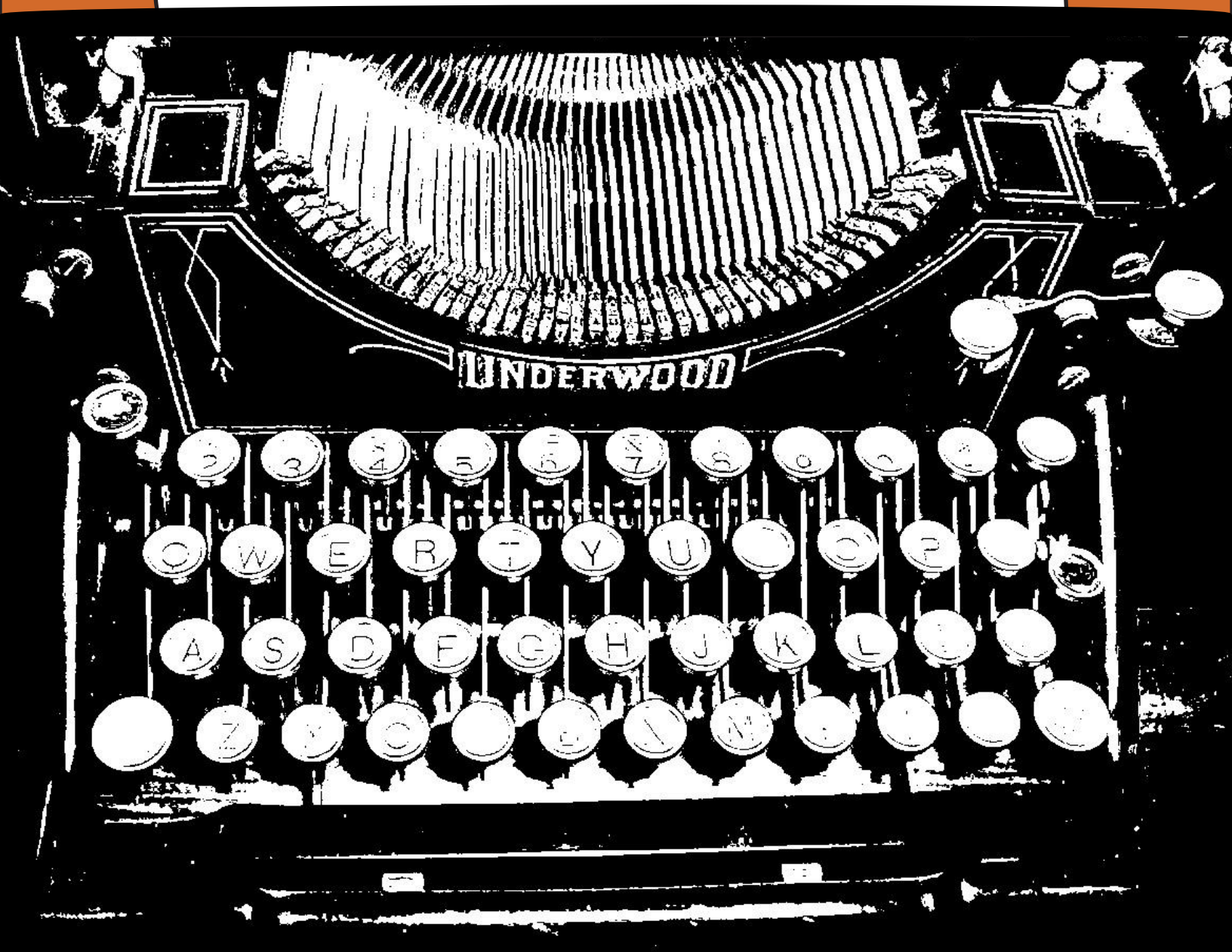
Loglines

by Adrian Patenaude



“You have one sentence.”

“If it fails to interest us, we will toss your story in the dreaded ‘pile,’ where screenplays go to die. Are you ready? Set. Go.”

It might not seem fair, but this is the fast-paced, competitive world of Hollywood, where screenwriters are a dime a dozen and producers are looking for stories with a guaranteed profit. And like any industry, business comes first and art second.

The logline was born out of necessity. Early on, as scripts piled up and time sped up, it was simply a way to organize screenplays. A short summary written along the spine was more efficient than sifting through countless piles of screenplays submitted by desperate writers. Over time, the logline became an essential tool: the perfect pitch that condenses a story into one attention-grabbing sentence.

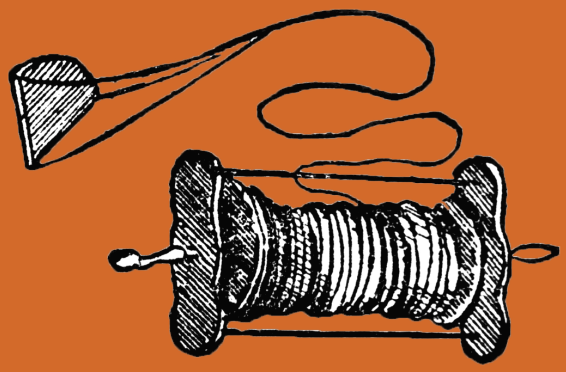
However, many argue that the constraining rules of loglining cheapen the art of storytelling. They complain that the once mystical “Story” is now codified, diluted into a series of formulas that ensure a profit, while leaving true art to rot.

However, a new creative movement has arisen to challenge the thought that constraints lead to stifled creativity. Extremely short stories (such as as flash fiction, hint fiction or six-word memoirs) are circulating online and rapidly growing in popularity. These “micronarratives” are choosing instead to embrace constraints and explore the concept of “less is more.”

So the question is this: is it fair to judge screenplays based on a single sentence? Can the essence of a story really be expressed in such a small package? Does the logline restrict creativity or refine it? Can something as commercial as loglining be considered art? Those are questions we will attempt to answer. But first, a little more information about loglines.

The Logline

The origin of the name “logline” is uncertain. It might be something as simple as keeping a “log” or record of the scripts in a studio. But a more interesting speculation is to compare its meaning to the one in the dictionary. In nautical terms, a logline was a cord attached to a piece of wood. The logline was then trailed behind the ship to calculate the speed of the vessel. With that comparison, a script logline could actually be testing the “speed” of a story. In essence, is it seaworthy? Can it really go the distance? While we don’t know the name’s true origin, we will learn how important the logline is in determining the story’s worth.



So how do loglines actually function in the process of selling screenplays? Well, let's take a step back, because it's hard enough getting a screenplay *read*. Screenwriter John August *(Big Fish)* offers a not altogether optimistic perspective: "No one wants to read your script. No one. Unless you had reason to believe that the script or the writer was genuinely worth your time... you'd find a way to get out of it." Great. Thanks, John.

In a documentary titled *Tales from the Script*, several screenwriters discussed the difficulty of the industry. In his interview, Gerald DiPego *(The Forgotten)* made a list of his screenplays. Out of eighteen, only three were produced. He sold six more, but that still leaves 50 percent of his work untouched. The sad truth is that Hollywood is a business and must operate as such. Screenwriter Peter Hyams *(Outland)* describes the thought process: "The only reason why they're gonna give me money is if they think they're gonna make more money back than they gave me. [Otherwise], they'd be idiots to give me the money!" Purchasing a screenplay is a risky endeavor and the costs must be weighed. Dennis Palumbo *(My Favorite Year)* explains it this way: "They are not in trouble if they say no. Nothing bad can happen to them and they won't lose any money. The moment they say yes, their troubles begin." The entire weight of evidence rests on the screenwriter. He has to prove the story will sell.

That's where the logline comes in. While John August says on his blog that loglines are not actually submitted with scripts, he explains why they are so necessary: "A screenwriter needs to be able to distill the premise and story of her script mostly so she can pitch it." Screenwriters have to fight for their story. Being able to describe it quickly and compellingly is essential in order to even be heard in such a competitive industry. Screenwriter Blake Snyder writes in his book, *Save the Cat*, that if someone doesn't have a logline, he refuses to listen. "It's because I know the writer hasn't thought it through. Not really. Because a good screenwriter, especially anyone writing on spec, has to think about everyone all down the line, from the agent to the producer to the studio head to the public." Screenwriters have to understand the industry and its challenges. They have to prove their story can not only withstand, but *thrive* in the process.

"How are you going to get strangers excited?" writes Snyder. "Getting them excited is Job One." Loglines are the hook. To get anywhere, screenwriters have to reel in all the right people – so the bait better be delicious.

Crafting a Logline

In order to succeed in such a challenging industry, writers have developed loglining into a fine-tuned craft. However, while they all agree that loglines are supposed to strip down the story to its barest parts, exactly what those components are is debated. Two screenwriters have published loglining tutorials worth noting. First is Jordan Smith's book, *Finding the Core of Your Story*. The second is a chapter in Blake Snyder's celebrated book on screenwriting, *Save the Cat*. While Smith and Snyder each have their own ideas about loglines, they can agree on a few essential elements they believe each logline should have.

IRONY. First, Smith and Snyder emphasize what they believe is the most important element of a logline: irony. According to the dictionary, irony is something that "seems deliberately contrary to what one expects." Smith describes irony as putting together two things that don't usually go together: "Irony is often putting a character in a situation that he never expected to be in, or it's putting two characters with opposing viewpoints on the same team." Snyder puts it this way: "A good logline must be emotionally intriguing, like an itch you have to scratch." Without irony, movies would be about ordinary, predictable life – not something anyone would be interested in watching. Smith uses this as an example:

> **DESPICABLE ME: A super villain who delights in making children cry must adopt three adorable girls as part of his next scheme, bringing chaos to his secret lair as he tries to keep the kids happy.**

This shows how irony creates conflict, which in turn moves the story forward. So every story needs an ironic twist.

A COMPELLING MENTAL PICTURE.

Next, a logline must have what Snyder calls a "compelling mental picture." "A good logline, once said, blossoms in your brain," Snyder writes. It has to help the reader visualize all that the movie could be. Smith agrees: "A logline exists to plant an idea in the mind of the audience. A well-written logline will spark the intended audience into imagining all the possibilities of what could happen in Act 2." The logline gives the setup, then lets the reader imagine the details of the story. Snyder gives the following as an example:

BLIND DATE: She's the perfect woman – until she has a drink.

He comments: "I don't know about you, but I *see* it. I see a beautiful girl and a date gone bad and a guy who wants to save it because... she's the one!" The logline has to do more than just communicate the story – it has to launch the readers *into* the story, allowing them to make it their own.

Blake Snyder has a couple more elements he believes are necessary:

A KILLER TITLE: First, a logline needs a "killer title." He calls the title-logline combination the "one-two punch." A good title must first communicate what the movie is about. If possible, it should also have that hint of irony. Snyder's favorite title is *Legally Blonde*, which somehow manages to communicate both the content of the story and the irony without being lame.

AUDIENCE AND COST: He also emphasizes that every logline should communicate the audience and cost of the movie. The writer should be thinking ahead to what buyers are actually wanting to produce. Again, this is a business, so it is important to keep in mind that studios want a movie that will reach a broad audience and bring in a profit. Understanding the economics of the filmmaking endeavor will help you craft your pitch in a way that makes your story more desirable.

FINDING THE CORE OF YOUR STORY

Jordan Smith's book, *Finding the Core of Your Story*, is all about crafting loglines. He recommends using this standard logline template:

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

He lists four components: the protagonist, the situation, the protagonist's goal and the antagonist. Those are the components that describe any story: a hero, a villain, a goal and (almost) insurmountable challenges. To illustrate, Smith wrote an example logline:

> **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.**

Jordan Smith's 4 Rules for Effective Loglines

1. Tell us about your main characters in simple adjective-noun pairs.
It's a simple way to sum up your character quickly in a short format.

2. Don't name names.
Unless the movie is a sequel, names are extraneous information.

3. Keep it simple.
Smith emphasizes conciseness by cutting out unneeded words and phrases. This both respects length constraints and makes the logline more powerful by streamlining and strengthening word choice.

4. Show us the conflict.
Just like irony, conflict makes a story interesting. Without conflict, you wouldn't have a hero and without a hero, you wouldn't have a story. No one wants to see a movie about ordinary life, in which nothing surprising happens and nobody changes.

Smith has a few additional recommendations. While a story might have a meaning, he tells writers to avoid stating it. "When we pick up a fictional book or movie, we're not interested in what we're going to learn. Instead, we're interested in what the story is about." The purpose of the logline is to communicate the story, so any "moral" is extraneous. But you can still write with a theme in mind. Smith explains what he means by theme: "Contrary to the beliefs of some, the theme is not the moral of the story. It's a question that will be explored in the story." He recommends hinting at the question without giving away what conclusion the story might reach.

Finally, Smith shows how to make a story stand out by focusing on its unique qualities. For example, the romantic comedy has basically the same storyline in every movie. So Smith says to "focus on what's different about your story and play it up." For example:

> **I.Q.: When an average-intelligence mechanic falls for the niece of Albert Einstein, his only chance of winning her heart is to pretend to be a brainiac with her uncle's help.**

"Now we've got something," Smith writes. "How many romantic comedies besides this one have Albert Einstein? Zero!" So writing a great logline means pulling out the very best parts of the story and making them shine.

EXAMPLE LOGLINES

With all this great information, I decided to brush up a couple of my own loglines. The first one is for a feature-length screenplay I've started writing:

> **THE CATCH: A self-conscious woman who has been hiding a rare condition known as fish odor syndrome is forced to work with a fastidious gourmet chef who attempts to sniff out her secret.**

My second one is currently just an idea for a movie:

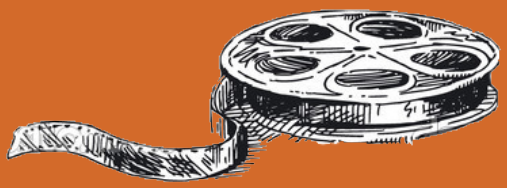
> **ALIVE AND KICKING: A predictable old man is forced to take the ultimate risk before the Grim Reaper allows him to die.**

I also found a few online that I enjoyed. The first one uses vivid language to communicate a fascinating idea:

> **SWINE HEART HORROR: A mild-mannered Jewish doctor struggles with bizarre personality changes, unfamiliar slaughterhouse memories and increasingly violent episodes after receiving an emergency heart transplant of unknown origin.**

Finally, John August found this logline on an IMDb summary:

> **SHREK: A reclusive ogre and a chatterbox donkey go on a quest to rescue a princess for a tyrannical midget lord.**



The Question Is...

No matter how well-crafted a logline is, many people still consider it to be no more than a commercial tool used to manipulate studios into buying a script. Frustrated by a broken system, writers are forced to play the game in order to get their story produced. So, getting back to our original question, is it fair to judge a screenplay based on a single sentence? You could argue that forcing a story into the constraining logline format destroys its very essence. Storytelling is an organic process, not a step-by-step experiment – so why ask for a science report? Wouldn't it be better to experience the full impact of the story by reading the screenplay itself? In the documentary, *Tales from the Script*, screenwriter Guinevere Turner *(American Psycho)* expresses her frustration with the pitching process: "A script is already a description of a thing... so to be describing the description of a thing is just... existential madness!" Pitching the idea of an idea is redundant. It's the Hollywood equivalent of judging a book by its cover. How many perfectly good stories are being overlooked because of a petty judgement based on a logline?

You could also argue that standard logline structure forces writers to simplify their story, dumbing it down to feed into the commercial system. Writers feel pressured to make their stories fit the guidelines so they can be produced. The result is yet another formulaic movie that earns a profit, but offers little artistic merit. In an interview published in *Screenwriters on Screenwriting*, Bruce Joel Rubin *(Ghost)* likens this kind of movie to an unsatisfying meal: "You go to so many meals and get the hors d'oeuvres tray and you're lucky to pick up one or two little morsels, and you walk out of the theater feeling hungry and thirsty; it took away rather than gave you." How is creative storytelling supposed to happen with such a rigid structure in place? It leaves no room for out-of-the-box experimentation which could open up new avenues for creative expression and exploration. How many stories will be rejected – or never even created – because they don't fit the format?

Of course, it is possible to approach the situation from a completely different perspective. Could loglines actually restrict creativity in order to *refine* it? Many writers claim that having a logline helps them improve their story. By examining the core of their story through loglining, they are able to detect and correct major structural flaws. Blake Snyder tells the story of a screenwriter who scrapped his draft and went back to developing a great logline in order to fix the story: "The irony of what he *sort of* had was brought into better focus. And when it was put into a pithy logline form, the conflicts were brought into sharper focus too... The characters became more distinct, the story became more clearly defined, and the logline ultimately made the actual writing easier." In the end, writers have a stronger, more focused story. Self-imposed structure regarding irony and conflict helps them center it. In this perspective, the logline's restrictions actually help refine creativity.

It appears the logline might be a useful tool after all. But can it be considered art? Well, in the world of micronarratives, it might very well be. By comparing loglines to "hint fiction," we discover many similarities. Hint fiction is limited to 25 words, which is actually shorter than most of the loglines mentioned in this document. Let's take a look at a few of the stories in Robert Swartwood's collection, *Hint Fiction*. Many could easily work as loglines. First is "The Exact Cost of the Young Couple's Forthcoming Wedding":

Before their wedding, Gino revealed he was adopted. Eugenia admitted she was adopted too.

I was a twin, Gino added.

Eugenia said, So was I.

In this example, you see both irony (long-lost twins falling in love) and conflict (the moral dilemma of incest). The story leaves you with chills – you see the story unfolding, imagining their reactions to the awful realization and wondering what they do next.

Another great example is “The Amputee”:

> **Wes returned in his wheelchair to where he’d been mugged, dollar bills sticking out of his pockets, a .38 under his folded pant leg.**

Again, you see irony and conflict, and are left wondering how it will end. While these hint fictions have a decidedly literary feel to them, they could easily serve as loglines. Conversely, loglines could easily be classified as hint fictions. Both are micronarratives!

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, writers could continue to complain about the commercial necessity of loglines. They could use them just to get their story sold or as a writing tool to focus their story. But what if they went further? What if they decided to look at loglines as something more: art? Instead, writers could start treating loglines as another creative avenue for telling stories. Writing loglines with a hint fiction attitude, they could focus on making people *feel* something, helping them see the story and make it their own. Not only would writers tell a more compelling story, they would do a better job of grabbing people’s attention and imagination. They could accomplish both goals: telling a better story *and* succeeding at getting it sold! The reality is that restrictions don’t have to be oppressive. Whether it be through a logline or a full screenplay, the point is to strive to tell a great story.

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