

## THE ANATOMY OF A LOGLINE

By Robert Gregory-Browne

You've written your script. You've labored over it for weeks and months and polished every syllable until your masterpiece is ready to hit the marketplace. Now comes the most frequently asked question I get: Who do I send my script to?

My response is usually another question: are you sure you're ready to send it?

So many of us want to send out our scripts the moment they're finished, yet we don't even think about what it takes just to find someone to send it to. "Find" is actually the wrong word. You'll never be able to "find" anyone in this business who actually wants to read a script. What you have to do is *attract* readers. And to attract readers you have to call on all your skills as a salesman.

Salesman? you cry. But I'm a writer!

Uh-huh. Glad you've enjoyed your stint in fantasyland, my friend, but it's time to take a step into the real world. In fact, I could argue that you should be thinking like a salesman with *every single word you put down on paper*, but that isn't what this article is about. At this point, you have a product that needs to be moved and there's only one way to move it:

Advertising.

Any good salesman knows all about the benefits of advertising. From the biggest corporation with their multi-million dollar commercials to the guy standing on the street holding a sign for the local car dealer: Big Savings! Today Only!

Advertising is what any good salesman uses to attract buyers. You go to a used car dealer to see what's available and what happens? The salesman comes over and guides you toward the latest lemon while he tries to smooth-talk you into buying it. And, boy does he make it attractive. It has the latest this and the latest that and it's only been driven by a little old lady on weekends, and once you get it on the road, this baby purrs.

His sales pitch is his advertisement.

And that's exactly how *you* get people to read your screenplay. Your sales pitch.

You have to prepare your pitch both verbally and on paper and you have to present it with confidence and polish. Otherwise nobody will take you seriously, and nobody will want to read your script.

You've all probably heard of a Svengali Deck, otherwise known as TV Magic Cards. For those of you who haven't, a Svengali Deck is a special deck of playing cards that allows the user to perform a dozen or more amazing card tricks without having to develop any sleight of hand skills.

In the old days, magician/pitch-men used to stand on street corners or at swap meet booths and demonstrate the wonders of this deck of cards by showing you an eye-popping trick. This trick would be brief and straight to the point -- just enough to show off the virtues of the deck and get you digging for the cash to buy one.

When you prepare your all-important sales pitch to entice readers to your script, you have to approach your pitch with the same economy and magic the magician/pitch-men use. You have to get your story across in a few simple words and those words must have eye-popping appeal. They must have that *wow* quality that forces the reader to say, "I've *gotta* read that script..."

That's where your logline comes in.

There are always a few out there who are relatively new to the game, so this is for you: a logline is a one or two-sentence summary of your story. Probably the best place to find a sample logline is to look in your TV Guide or local equivalent, which are full of brief story summaries.

But let me give you an example. Here's a logline for *The Fugitive*:

After he's wrongly convicted of murdering his wife, a high-powered surgeon escapes custody and hunts down the real killer, a one-armed man.

Maybe not the liveliest logline in the world, but it tells you just about everything you need to know about the movie. We know who the lead character is, what his dilemma is and, most importantly, *what he hopes to accomplish*. What we have above is essentially the *spine* of the story -- the sentence the entire movie hangs on.

Sure, we could talk about the relentless U.S. Marshal who is after the doctor; we could talk about the train crash and the chase sequences and the experimental liver drug, but when it comes to the logline, none of that really matters. We don't have time for it.

Like that TV Magic card trick, your logline has to be simple and to the point and it has to attract the reader to the *possibility* of a great read. When I look at the above logline, I think, "Wow, that sounds like it could be an exciting story." And, of course, we all know it is.

The anatomy of a logline is this:

The lead character has a problem and must achieve a certain goal in order to solve that problem.

Who, What, How. *Who* is the lead character, *what* is his problem and *how* is going to solve it. Let's take a look at *The Fugitive* again:

Who: A high-powered surgeon.

What: Wrongly convicted of murdering his wife.

How: He escapes custody to hunt down the real killer.

Chances are pretty good that you're scratching your head right now and saying, "But my story is much too complex for that." This may be true, but if you can't boil your story down to a simple Who, What and How, I've got some sad news for you: you are in serious trouble.

Because if *you* can't boil your story down, no one else is going to be interested in trying to figure it out. So what's a poor screenwriter to do?

Try this on for size:

That's right. The most important step you can take toward structuring a script is to create your logline or spine before you start writing the script. You have your idea, you have your characters, you have a general idea of what you want to happen and how you want it to happen, but what do you hang it on?

Without a spine, your creation will be nothing more than a mess of flesh and bones. There may be a lot of interesting stuff there, but it has nothing to cling to.

So before you start page one, scene one, the best thing you can do for your story is figure out the Who, What and How. Write them down. Fashion them into something that has movement and purpose. *Then* start writing. And as you write, always remember your spine. And stick to it.

Then, when the script is done and it comes time to work up a sales pitch, you don't have to search. You already know what it is. Your entire story is based on that sales pitch. As it should be.

I can hear you now. "Come on, man, I already told you. My story is too complex for that."

Is it really? Let's take a look at a very complex story: *The Godfather*.

We all know *The Godfather* is full of vivid characters and great subplots and big moments, but what really is the essence of the story?

Here's what I get:

When a powerful gangster is gunned down, his reluctant son must seek revenge and take over the family business.

The movie plays on a rich canvas, but it is much less about Brando, the Godfather, and more about Pacino -- Michael Corleone -- the *up and coming* Godfather. It is the story of his ascent (or descent, depending on your POV) to the leadership of the Family. Everything in the movie leads up to the moment Vito Corleone is shot, then follows Michael as he gets revenge, then eventually takes over as head of the organization.

Everything in the movie hangs on that simple logline or spine.

Do you think Coppola discovered this spine after he and Puzo wrote the screenplay?

I seriously doubt it.

Let's get back to our original notion of what a logline is for. As I said, if you know your logline before your start, then you shouldn't have a problem figuring out what it is after your script is done.

But you're trying to *sell* something here. If you follow the usual marketing strategies, you'll be sending out query letters and making phone calls and throwing your pitch at just about anyone who is willing to catch it.

And in order to get their attention; the logline you pitch had better shine. It shouldn't simply tell the story. There should be something in that brief one or two-sentence pitch that really makes it stand out.

Unfortunately, that's difficult to do if the elements aren't there.

In this day and age, it isn't enough to have a great story. These days, with all the competition out there, you have to have a great story with an even greater *hook*. You have to have what is commonly referred to as high concept -- an idea that jumps off the page.

A cop must find out a way to save a busload of people stranded on a bus that will explode if it drops below 55 MPH.

*A young wife discovers that the husband she's been convicted of killing is not really dead, and escapes custody to track him down.*

These are high concept ideas that immediately grab you. You can go back to *The Godfather* pitch and even that has a pretty high concept idea. And unless you start with a high concept idea, you're going to have a really tough time making your logline shine.

And if your idea isn't high concept? What do you do? First, you wonder if your script really *is* ready to be read. If you think it is, you have to find the hook hidden inside of it, find that simple spine that tells us what the story is about and turn it into gold. Make it sound interesting.

Unfortunately, I can't tell you how to do that. It's your story and you're a writer. And the writer's job is to make his words shine.

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