How to Craft a Compelling Logline

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How to Craft a Compelling Logline

by John Evans

Your logline is the single most essential sales tool that you, as a spec screenwriter, have at your disposal. In one eminently bite-sized construct (25 words or less), your logline provides industry professionals with the essentials of your entire script: who are the characters, what happens to them, and why we should care.

A well-written logline encapsulates the premise of a screenplay in one or two short sentences, while also suggesting the genre and overall tone of the story. In the 15 seconds or so that it takes to read your logline, any knowledgeable agent, manager or producer (or a seasoned assistant to that agent, manager or producer) should be able to assess the market viability of your script with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Of course, the execution of your screenplay is what will ultimately get it sold – or not. But getting industry execs to actually read your script is Job Number One, right? And in order to make that happen, you need a strong, compelling logline.

Structuring Your Logline: The Key Questions

First, let’s take a logline for a produced movie and assess what makes it effective.

When a Roman general is betrayed and his family is murdered by a corrupt prince, he returns to Rome as a gladiator to seek revenge.

In this simple but evocative construction, we get the who (a Roman general), the what (he returns home to seek revenge on a corrupt prince), and the why (the general was betrayed and his family murdered). We immediately understand who our hero is, what he is trying to accomplish and why it’s imperative that he succeed. We also understand what he’s up against and why his path won’t be easy.

Most importantly, the answers to each of these questions are “grabbers.” A betrayed general who turns gladiator to seek revenge on the corrupt prince who killed his family? I’m in! Taken as a whole, we have a strong, straightforward premise.
This, of course, is the logline for Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*, which was a substantial commercial success and won the Academy Award® for Best Picture. When the film was released in 2000, we had seen plenty of revenge films (such as *Death Wish*) and a few set in Rome (such as *Spartacus*), but combining those two ideas felt fresh.

With that in mind, re-read your own script and ask yourself what makes it different from all the rest? Isolate what’s remarkable about your concept and put that front and center. Your project’s “hook” should be the focal point of your logline.

Remember, too, that your logline must convey the fundamentals of your story. You must tell us:

- **Who** your protagonist is.
- **What** your protagonist wants.
- **What** he or she is up against (the antagonist or primary obstacle, conflict, or problem to solve).
- **Why** this person or event is a problem.

If you include all of this information, your logline will be structurally sound. But don’t go overboard. As readers, all we’re looking for here is the core of your story. The subplots, character backstories or slick technologies in your script may well be fascinating, but unless it’s a significant selling point or fundamental to the premise, save those details for the synopsis. Your logline has to sum up the protagonist and his or her predicament in about 25 words – just a sentence or two!

It’s also important to note that most loglines don’t reveal much that happens in your story after Act I. They focus on the setup, the inciting incident, and the primary story engine – not the plot’s subsequent twists and turns (however cool they may be) and definitely not the third act. Picture your story as a windup toy. Don’t tell us where the toy ends up, just tell us how to wind it up and let us wonder where it goes from there.

**Four Helpful Techniques**

Once your logline is structurally sound, clearly conveying the premise of your story, the question is: Is it compelling? The power of your concept is a key factor here, of course, but regardless of your story’s particulars, there are a few techniques you can use to make your logline as engaging as possible.

First, make sure you pose an inherent question in your logline that the average person will be curious about. After all, the essence of storytelling is coaxing your audience to wonder “what happens next?” A logline does that on a broader scale. It sets up a promising tale, but leaves the outcome
open-ended. We may assume in most genres that the protagonist will achieve his or her goal, but the more your logline can cast doubt on that outcome, the better. This can be accomplished either by using language that seems to “stack the deck” against your protagonist with seemingly impossible odds, or by suggesting that a surprising outcome is in the offing.

Second, don’t downplay or soft-pedal anything in your logline – in fact, accentuate and exaggerate! You need to be your own best salesperson here. Unearth the nuggets of “wow” within your script and showcase them with a little pizzazz. If your script involves a bank heist, make it the world’s best-secured vault. How on earth will the protagonist pull off the job? If your script is about a manhunt, suggest that the fugitive is hiding in the last place authorities will ever look.

Dramatic extremes – whenever remotely plausible – are intriguing. Wouldn’t you rather read an action script about “the world’s most dangerous blade-thrower” than “a man skilled at throwing a knife?” I’m using very broad examples, but I hope they illustrate the point. It’s okay to use theatrical language when selling your movie.

Just take a look at the critics’ quotes in any movie ad or listen to the voice-over in a trailer and you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about. Even if your story is firmly grounded in gritty reality, the logline needs as much sizzle as possible. Search for colorful phrases that evoke emotion and imply deeper layers of meaning. For example, if you’re writing about the boss from hell, you might describe him as “Lucifer with a clip-on tie” or “gleefully sadistic.” Whatever suits the character but makes the point in a vivid way. Try to suggest dimensions to the character, intriguing aspects of the situation or setting, and potential scenarios arising from the premise.

In the Gladiator logline, the words “betrayed” and “corrupt” do this by suggesting aspects of the characters and situation that the logline doesn’t delve into. “Betrayed” suggests that our Roman general was loyal to the prince and that perhaps this made him vulnerable to treachery. “Corrupt” implies that the prince has no values or ethics and is a decadent ruler. We draw those conclusions to fill in some of the blanks and contemplate the directions the story might take.

Third, avoid using clichés like “race against time,” “battle between good and evil,” “with the fate of the world in the balance,” etc. When you’re trying to distinguish yourself and your script, “we’ve heard it all before” is not the response you’re looking for. Phrase your logline in a way that will stick in someone’s mind as something unique, rather than sounding generic or overly familiar. The truth is, if your logline sounds like just another late-night movie, it’s not likely to attract much interest. A busy industry professional might get five queries in a single day with loglines containing the terms “a deranged killer” or “a renegade cop who plays by his own rules.” Why should he or she request one script over another – or any of them, for that matter? We’ve seen it all before.
Even if your script contains certain common character types or plot points, a good logline will hint at how your script **transcends** the norm. What is it that elevates your take on this particular narrative paradigm? Focus on the distinctive nature of your story’s strengths and try to weave those into your logline through word choice and specific details. For instance, if in your thriller the two investigators who team up to solve the mystery are both wheelchair-bound, include that fact in the logline. This immediately marks your story as unique, even if the specific case they’re investigating is not especially groundbreaking.

Lastly, make sure your logline suggests the tone and genre of your project. Your word choices and phrasing can go a long way toward conveying the spirit of your story. The logline for a moody noir film might describe infidelity as follows: “a loyal husband is devastated by evidence that his wife has broken her vows.” The logline for a comedy might put it this way: “a loyal husband is horrified to learn that the neighbors refer to his wife as ‘The Village Bicycle’.” Same scenario, different inflection entirely!

To demonstrate these principles in action, let’s take a popular movie and come up with a logline from scratch.

**A Case Study: Up in the Air**

*Up in the Air* is about a guy who flies around the country firing people for a living. He loves his rootless lifestyle, in which he has no real home or lasting relationships. Then he falls in love with a woman who’s every bit as free-spirited as he is. At the same time, his job is jeopardized when a new employee develops a method to fire people over the Internet, which would of course put an end to our hero’s constant air travel. So let’s try to construct a logline that pitches the essentials of this somewhat complex story in a quirky and original way.

Remember, the logline needs to tell us **who** our protagonist is (Ryan, a rootless corporate traveler), **what** he wants (to maintain his lifestyle), **what** he’s up against (two women), and **why** these women are a problem (they each, in different ways, threaten to ground him).

Alex, the woman Ryan falls in love with, is not so much an external threat as a threat to Ryan’s psyche, while Natalie poses an imminent threat to Ryan’s job. If we were only to focus on the external, plot-driving aspect of the story, we might write a logline like this:

*A corporate vagabond’s jet-setting lifestyle is threatened when a co-worker claims his job can be done over the Internet, so he invites his adversary to join him on the road in an attempt to prove her wrong.*

We’ve included a couple of colorful, suggestive words in this logline: “vagabond” (a little old-fashioned perhaps, but evocative and memorable)
and “jet-setting” (implying a life of money, flight and freedom). Other ways to express the same idea? Perhaps “high-flying” or “free-wheeling” might be better. And although the word “threatened” works, if we cogitate a bit maybe we can find a more interesting option. “Jeopardized,” “put at risk,” “endangered” and “imperiled” come to mind as alternatives.

But the real problem with this logline is that the script is pretty evenly split between the Ryan/Natalie conflict and the Ryan/Alex romance. Plus, the road trip element doesn’t significantly boost the commercial appeal of the premise. As you know, we can’t cover every story element in a few short words, and in this case it’s more important to give equal focus to that critical love story, rather than explain the road trip. So let’s refocus and try again:

A corporate vagabond’s high-flying lifestyle is jeopardized when a woman just like him captures his heart and an ambitious new co-worker threatens his job.

That’s nice and tight. We get the who, the whats and the why, including references to both storylines. This version evokes the world of the movie with the use of “high-flying,” as well as the romance and its potentially dire consequences with the phrase “captures his heart.” We raise the stakes by using both “jeopardized” and “threatens.” And although we have not explicitly stated our hero’s goal, it’s pretty clear that Ryan wants to maintain his “high-flying lifestyle.” Most importantly, the logline clearly poses the compelling question of the movie: Will our hero ultimately settle down and give up his vagabond ways, or will he manage to maintain his rootless life?

There’s no limit to better, so keep trying different iterations of your logline and compare the variations until you arrive at the most enticing option. For example, let’s see if there’s yet another way to express Ryan’s predicament. How about this:

A free-wheeling corporate vagabond is forced to confront his worst fears when a female counterpart captures his heart and a rookie employee threatens his job.

Here we add the suggestion that the two female characters represent our hero’s worst fears. This does justice to the fact that Ryan really cares about his lifestyle, which isn’t necessarily a given. It’s important to convince your potential buyer that this story really matters to your protagonist, especially when on the surface it isn’t as obvious as in, say, Taken. While we don’t need convincing that a man’s daughter being kidnapped is a high-stakes situation, Ryan’s predicament in Up in the Air is not so clear-cut.

As you consider the three variations of this logline we just created, think about which words and phrases best express the characters, conflicts, style and tone of the story. Mix and match at will. Do you think it’s better to
refer to Ryan’s love interest as “a woman just like him” or as “his female counterpart?” Which is more evocative: “jet-setting,” “high-flying” or “free-wheeling”? Practice your skills and see if you can come up with an even stronger logline for this movie.

There are no right or wrong answers here, but there are proven techniques that will help you market your work. So as you craft loglines for your own scripts, keep these guidelines in mind.

Before you begin writing your logline, ask yourself these four key questions:

- **Who** is the protagonist of my story?
- **What** is it that my protagonist wants?
- **What** are the forces of opposition (people or events) that stand in his or her way?
- **Why** are those forces of opposition a problem or threat?

Your logline should answer all of those questions. In addition, as you’re working on your logline, ask yourself:

- Does this logline pose the **compelling question** of my movie – a question the reader will want to see answered?
- Does this logline include the most **unique and intriguing** aspect(s) of my script?
- Does this logline use **distinctive, original language** that will stick in the reader’s mind?
- Does this logline suggest my screenplay’s **genre and tone** in its phrasing and choice of words?

Bottom line, your goal is to express the essence of the story you’re trying to tell in the most compelling and unique fashion possible. Easier said than done, I know! But it’s well worth the effort. Write a great logline and you’re one **big** step closer to getting your script sold. – **JE**
About the Author...

A former newspaper reporter, John Evans received his MFA in Screenwriting from Boston University. Since moving to Los Angeles in 2001, he has worked in the development departments at ABC, The Donners’ Company, Kopelson Entertainment and Amazon Studios, evaluating many hundreds of screenplays. He has worked as a copy editor for the Annenberg Foundation and the Deutsch advertising agency, among other clients, and his four-book contribution to Enslow Publishing’s “Championship Coaches” series is available to high school students nationwide. John has been a judge for the PAGE Awards since 2005. He is the editor of the PAGE publication LOGLINE: The Screenwriter’s eZine.