound) or men of ordinary strength who are so determined that they can do anything despite their size or underdog status.

Where do people get high concept ideas? Sometimes they come from a recurring dream (*Deep Blue Sea*). Sometimes they come from catastrophic events (*Twister*, *Armageddon*, *Earthquake*). Sometimes they come from wars (*Gone With the Wind*, *Pearl Harbor*). Often they come from the writer's imagination (*Alien*, *Star Wars*, *Independence Day*, *Godzilla*).

One way I get ideas is to read what the best-selling books (especially non-fiction ones) are and by reading the New York Times to keep abreast of what's going on in the world. Almost any major news story can lend itself to a high concept. Read the article and then ask yourself "What if..."

One high concept movie *Dr. No* has turned into a franchise that has created 18 successful films (James Bond). *The Last Action Hero* was supposed to be a high concept film that would launch a new studio franchise and failed.

Sometimes you can come up with a great high concept idea and it doesn't work, like *Waterworld*. We immediately get that the world is now only on water ... it's not a bad concept. But it was too depressing. We didn't want to go there. We are hooked on happy endings, because most of our lives don't have them.

Sometimes you can come up with a great high concept movie but the timing is bad. Now is not the time to be pitching or writing a movie about terrorists. Just ask David Griffiths III, the writer of *Collateral Damage* that was scheduled to be released soon with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The script was about Firefighter Gordon Brewer who is plunged into the dangerous world of international terrorism after he loses his family in a bombing that takes place in a high rise in Los Angeles.

Men in Black 2 and *War of the Worlds* production schedules have been halted. The sequel to *The Siege* is proceeding on schedule. Some movies like *Spider-Man* are being re-edited to remove images of the World Trade Center.

We may see studios shy away from action films for quite some time as they reassess their market after the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. Would they buy *Die Hard* today? I doubt it.

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Bonnie has been a reader for The Austin Heart of Film's Screenwriting Contest for the past four years, teaches screenwriting classes, and has had several scripts optioned. Recently, she completed her thirteenth script; a comedy called *Welcome To Kick-Ass*. Currently, Bonnie is a reader for the Texas Film Development Corporation.

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