

# Loglines Using the Seven Basic Elements of Screenplays

*The following is an excerpt from Rob Tobin's book "The Screenwriting Formula: Why It Works and How to Use It," published by Writers Digest Books, available on Amazon.com and of course at any bookstore either brick or click.*

## **A Screenplay Consists of Seven Basic Elements.**

These seven elements are:

- A hero
- The hero's character flaw
- Enabling circumstances
- An opponent
- The hero's ally
- The life changing event
- Jeopardy

One of my readers (of one of my columns as well as of this book) came up with a clever little mnemonic acronym to help him remember what the elements are: HALF JOE.

H(ero)  
A(ally)  
L(ifechanging event)  
F(law)  
J(eopardy)  
O(pponent)  
E(nabling circumstances).

Okay, so what do I do with these elements?

Answer: You put them together into what is known in the industry as a **LOGLINE**.

A logline is a one-or-two sentence description of your story. Producers, exec, directors, writers and agents use loglines when pitching a story in Hollywood because nobody of any importance in Hollywood has time to hear a lengthy pitch, much less actually read a script. That's why the logline has to be so compelling that the listener is willing to ask for a longer description of your story (a "synopsis" or "treatment") or even for the script itself.

Here are some examples of loglines:

"A jaded, old boxing manager gets a second chance when a female fighter convinces him to train her."

"A young couple meet and fall in love at sea... on the maiden voyage of the Titanic."

"A meek and alienated little boy finds a stranded extraterrestrial in his closet and has find the courage to defy authorities to help the alien return to its home planet."

"A grown-up Peter Pan having foresworn Neverland for the "real" world, discovers that Captain Hook has kidnapped his kids and taken them back to Neverland."

"A down-and-out club fighter gets a one-in-a-million chance to fight for the championship."

"A pair of sex-crazed, serial wedding crashers finally meet their female matches."

A logline is also what helps you determine whether your story is structurally sound. Even "low concept" stories can be summed up in a logline if the story is structurally sound. *Steel Magnolias* is a great example: "An overprotective mother has to choose between keeping her ailing daughter safe or letting her risk her life to have a child of her own."

If you can't sum up the essence of your story in a sentence or two, it may be because your story has structural problems. More on this later.

One more thing to note, and that not only does a good logline tell us what the story is about, it tells us what BOTH stories are about. Let me explain.

### **Objective and Subjective Storylines**

The original title of this book was "Two Stories to Tell." That's because all well-written stories consist of two stories-the "objective storyline" and "subjective storyline."

The objective storyline is the backdrop against which the hero's story (the "subjective" story) takes place.

In *Wedding Crashers*, the objective story is whether John and Jeremy can pull off another successful wedding crasher season without getting killed, maimed or, even worse, romantically entangled with the wedding-obsessed women they're planning to love-and-leave. The subjective storyline is whether John can finally find a meaningful romantic relationship with a woman who is worth the effort it will take to win.

In *Million Dollar Baby*, the objective storyline is whether Frankie can train Maggie to win the women's world boxing championship. The subjective storyline is whether Frankie can redeem himself as a father figure, having already failed to do so with his own daughter.

In *Leaving Las Vegas* the objective storyline is whether Ben is going to actually drink himself to death. The subjective storyline is whether Ben can find a reason to live. They may seem to be the same thing in this case, but they're not. The one is whether a specific action is accomplished (suicide). The other is whether the hero can redeem himself in his own eyes enough to want to continue living.

In *Rocky*, the objective story is the story of Rocky training for and then fighting for the world heavyweight championship of the world against the opposition of the current Champ, Apollo Creed. The subjective storyline is the hero's story, the story of Rocky trying to overcome his image of being a loser. The subjective story, then, is the story of the hero becoming a better person, not better boxer or a better cop, or a better politician.

In *Lethal Weapon*, the objective storyline is whether Mel Gibson's character can take down Gary Busey's bad-guy character. The subjective storyline is whether Gibson's character can find a reason to go on living. Ironically, this is the same subjective storyline as a very different movie, "Leaving Las Vegas."

In *Hook*, the objective storyline is whether the adult Peter Pan can rescue his children from Captain Hook. What's the subjective storyline?

### **Stories That Aren't Stories and Why**

Okay, then, here's a story: a woman is sitting on a rock, looking out to sea. She's conflicted, feeling guilty about having abandoned her husband and children in order to pursue a career as a writer.

As she sits on her rock, staring at the ocean, the woman works it out in her mind, and finally comes to a resolution of her conflict, deciding that she must pursue her dream and go on with her writing, even though it means that she must lose her family.

What's the subjective storyline? The woman's struggle to choose between pursuing her own interests and giving up her dream in order to care for her family. What's the objective storyline? There is no objective storyline. Why is this important? Because without an objective storyline there is no external story for us to see. All we see is the woman looking out to sea, maybe with a frown on her face.

This woman might be going through emotional conflict and anguish as great as that of soldiers in the middle of a war, but how do we know, and why should we care?

What do we see on-screen that's visually interesting? Nothing.

Okay, a cop is chasing a bad guy, finally tracks him down, and defeats him. What's the objective storyline? A cop chases a bad guy. What's the subjective storyline? There is no subjective storyline. We can see spectacular special effects, gunfights, car crashes, bombs exploding, but there is no personal, subjective story or struggle. There is no one who draws us into the story, leads us through the story, no one to lend a personal feel to the movie.

This last story is the Eddie Murphy movie *Metro*. The film was all car chases, explosions and gunfire, but no personal, subjective story. In fact the movie was so empty without a subjective storyline that half-way through they ran out of objective story, and even though Murphy's character had already caught the bad guy, the writers had to let the bad guy escape so that Murphy could do the same chase thing all over again. There was no subjective story to reinforce and deepen the objective story.

**IMPORTANT: most well made stories contain both objective and subjective storylines.**

The crucial thing to realize here is that only when Frankie or John or Ben or Rocky (or any other hero) overcomes his character flaw, only when he triumphs on the subjective level, is he able to triumph on the objective level.

Overcome his fear of (romantic) intimacy before he can make a play for Claire. It's only when he becomes a better man on a personal level that he can attain his goal (the girl) on the objective level.

In *Million Dollar Baby*, Frankie has to overcome his fear of (familial) intimacy before he can train Maggie for the championship and thus give both of them the second chance they so need. It's only when he becomes willing to risk himself emotionally by opening up to Maggie that he has a chance to give her the training and trust she needs to fight for the world championship.

In *Leaving Las Vegas*, Ben would have had to find a reason to live before he was able to give up his plan to drink himself to death. Ben has to become a better man, a man with the courage to fight for life even when it doesn't seem worth fighting for, that he has a chance to win on the objective level-to form a relationship with Sera and to go on living.

In *Rocky*, the hero has to overcome his self-definition as a loser in order to apply himself sufficiently to win on the objective level, going the distance against the champ.

Is every screenplay written this way? Absolutely not. There are great screenplays that break many of these rules, and if you are one of those geniuses who can toss the rules aside and still write an unorthodox masterpiece like *Forrest Gump*, *Adaptation*, *Memento* or *Donnie Darko*, then go ahead.

If, however, you are like the rest of us, it would do you well to at least be aware of standard screenplay structure so that, if nothing else, you know what "rules" you're breaking. Breaking rules intentionally means that you're prepared for the consequences. Breaking rules that you don't even know exist, leaves you and your script open to a lot of surprises, not all of them happy ones.

**Recap: A Logline Consists Of...**

There are two types of loglines: a "pitching" logline that catches a producer's attention sufficiently for him to want to read your script. A pitching logline can be as simple as: "*Yentl* on the Roof" (I wish I could remember who described what film that way to me, it's absolutely the perfect logline!).

One of my favorites is a script in which the title itself is all the pitching logline you need: "Sherlock Homie." A modern-day, street-savvy, Mexican American Sherlock Holmes. One of the most effective loglines belongs to the most financially successful film of all time: "A young couple meet and fall in love... on the maiden voyage of the Titanic." Hated the movie, but boy, that is a pitching logline.

So a pitching logline consists of the essence of your story told in a unique, concise, perhaps surprising way so that it immediately catches the interest of the person you're pitching. Note that

an effective pitching logline might have only one story element in it: "Sherlock Homie" has only the hero, but it's a hero described so cleverly in two words that we're all hooked.

The second type of logline is what I call an "analytical" logline. By that I mean a logline that you use to determine if you have all seven essential elements in your story, and in the right relationship to each other.

An analytical logline consists of the following: A HERO living in ENABLING CIRCUMSTANCES that allow him to maintain a FLAW that keeps him from achieving a worthwhile goal, is forced to respond to a LIFECHANGING EVENT instigated by an OPPONENT, and in the process of responding to that life changing event and with the help of an ALLY, the hero, in the face of increasing JEOPARDY, is forced to overcome his flaw, and only then is he ready to do one-on-one battle with the opponent to realize her goal.

You're not going to come up with a short, witty logline using this method, but you will find out if you have all seven elements and whether they're in optimum relationship to each other.

### **One of the most important statements in this book**

Allow me to digress from logline for a moment to discuss one of the most important statements you'll read in this book: The hero's flaw has to prevent the hero from responding successfully to the life changing event. Conversely, the life changing event has to force the hero to choose between his flaw and the opportunity, challenge or threat presented by the life changing event.

### **Examples of the hero's flaw from hit movies**

Bruce Wayne can never become a superhero and save Gotham until he overcomes his guilt over his parents' death and step up fully with the confidence he'll need to battle his former ally and teacher, Ducard.

Frankie will never be able to train Maggie hard enough and well enough for her to challenge for the women's world boxing championship until he is able to overcome his own fears and give her everything he has as manager and as a father figure. We see this, because his doubts prevent him from letting Big Willie fight for the championship, so he loses Big Willie to another promoter who does get Big Willie a title shot, which he wins, becoming a world championship. Scrap, Morgan Freeman's character, tells Frankie exactly what his problem is in two bits of dialogue. "Ain't about connections. Bout you not believing in him." Then, a few seconds later as Frankie argues with him, Scrap says: "You just protected yourself right out of a championship fight." This is exactly what a flaw does for and to a hero: it protects him and it prevents him from gaining something valuable.

Rocky Balboa is a loser who refuses to try to do better for himself, for fear of putting himself in a position a loser like him can't handle. The life changing event, that of fighting for the world championship, is of such magnitude that even the "loser" Rocky can't refuse it.

BUT, Rocky cannot successfully respond to the opportunity unless he overcomes his image of himself as a loser. It is the overcoming of that flaw that allows him to respond to the life changing event by going the distance in the ring in the third act, one-on-one with the opponent.

So, the life changing event forces him to choose between being a loser and the opportunity of fighting for the world championship.

In *Hook*, the adult Peter Pan has forgotten who he is, which keeps him tied to the material world of overwork and neglect of his family. The life changing event is that Captain Hook kidnaps Peter's children.

The only way that Peter can respond successfully to the life changing event-the opportunity to rescue his children from Captain Hook-is to remember who he is and rediscover the imagination, faith and child-like joy in himself. He has to choose between his flaw, which is a type of self-induced amnesia, and the opportunity to rescue his children.

### **Examples of Loglines**

Okay, back to loglines: here are examples of the analytical logline applied to some successful films, to demonstrate how the best loglines usually include the aforementioned elements: hero, flaw, life changing event, opponent, ally and, battle.

A young man (hero) riddled with guilt (flaw) over his parents' death, is rescued (life changing event) from a foreign prison (enabling circumstances) by a mysterious stranger (ally and opponent) but must then battle his teacher (jeopardy) to prevent him from destroying the hero's home city. *Batman Begins*

A boxer (hero) with a loser mentality (flaw) is offered a chance by the world champ (opponent) to fight for the title (life changing event) but, with the help of his lover (ally) must learn to see himself as a winner before he can step into the ring (battle). *Rocky*

A romantically calloused (flaw) divorce lawyer (hero and enabling circumstance) crashes weddings with his partner (ally) to get one night stands, but then meets the girl of his dreams (opponent and life changing event) and must battle her (jeopardy) her family, fiancé and his own ally to win her heart. *Wedding Crashers*

An overprotective (flaw) mother (hero) must overcome her own fears in order to allow her diabetic daughter (opponent and ally) to risk death to give birth (life changing event), then must fight to make sense of her daughter's losing battle against death (battle). *Steel Magnolias*

A jaded (flaw) WWII casino owner (hero) in Nazi-occupied Morocco sees his former lover (opponent) arrive (life changing event), accompanied by her husband (ally) whose heroism forces the hero to choose between his cynicism, his feeling for his ex-lover, and his once-strong feelings of patriotism (battle). *Casablanca*

A homophobic, agoraphobic, misogynistic, mysophobic, sociophobic (flaw), reclusive (enabling circumstances) romance writer (hero) is forced to care for his homosexual neighbor's (ally) dog (life changing event), then falls in love with a woman (opponent) who forces him to choose (jeopardy) between his neuroses and her. *As Good as it Gets*

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