

## The one-page outline

Having the ability to pitch your ideas succinctly, in written and verbal forms, is a key skill the emerging screenwriter needs to have because you are unlikely to get an established producer or director, agent or studio executive to read your treatment or script without first giving him/her a good reason to read it, and in a form that is easily consumable, because they are busy people who always have a pile of scripts and treatments waiting for them to read. The one-page outline is designed to give them that reason and is attractive because they can tell it will only take a few moments to read and whether your idea stands out from the others.

The guidelines that follow provide the foundations for writing this selling document well. The point of the outline is to sell your idea to the reader. You need to make the reader able to conceive, visualise and determine the kind of film it would be just from reading this document. He/she should be able to tell what kind of production values it will have, including whether its success would be dependent on a name actor and/or director and whether they would be interested in it; he would have an idea what audience the film would appeal to and whether you have the professional capabilities as a screenwriter to deliver on your promise and, finally – and don't underestimate the importance of this – he/she would be able to tell whether this is his/her (or the company's) kind of film.

The one-page outline, then, is a selling document that can help you to be paid for writing your script or, if the script had already been developed, to help the project go to the next stage.

Your concept should be laid out in the following manner on one page.

Working title:           e.g. Corrective Action

Your title is the first element that 'positions' your film for the reader and potential audience. You should regard choosing your title as being as important as naming your new baby. If you think that the name you give your baby must say something about you as well as be something that the child will be happy to have as is name as he journeys through life because it reflects who he is, then that is true for the film title, too. Your title should reflect something in the story – your concept would be best, but it could also point to the lead character, significant place or genre.

Film Genre(s):           e.g. Conspiracy Thriller

Genre, like the setting, defines and limits the story. For a mainstream, wide distribution film, using genres as an aid to storytelling also aids in marketing as audiences are loyal to genres that they like. So consider whether genre storytelling is what you most wish to pursue and which film genres would be most useful for the telling of this specific story. You also need to consider whether you have a flair for genre storytelling for if not, you are unlikely to be able to use them well in your story and the reader will be able to see this.

If you are writing this outline at a very early stage of your development as a professional writer, it may be that you don't really understand film genres yet. In this case, think about the movies you love to watch and go to [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) to look them up and see what genres are used in the telling of

these stories. These are the genres that you will probably be best at writing yourself because the genre conventions are familiar to you.

Genres have specific relationships to audiences. Dreams and nightmares are the emotional baselines for storytelling in the genre approach. Nightmares, for example, are central to horror films and film noir. Conversely, a world where dreams can come true is the world of the Western, the adventure film and the musical. Writers should remember, though, that just as people change over time, so do film genres.

Writers should not be afraid of film genres. What the word 'genre' means is, essentially, 'type'. This means that films categorized in a certain genre will have certain common denominators. These common factors are based on the following criteria: 1) the nature of the protagonist; 2) the nature of the antagonist; 3) the shape of the dramatic action; 4) the call to adventure or inciting incident; 5) the resolution; 6) the narrative style; 7) the narrative shape, and 8) the tone. (See *Alternative Scriptwriting* by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush, pub. Butterworth-Heinemann, 1995 for more detail.)

It may be that your film is not a genre film. Films such as: Rolf de Heer's 2002 film, *The Tracker*; Yann Samuëll's 2003 film, *Jeux d'Enfants (Love Me if You Dare)*; José Luis Guerin's 2007 film, *En La Ciudad de Sylvia (In the City of Sylvia)*; Matías Bize's 2005 film *En La Cama (In Bed)*; Semih Kaplanoglu's 2007 film, *Yumurta (Egg)*; Rafi Pitts' 2006 film, *Zemestan (It's Winter)*; or Darrell Roodt's 2004 film, *Yesterday*. All these films may be loosely termed 'dramas', which is the catch-all phrase for all films that do not use one of the other film genres, but in the true genre sense, most of the films mentioned above do not comply with genre categorisation. Instead, they are non-genre films that achieve their engagement through mood, style and identification with the central character's situation.

For a selling document, if you are writing a non-genre/arthouse film, it might be best for you to state the plot form you are using. To determine what this might be, you need first to ask the following key questions about your central character. "What is his character and how do we respond to it?" What is his fortune and do we fear it will become worse and then hope it will become better or vice versa? And what is his thought, and do we feel he is sufficiently aware of the facts of the situation and the consequences of his behaviour to be held responsible for what he does and undergoes?

These questions indicate that plots fall into one of three categories: plots of fortune, character or thought. In any well-organised plot, these three parts – either changing or remaining constant – are inextricably interwoven, one serving as material to another or as its cause, its occasion or as its manifestation. Although related, you must take care not to confuse them. The protagonist's suicide, for example, as the culmination of a plot, may represent a noble character's decision to atone for the evil he has done and the misfortune he has caused to fall on himself or others, as in *Othello*; or it may represent the last despairing gesture of a protagonist whose character is no longer sufficient to cope with the problems of his life, as happens in *The*

*Seagull*. The difference lies in the amount of choice we think he has in deciding whether to live or die.

So study the plot forms in Norman Friedman's *Forms and Meaning in Fiction*, University of Georgia Press 1975. In short, the plot forms are as follows:

### **Plots of fortune**

a) The action plot. One finds the character sympathetic and responsible for the up ending of the story but the main point of such plots is to see the protagonist survive many explosions or lion pits, etc.

### **The rest of these also come under a subheading: plots of suffering**

b) The pathetic plot. The protagonist is sympathetic but not responsible for the down-ending of the story. It's society's fault.

c) The tragic plot. One admires the protagonist but he has a very serious fault of character so he/she cannot stop what he/she does.

d) The punitive plot. The protagonist's goals are repugnant. S/he undergoes misfortune but because the character does horrid things to other people, we want to see him/her punished.

e) Deus ex machina. A sympathetic character is rewarded by outside influence.

f) The sentimental plot. Here we have a sympathetic protagonist who survives the threat of misfortune and comes out alright in the end.

g) The admiration plot. A noble protagonist outdoes his own and others' expectations of what he is capable of and gains our admiration where before he was scorned.

### **Plots of Character**

a) The maturing plot. The protagonist chooses the right course as the character grows and so is a sympathetic character. *Platoon* was a great movie demonstrating this theme. "What does it take to grow up?" is a very valid question to ask in a maturing plot. It will help the writer to make interesting and appropriate choices.

b) The reform or redemption plot. This has a sympathetic protagonist who changes for the better even though his thought was sufficient from the beginning. That is to say, he was doing wrong and knew it but he was weak willed. Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* is a good example of this kind of protagonist.

c) The Testing plot. A sympathetic and strong character is tempted to take a bribe for material good. In the end he gives it up and we admire him for his choice though we identified with the difficulty of his decision.

d) The Degeneration plot. A sympathetic character becomes disillusioned through some crucial loss. e. g. *Death in Venice*, *The Seagull*.

### **Plots of Thought**

a) The education plot. A sympathetic character goes from a positive view of the world to a negative view. e. g. *Crime and Punishment*, *War and Peace*, *Harold and Maud*, *Terms of Endearment*, *My Dinner with André*, *Out of Africa*, *Tender Mercies*.

b) The revelation plot. This plot hinges on the protagonist's ignorance of the essential facts. It is not a question of his attitude but his knowledge.

c) The Affective Plot. A sympathetic character doesn't change his attitudes towards the world but towards a person. *On Golden Pond* is an Affective Plot and an Education Plot. *Atlantic City* is an Affective Plot because the central character's attitude to himself changes.

d) The Disillusionment Plot. Here we have a sympathetic character whose attitudes towards life go from positive to negative.

The main thing for you is to decide what is you want to say and what the best storytelling form is for you to say it. If your concept happens to fall into one or more film genres, then the film will be more marketable and the reader of your selling document will know this. If it is more comparable to a stage drama or literary novel in form, again, the professional reader will know where to place it. If you cannot categorise your concept in either of these ways, then, hopefully, you will be able to signify it as a personal drama.

Length: e.g. 120-minutes

A feature film will not be shorter than 75 minutes and is rarely longer than 120 minutes. The economics of theatrical exhibition require this. If your film is a comedy it will, inevitably, be fast-moving and be around 90-100 minutes long. Your character based drama, film-noir or melodrama will be at the other end of the spectrum, around 120 mins. A story about a single protagonist with one plotline will be 90 minutes long while a multi-protagonist film like Paul Haggis' *Crash (2005)* or Francis Ford Coppola's *Youth Without Youth (2007)* could be 120-150 minutes.

Target audience: e.g. 15-34 year-olds

Consider carefully who the audience for your film might be, who you want to watch it. It is obvious that people of different ages, cultures, lifestyles, incomes and levels of education have different expectations from their film-going experience. You need, therefore, to have regard to this when deciding whether your film needs to be a genre film to reach this audience or whether you may determine the story form yourself and reach a discerning or niche audience that is very educated and informed about cinema from around the world.

Most moviegoers are between the ages of 16-24, male and female. Romantic comedies are considered date-movies with a high appeal to women who often make the decision on what to see. So what kind of person would make up your audience? Is your film likely to have a bias towards males or females of a certain age group? Is your film for the serious film goer who goes to film festivals and, occasionally, the arthouse theatre but rarely to the cinema any other time? What kind of movies do these people really love? Distributors put audiences into the following age categories: children, 8-12 years, teens, 13-17, then 15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, pensioners 65+. Family films are for children aged 5+ and other family members, whatever age. That means that the film has something in it to please all of them. These may also be called 4-quadrant movies, meaning all ages, both sexes. Very few films achieve this kind of demographic and they tend to be films like *Finding Nemo*, *Titanic*, *Toy Story 2*, *Harry Potter* and *Spiderman*.

**Tag-line:** A tag-line is the kind of sales pitch the exhibitor might put outside the movie theatre or which you would see under the title on the poster or on the side of a bus. A tagline is not description of your movie. It is a succinct phrase or slogan that communicates a single but powerful promise that can be easily understood by the reader or hearer and which resonates strongly with the intended audience. It must encapsulate something special about your character's dilemma. e. g. Can love conquer all? You can never escape your past! Desperate times lead to desperate measures.

**The premise:** The premise sets out the argument that you will be presenting in your story. This may be presented in one of several ways. In the next two sections I offer explanations for writing your premise as a logline or as a what-if premise. You must choose the form that is more attractive to you.

**Logline:** A log line is a one, two or three-sentence description of your story that encapsulates the dilemma and goal of the central character. All well-written stories consist of two stories – the "objective story" and "subjective story." The "objective story" is the backdrop against which the hero's story (the "subjective story") takes place. The catalyst for what we all call a "story" is created at the point in a character's life when your lead character is forced to confront and solve his/her inner conflict (the "subjective story") in order to resolve the outer conflict (the "objective story"). This, then, ties the inner conflict to the outer conflict and creates a dilemma for the central character and, thus, a Dramatic Question that we should desire to see resolved.

In *ET*, the objective story is about whether the boy gets the alien back to his ship. The subjective storyline is the hero's story, the story of the meek little boy finding the courage, conviction and self-worth he needs to be able to pull off the difficult and dangerous goal of saving ET, and of saving his own life in terms of being able to live it fully rather than always feeling alienated himself. The logline, then, is "A meek and alienated little boy finds a stranded extra-terrestrial and has to find the courage to defy the authorities to help the alien return to its home planet."

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 a better boxer. The logline, then, is "A struggling boxer, who works part-time in a meat factory for extra cash, is given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity when he is chosen to be the opponent for an exhibition match with the heavyweight champion. But he has to throw off his idea of being a loser if he is to grab this chance and change his life forever."

What-if premise: In this form of premise you describe the nature of your protagonist and the event that launches the story, your "inciting incident" or "call to adventure".

The what-if premise is something that Stanislavski used to call The Magic If. If this.. if that... if the other... This question stimulates the imagination.

The plot premise and the central character is what you should be aiming to communicate in the "what if premise". People who greenlight ideas for development and scripts for production normally ask to see or hear the story concept (or plot premise) first because this lets them know if it's worth spending any more time on it because a good one suggests the film's commercial appeal.

Here are a few examples.

"What if a war criminal who escaped justice when he fled to another country after the war and has built a new persona where he is considered a man of substance and integrity, is suddenly accused of his crimes by one of his surviving victims?" (*Music Box*)

'What if a boozy, ambulance-chasing lawyer realises that going to trial instead of taking the easy, out-of-court settlement that's been offered in the medical malpractice case he's been given, presents him with a chance to vindicate himself against the hated legal establishment that ruined his life?" (*The Verdict*)

"What if an aging secret service agent, who feels guilty for failing to save President Kennedy's life in Dallas, Texas, learns that an assassin plans to kill the current president and this aspirant assassin tells him he'll never be able to stop him?" (*In The Line of Fire*)

"What if a senior Stasi interrogator, who has always been an ardent defender of the State, realises while on his current job, which is to destroy the reputation of a famous playwright, that he has been ruining people's lives all these years to protect a lie – that his masters are nothing but hypocrites out for themselves? (*The Lives of Others*)

In each of these what-if premises it is clear who the central character is and what his dilemma is. But the pitch also works if you say something like: "What if a coke bottle dropped from an aeroplane landed in the midst of a primitive African tribe?" (*"The Gods Must Be Crazy"*)

For an art house film like "In the City of Sylvia, the what-if premise would be: 'What if a young artist, ripe for being in love, returns to the city where he saw the woman who stole his heart?'"

**The story synopsis:** Now you should briefly describe the consequences of the inciting incident, articulating the outcomes of the dilemma set-up by the inciting incident, identifying the emotional arc of the story and showing the key turning points in the 3-act structure, including the mid-point of act 2 where you are using this structure. Concentrate on engaging the reader with the central character's emotional journey.

If you have chosen to write a film that does not use classical story structure, you must still endeavour to tell a story and use narrative mechanisms that will draw the reader/audience in. So think about how you would tell the story of one of your favourite films to your friends. It will be short and to the point. We can all do this for art house films that we see as well as for the mainstream Hollywood movies so don't be daunted if your form is not mainstream.

**Visual realisation:** Here you should allude to the treatment of the idea. Describe the look and pace of the film. Let us know if any previous films have explored this territory? If so, how will yours differ? If you have films in mind that for some reason will indicate the kind of approach you might take to achieve a particular effect, let us know what these films are and why they are good examples. What kind of treatment will the dialogue have? Your notes in this section should extend the reader's imagination of the cinematic and marketable possibilities of your idea.

**Statement of Intent:** What is the theme or controlling idea for your story? Why do you want to tell this story? What does it mean to you and why will the audience care about it? Why is it the right time to tell this story? Why is it a film rather than a television drama?

**Audience appeal:** Explain here what you understand about your target audience and identify the appealing elements of your idea that will make it work for them. For example, what are the talking points? If you envisage lead actors in the key parts, it would be good to mention these names as the kind of actors whom you think would embody these roles and be a draw for the audience.