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Finding the Core of Your Story

How to strengthen and sell your story in one essential sentence

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The Stuff Inside This Book

The Quick-Start Logline Chapter

This chapter is designed to get you going really, really fast. Like, by the time you get to the end of the chapter, you should be able to write a fairly decent logline. What I'm going to do is show you a couple of logline templates and then go over what I consider to be the fundamental logline rules. So let's jump right in!

If you were to write a logline with placeholders for each of the story elements, the most basic logline might look something like this:

Logline Template 1

An adjective protagonist must do something that will set up a climactic encounter with an adjective antagonist/antagonistic force.

Some loglines are a bit more complicated than that, and we'll get there in a minute (depending on how fast you read!), but let's break this one down for now.

Every logline needs to contain four things:

1. A protagonist
2. The situation

3. The protagonist's goal

4. An antagonist

(In case you were sleeping during vocabulary class, the protagonist is your main character, and the antagonist is the person or force that opposes him. If you knew that before now, pat yourself on the back and feel free to look superior.)

That's a story in its most basic form, and you'll see all of those elements from the above template in every completed logline in this book and in every good story (and most halfway-decent ones) you come across. Sometimes it's subtle, sometimes it's blatant, but those are always there. If you're missing one… Well, you don't have a story yet.

Don't contradict me. Just put this book away and find those four things in your story, then come back. The rest of you follow me. This next part is cool.

The Four Fundamental Logline Rules

As I've helped people write loglines, I've run into some common errors. So you can avoid such mistakes, I've put together four fundamental logline rules for you to follow (ain't I sweet?).

Fundamental Logline Rule #1: Always tell us about your main characters in a simple adjective-noun pair.

It's really easy and lots of fun to do this part. Take your protagonist and come up with a noun for him, like one of these:

- Policeman

- Teenager

- Chef

Then brainstorm some adjectives that describe him, like this:

- Happy-go-lucky

- Ginormous

- Crafty

Put 'em together and you get your adjective-noun pair, like this:

- Happy-go-lucky policeman

- Ginormous teenager

- Crafty chef

Simple, right? Fun, right? I could do this all day. But we have loglines to write.

You can do the same thing for the antagonist or antagonistic force. Show us who he is and why he's bad in that little pair. And yes, you should probably stay away from clichés like "world-dominating overlord."

This can get a little tricky when you have an antagonistic force like a hurricane or something like that, because it's pretty hard to make a hurricane more scary. So usually, natural disasters are compelling enough in themselves. After all, you're not going to find much of an audience for a story about The Tsunami That Was So Threatening It Didn't Kill Anybody.

By the way, in case you're wondering, an *antagonistic force* is a non-personal source of antagonism. That is, in stories where you don't have a person playing the role of the villain, something else takes its place. As above, it could be a force of nature or some other life problem, such as going into debt or the threat of starvation.

The second rule goes with the protagonist and antagonist, so let's cover that now.

Fundamental Logline Rule #2: Don't name names.

We're interested in the essence of your story, not the names of your characters. Your character's name doesn't tell us anything about him, so don't use it. Same with made-up cities, countries, etc.

There's one exception to this, and that's actual historical figures or people from existing works of fiction. Ulysses S. Grant, Robin Hood, the Wizard of Oz. Long story short, if you're writing a logline for *Wicked*, you definitely need to mention the Wicked Witch of the West.

And yes, real places can be named. Rule of thumb, though: Don't. Unless you really have to. But generally, you can write a compelling logline without telling us where the story is set.

Fundamental Logline Rule #3: Keep it simple.

This means that we're looking for the very core of the story (have you been getting that vibe?), so anything not important to the main thread of your story should be saved for your summary, where you have more room to flesh things out. Subplots and extraneous phrasing must all be chopped out without mercy.

A quick word on extraneous phrases. There are many sorts of these things, so I'll give a couple of examples just to get your wheels turning in the right direction.

First, I once told someone that the phrase "sets off in the dark of night" was too pretty for a logline. Why? We're trying to get the essence here. You can use those pretty phrases in the back copy. For now, just tell us the main event.

Second, there are phrases like "in order to" and "so that he can" that can easily be trimmed down to "to" and "so he can," respectively. Break out those scissors and cut those large phrases down to size.

Fundamental Logline Rule #4: Show us the conflict.

Notice our logline structure. Something is opposing our protagonist. This is conflict.

If you don't have conflict, you don't have story. Every good logline shows compelling conflict, whether internal or external. Get it in there.

(And I know this last rule is short. That's because conflict is the core of story and it takes a while to discuss properly. The above is the ultra-condensed version and we'll get to an entire chapter on it later.)

So there you have the four fundamental logline rules. You can write a logline!

Oh, wait. Hold your horses a minute. I told you there was another logline template to come. Let's cover that now.

Sometimes, your story will need some setup to logline nicely. When you have one like that, you might need a slightly different version of the handy-dandy logline template. Something more like this.

Logline Template 2

After something happens to set things up, an adjective protagonist must do something that will set up a climactic encounter with an adjective antagonist/antagonistic force.

I call that opening part "the setup clause." Basically, you include a phrase that will set up the rest of the logline with some key information. It's kind of difficult to explain in a short space, so I have an example coming. Hold on a second! I've also devoted an entire chapter to it later in the book.

In fact, this whole chapter is just the basics. It's enough to get you off and running with your own loglines. Pretty much everything I've talked about here will be covered in greater detail as you read on. (How's that for an incentive?)

You're pretty much all set to write your own logline. But first, because it often helps to see things in practice, here are example loglines I've written for two movies that you might have seen.

National Treasure: A daring treasure hunter's next clue is on the back of the Declaration of Independence, which he must steal to keep it safe from a ruthless rival.

This one uses Logline Template 1. We have a protagonist (a daring treasure hunter), who must do something (steal the Declaration of Independence), which sets up a climactic encounter with an antagonist (he'll have to meet and overcome the ruthless rival before the movie ends).

Bolt: After he is mistakenly shipped to New York, a TV-star dog who thinks he's a superhero must survive the real world to get back to his owner in Hollywood.

This one uses Logline Template 2. We have a setup (after he is mistakenly shipped to New York), a protagonist (a TV-star dog), who must do something (survive the real world), to set up a climactic encounter with an antagonist (the real world is the antagonist, which must be survived to get to the climax of reunion with his owner).

You can see how these templates are very loose and flexible. I really hope you don't try to write a logline that fits one of them exactly, because these are not formulas to be followed strictly. Instead, I want you to flex the templates and use them as a reminder of the components of a logline.

The goal here is for you to understand what you need to tell me about your story for me to get the idea. Once you have those elements down, you can play with the format all you like. Don't let the tools be your master; master the tools.

We're just getting started here, so check out the exercises below, and then read on for more adventures in the land of loglines.

Exercises

- Pick a book or movie that you really like. Write a logline for it using the templates from this chapter.

- Now that you have a basic idea of logline structure, take a story you're working on and write a logline for it.

(Oh yeah... Feel free to do these out of order if you find one easier than the other. There's a reason I didn't number them!)