

Writing a Logline: Why and How

The term “logline” comes from the old days of Hollywood, where studios would own hundreds of scripts, and the studio head would keep a **log** book with quick summaries of each. Nowadays, writers of screenplays are encouraged to create loglines, which provide the basis for their “elevator pitch.” That is, loglines are seen as a tool to help sell the concept behind a story.

When it comes to prose writing (short stories, novellas, novels, etc.), there isn’t necessarily a specific place in the querying process where you insert the logline. For short stories, you’ll pretty much never be asked for a quick summary. For novels, however, **being familiar with a quick summary will come in handy for the pitching and querying process, even if you won’t necessarily relay your carefully-crafted sentence to an agent or publisher.**

Regardless of whether the logline will help you pitch and sell, however, it is still a beneficial tool for wrapping your head around the core of your story and maintaining that focus. And that’s my main concern in going over the logline. I’ve worked with a fair number of writers whose inability to articulate the central trajectory of their story showed on every page.

So I think it’s one of the best things you can do for your writing process to create a one-sentence summary of your story. And it’s something you should do early and often. Even if you don’t like to outline, at least write a logline. And then keep coming back to it and updating it as your story evolves.

What it is

A **logline is a short summary of a story**. Some people say it can be one to three sentences; I'd argue that a single sentence is all it takes. And that single sentence should orient us to the story's central trajectory. (More on that in a sec.)

A **logline can/should contain spoilers**, by the way. Its purpose is to accurately summarize, so it may indeed give things away. (Agents—or anyone else who may buy your story and/or work to publish it—want to know how it will end. They can't accurately assess its potential without knowing how it will end.)

Now, what is involved in what I've deemed the "central trajectory"? **The story's central trajectory comes from following the main character as she takes action in pursuit of a goal and faces conflict**. It may be even more compelling if we also know what inciting incident kicked off the pursuit and what the stakes are for not achieving the objective.

What it isn't

Loglines can get confused with other short overviews of stories, which you might find in marketing or in reviews.

A **tagline (not a logline) is a like a slogan or a catchphrase**. It's snappy and mysterious, but it gives very little information about a book. Here's a tagline for *The Hunger Games*: "Winning will make you famous. Losing means certain death." Or for the *Song of Ice and Fire* series: "Winter is coming." A tagline is the sort of thing you can picture at the bottom of a poster. **That's not what we're after with the logline.**

You also don't want one of those abstracted statements about the story's thematic content: "In a world where everyone grows up too fast, one boy learns that the magic of childhood is worth holding on to." What does that tell us about the central trajectory? Not much.

In fact, **if you see your logline contains any abstract nouns at all, alarms should go off.** I sometimes see writers earnestly attempt loglines but fill them with theme-related abstractions. “When prospects for marriage move into the vicinity of the Bennett family, second daughter Elizabeth Bennett immediately butts heads with wealthy suitor William Darcy, but she gradually learns the error of making hasty judgments and comes to appreciate the difference between the superficial and the essential.” I can’t even begin to say how horrible that sentence is as a logline.

In short, your logline is a sentence with a singular purpose: to summarize the actual story in a gripping manner. It is not about selling or marketing. It is not back-cover copy. It is not an assessment of the story’s themes. Don’t worry about making it mysterious. Don’t have it end with a question.

What it looks like

Let’s start with this very solid example of a logline (written by Graeme Shimmin) for the film *North by Northwest*: “When an innocent advertising executive is framed for murder by foreign spies, he must evade the authorities for long enough to uncover the spies’ plot and save the enigmatic woman who is mixed up with them.”

Good stuff there. We have a sense of the character (innocent advertising executive), the inciting incident (when he’s framed for murder by foreign spies), his goals (uncover the spies’ plot and save the woman), and his conflict (the authorities tracking him down). The stakes are implied (being tried for murder), as is action (in the verbs “must evade,” “uncover,” and “save”).

This gives us a sense of the story’s trajectory while also containing some urgency. That’s what we’re after. I’ll give you a few different recipes, but the **truth is—as with most things writing related—there is no one-size-fits-all formula** (more on that later).

For now, I want to show you a few more successful loglines.

Hanna

You're guaranteed to find examples of loglines if you go to [imdb](https://www.imdb.com) and search for movies you know. But here's the thing: The loglines you'll find at imdb tend to lack any sense of the story's actual urgency. Here, for example, is the imdb logline for *Hanna*: "A sixteen-year-old girl who was raised by her father to be the perfect assassin is dispatched on a mission across Europe, tracked by a ruthless intelligence agent and her operatives."

Compare that to Graeme Shimmin's version of the logline: "When a teenage assassin's mission goes wrong, she is pursued across Europe by a ruthless CIA agent and must come to terms with the secrets of her childhood in order to survive."

So much better, right?

Why?

Shimmin's version has a stronger sense of urgency because it has multiple sources of complication: an inciting incident, an antagonist, and a sense of her inner conflict and stakes.

The imdb version's conflict comes down to one thing: the fact that she is "tracked" by bad guys.

More complication = more urgency.

Hunt for Red October

Here's the imdb logline for *Hunt for Red October*: "In November 1984, the Soviet Union's best submarine captain in their newest sub violates orders and heads for the U.S. Is he trying to defect or to start a war?"

You'll note the question at the end, which I've already stated is a no-no. And know what else is missing? The American CIA hero, Jack Ryan! Sheesh.

Here's an improved version, written by me and Graeme Shimmin: "When a revolutionary new soviet submarine tries to defect to the USA, a CIA analyst who deduces the submarine captain's intent has to try to come up with a plan to guide the rogue submarine to safety without provoking a war with the Russian forces closing in on it."

More urgency?

I'd say.

Exercises

Try this as an exercise: Think of a book you know has been adapted into a film and look it up on [imdb](http://imdb.com). The logline should be easy to spot; it's usually right below the trailer, above the Director, Writer, and Stars. Copy it down, and then revise it for more urgency.

Here are some weak-sauce loglines to get you started:

"An orphaned boy enrolls in a school of wizardry, where he learns the truth about himself, his family and the terrible evil that haunts the magical world." (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*)

Your improved version:

"An English combat nurse from 1945 is mysteriously swept back in time to 1743." (*Outlander*)

Your improved version:

“A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron.” (*The Lord of the Rings*)

Your improved version:

“Sparks fly when spirited Elizabeth Bennet meets single, rich, and proud Mr. Darcy. But Mr. Darcy reluctantly finds himself falling in love with a woman beneath his class. Can each overcome their own pride and prejudice?” (*Pride and Prejudice*)

Your improved version:

“Atticus Finch, a lawyer in the Depression-era South, defends a black man against an undeserved rape charge, and his children against prejudice.” (*To Kill a Mockingbird*)

Your improved version:

Variations

This guy I've quoted multiple times, Graeme Shimmin, has a wonderful formula for loglines, which he calls the [Killogator](#) Logline Formula for reasons I have not been able to ascertain. It goes like this: In a (SETTING) a (PROTAGONIST) has a (PROBLEM) (caused by an ANTAGONIST) and (faces CONFLICT) as they try to (achieve a GOAL). You fill in your setting, protagonist, problem, antagonist, conflict, and goal. Obviously.

Shimmin notes that it works best to list those six things before creating the sentence. And if your story takes place in a modern-day setting, you don't really need to note the setting. He also clarifies that the problem is the inciting incident and the conflict is the obstacle to the goal.

I've got to hand it to Shimmin: he's very good at writing loglines. He has a whole lot of [examples](#), mostly for stories in the thriller genre.

However, Shimmin's formula isn't the only path to success. The [YA Writer's Toolbox](#) has a nifty Twitter-pitch generator which creates very rough drafts of several different pitches for you. Now, as I've already said, a logline is not a pitch. So the sentences you'll get with this generator will be flawed, as you can see below with my admittedly-quick attempt at using it for *Children of Blood and Bone*. But there are some great lessons to be taken from attempting this. First, though, here are the ten loglines it gave me.

1. For persistent newbie diviner Zelig, there are only two options left: help the princess or abandon her to likely death. But either way, Orisha will lose magic forever.
2. For persistent newbie diviner Zelig, there are only two options left: help the princess or abandon her to likely death. But either way, she may lose the one thing she cares about most: her one true love.

3. When a runaway princess seeks aid, persistent newbie diviner Zelig, is left with only two choices: help the princess or abandon her to likely death.
4. Trapped in Orisha, a fantastical version of Nigeria, Zelig, must reach the Holy Temple before the solstice, or Orisha will lose magic forever, but if she does, she'll have sacrificed her loved ones on the way.
5. After a runaway princess seeks aid, persistent newbie diviner Zelig must help the princess but to do so, she must betray her heart.
6. Persistent newbie diviner Zelig has a second shot to fight for freedom. But when a runaway princess seeks aid, she learns the cost may be she'll have sacrificed her loved ones on the way.
7. Balancing her dream to fight for freedom with finding a path to peace, persistent newbie diviner Zelig learns the true cost of success: she'll have sacrificed her loved ones on the way.
8. When a runaway princess seeks aid, persistent newbie diviner Zelig must sacrifice her one true love in order to reach the Holy Temple before the solstice.
9. Given a chance to fight for freedom she'll do whatever it takes. Even if it means betraying her heart forever.
10. In a last ditch effort to reach the Holy Temple before the solstice and before King Saran takes over, Zelig must sacrifice her one true love or Orisha will lose magic forever.

| | |
|--|------------------------------|
| Main Character's First Name: | Zelig |
| MC - she or he or hän? | she |
| Describe the MC in 2-3 words: (e.g. genie-in-training, ace butterfly napper, avid stenographer) | persistent newbie diviner |
| MC's Greatest Wish: Finish this sentence; more than anything else, the MC wants to ... | fight for freedom |
| Conflicting Goal: (... But he/she must also complete _____ task) | find a path to peace |
| Setting/World: (e.g. aerial kingdom, abandoned gold-rush town, the forests of Eluvia) | fantastical version of Nige |
| Who is the enemy? | King Saran |
| Love Interest's First Name: | Inan |
| Describe the LI in 2-3 words: (e.g. saucy wine cellarist, fickle werewolf, one-time angel, geek-jock ...jeek?) | kosidan prince |
| The Inciting Incident: Start with an adjective or noun, end with a verb. e.g: tragic fire strikes: | a runaway princess seeks |
| First Important Choice - The MC has only two options: Option 1: _____ (e.g. incite a mutiny, steal the last bowl of soup) | help the princess |
| Option 2: _____ (e.g. stay in the genie commune, abandon sister to her fate) | abandon her to likely death |
| Ultimate Solution: In order to succeed, the MC must ... (eg. develop powers, escape, confront, uncover) | reach the Holy Temple bef |
| Consequence of Failure? The MC must succeed OR ELSE ... | Orisha will lose magic fore |
| Price of Success? But if the MC succeeds ... (e.g. she'll never see her homeland again, cuddly koalas will get hurt etc.) | she'll have sacrificed her l |
| The Sacrifice: In order to succeed, the MC must give up ... | her one true love |
| The Betrayal: In order to succeed, the MC must betray ... | her heart |

Create my Twitter Pitches

I've included the original form, as I filled it out. (Don't get hung up on my sometimes-lame fill-in-the-blank responses. That's not the point here.)

Now, to be clear, none of those are that good. And they are a little closer to taglines than loglines for my tastes. But the various generators at YA Writer's Toolbox (there are four generators for different kinds of stories) do give you some other options for sources of urgency.

And that's why I bring it up at all.

Maybe your story is about a dilemma (a character deciding between two irreconcilable choices); or maybe there's a big betrayal or sacrifice that must happen. Maybe instead of or in addition to the stakes (consequences for failing to meet the objective), there is a price to success.

Here's the important takeaway: Your story's core might contain any or several of the above sources of urgency. As great as he is at creating loglines, Shimmin is dealing with a small subset of genres (Alternative History and Spy Thriller). The Killogator may not be best for your story.

So what's the formula then?

Okay, pay attention.

You need to mention your **main character**. (In the film industry, by the way, the convention is not to name the characters, but instead to give them a title or an adjective+noun descriptor, like "orphaned boy," or "boy wizard." I say if you want to name your character, go for it.)

You also need to mention the **goal**.

Setting is optional but worth including if it's very different from our world.

And then, you want to load up with 3-4 sources of urgency: **problem** (inciting incident), **obstacle** (to goal), **antagonist**, **stakes**, **inner conflict**, **betrayal**, **sacrifice**, **price of success**, **dilemma** (choice between two evils or two goods).

Give it a try with your story:

Fill out the pertinent details below. If your story has no sacrifice, for instance, then skip it.

I'll talk you through this:

- The underlined ones (see the list on the next page) are essential.
- Problem is likely going to be included.
- Inner conflict may replace antagonist.
- Price of success may replace stakes.
- Action and setting are optional. Action is often implied by talking about the goal. Setting is only necessary if it's special.
- Sacrifice, Betrayal, and Dilemma are options for special cases. Most of you won't include those.
- Loglines usually require at least six attempts.

MC (main character):

Goal:

Conflict (obstacle):

Problem (inciting incident):

Antagonist:

Inner conflict:

Stakes:

Price of success:

Action:

Setting:

Sacrifice:

Betrayal:

Dilemma:

Your logline (attempt #1):

Your logline (attempt #2):

Your logline (attempt #3):

Your logline (attempt #4):

Your logline (attempt #5):

Your logline (attempt #6):

Resources

- Graeme Shimmin's [Killogator Formula](#)
- Graeme Shimmin [Examples](#)
- C.S. Lakin has [a nice article](#) about loglines and you can even see some workshopping in the comments of this one.
- Screenwriter [Noam Kroll](#) has a simple formula.
- [Kristen Lamb](#) makes some good points about loglines needing to be ironic and emotionally appealing.
- See a writer make several attempts at a logline at [Fictional Alchemy](#).
- Want more tagline info? Start with this article at [Thoughts on Fantasy](#).
- A logline might be the basis of a concise pitch, e.g., a Twitter pitch, but such pitches are a bit different:
- The [YA Writer's Toolbox](#) generators referenced above might be helpful for such pitches.
- But this article from [Amelie Zhou](#) is the best information on Twitter pitches.