



The Logline.

*your story in
one sentence.*

A working field guide to the logline: your protagonist, goal, conflict, and stakes in one line; the formulas that actually work; how to choose the irony and the hook; the mistakes that flatten a pitch; and a printable logline worksheet to build your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft the line.

A logline is the shortest document in your whole career and, dollar for word, the most valuable. It is the one sentence a producer, an agent, or a contest reader meets first, and often the only sentence they read before deciding whether your script is worth their afternoon. Getting it right is not a copywriting trick you do at the end. It is a test of whether the story underneath it has a spine.

There is no single author to credit here. What follows distills the standard practice of pitching that story people work by, as it operates across film and television today: the four pieces every logline carries, the formulas that assemble them, how to find the irony that makes a familiar premise feel new, and where loglines reliably fail. A running example, an invented film, is built one piece at a time so you can watch a flat first attempt sharpen into a tight final line. The four-piece anatomy at the center of this guide is also the checklist on the printable worksheet at the back.

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What a logline is.

sell the story in a sentence. do not summarize it.

A logline is one sentence, occasionally two, that tells a stranger what your story is and makes them want to read it. It names who the story is about, what they are trying to do, and what stands in the way, compressed until a busy professional can grasp the whole shape in the time it takes to read a subject line. It is the first thing they see and, more often than writers like to admit, the only thing they read before deciding whether to open page one.

What a logline is not matters as much as what it is. It is not a summary: a summary lists everything that happens, while a logline isolates the spine and throws the rest away. It is not a tagline: a tagline is mood built to sell a finished film to an audience (“In space, no one can hear you scream”), while a logline is built to sell an unmade story to a buyer, so it has to carry actual plot. Confusing the two is the fastest way to write a line that sounds exciting and says nothing.

A LOGLINE AT WORK

“A claustrophobic astronaut must cross eight months of deep space in a coffin-sized capsule to reach a stranded crew before their air runs out.” One sentence, and a stranger already knows the genre, the character, the engine, and the exact source of the tension. That is the whole job.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A logline is one sentence that tells a stranger who your story is about, what they want, and what stands in the way, sharp enough to make a professional want to read the script.

The logline as diagnostic.

if you cannot log it, the story may not have a spine yet.

Here is the secret that makes such a short line worth so much: it is a diagnostic tool wearing a marketing tool's clothes. When a logline refuses to come together, the problem is almost never the sentence. It is the story. A goal you cannot state plainly is a goal that is not yet sharp on the page; an obstacle you keep leaving out is usually an obstacle the draft is missing too. A muddy logline is a muddy structure, reported back to you in twenty-five words.

This is why you should write the logline early, before the draft and not only after it. A story that logs cleanly tends to have a working spine; a story that will not log is often telling you exactly where it is soft. Writers who treat the logline as a chore for the end miss its best use, which is as an X-ray taken at the start: cheap to run, and honest about what it finds.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • FIRST ATTEMPT

Throughout this guide we build one logline from scratch, for an invented film. The first attempt: "A man tries to keep a lighthouse working during a bad storm." That is not a logline; it is a shrug. No sense of who the man is, no real goal, no force against him, nothing at stake. The flatness is not a wording problem. The writer has not yet decided what the story is.

WATCH FOR THIS

If you catch yourself padding the line with adjectives to make it feel bigger, stop. Bigness comes from a sharp goal, a real antagonist, and a genuine cost, never from "epic," "thrilling," or "unforgettable." A flat logline is a story note, not a copywriting task.

The four load-bearing pieces.

four things, and the story shows through the gaps between them.

Every working logline carries four load-bearing pieces. A protagonist, described rather than named. A goal, concrete enough to film. Opposition, the force pushing back. And stakes, what it costs if they fail. Leave any one of them out and the sentence sags at exactly the point where the story does, which is why the four pieces are also the four questions to ask of your draft.

THE FOUR PIECES

- **Protagonist:** not “Frank,” but “a burned-out getaway driver.” A description carries character and often the irony; a name carries nothing to a stranger.
- **Goal:** something a camera could point at. “Find peace” is invisible; “get her daughter off the island before the last ferry” is a scene.
- **Opposition:** the person or force actively in the way. With no antagonist there is only a situation, and situations do not sell.
- **Stakes:** the price of failure, ideally with a clock that says why now. “Or else” is the engine of the whole sentence.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • FOUR PIECES

Take our example. Break it into its four pieces before writing a word of the sentence. Protagonist: a lighthouse keeper who is terrified of the dark. Goal: keep the lamp burning by hand once the storm kills the power. Opposition: a dead generator, and a mile of unlit cliff between him and the spare oil. Stakes: a returning fishing boat, his estranged son at the wheel, that breaks on the rocks without the light.

The anatomy of a logline.

the order the pieces click into, and where the irony hides.

Assembled, the four pieces fall into a reliable order. The reader meets the protagonist, learns what kicks the story off, hears the goal and the force against it, and lands on the stakes. Hold that sequence and even a rough logline reads clearly; scramble it and the sharpest ingredients blur into each other.

THE ANATOMY

01	The protagonist, in an ironic descriptor	WHO
02	The inciting trigger	WHY NOW
03	The goal, and the force against it	WHAT
04	The stakes, with a clock	OR ELSE

One dependable skeleton holds all four: “When [trigger], a [flawed protagonist] must [goal] or [stakes].” You will not keep the scaffolding in the final line, but drafting on it guarantees no slot is left empty. The irony usually lives in slot one, folded into the descriptor, and the urgency lives in the clock tucked inside the stakes.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • ON THE SKELETON

Dropped onto the skeleton: “When a hundred-year storm kills the power to his lighthouse, a keeper terrified of the dark must keep the lamp burning by hand, or the boat carrying his son wrecks on the rocks.” Rough, and still too long, but every slot is now full. The pages that follow sharpen them one at a time.

The protagonist.

a description, not a name. three words that carry a character.

Lead with a description, never a name. “Sarah must save the town” tells a stranger nothing, because Sarah is a stranger; but “a disgraced storm chaser must save the town” hands the reader a whole person in three words. The best descriptors do double duty, carrying the character’s wound, flaw, or profession while quietly setting up the irony the story will exploit.

Choose the single descriptor that collides hardest with the goal ahead. A logline has room for exactly one adjective-and-noun that matters, so spend it where it creates the most friction. Age, hair color, and hometown are almost never that word. The wound, the job, or the flaw almost always is.

ON THE PAGE

- Cut the name. If a stranger would not recognize it, it is taking a seat that a description should have.
- Pick the trait that fights the goal, not the trait you are fondest of. Friction is the whole point.
- One descriptor, not three. “A lonely, aging, guilt-ridden ex-cop” is a shrug in a trench coat; choose the one that matters.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • PROTAGONIST

Before: “Tom, a lighthouse keeper in his sixties, ...” The name and the age do no work at all.

After: “a lighthouse keeper who is terrified of the dark ...” The same man, but now the descriptor carries the irony the whole film runs on.

The goal.

concrete, active, and something a camera could see.

The goal is what the protagonist is physically trying to do, and it must be concrete enough to film. Internal goals (“find closure,” “learn to trust again,” “confront her past”) are the theme of the story, not its engine, and a logline built on them evaporates on contact. Convert every abstract want into the visible action that would prove it on screen.

The test is simple: could a cinematographer point a camera at it? “Confront her past” fails; “return to the island where her sister drowned” passes, because it names a place, an action, and a wound in a single stroke. Keep the goal active, with the protagonist chasing something rather than merely enduring something, so the reader feels the story lean forward.

ON THE PAGE

- Name a visible action, not a feeling. If you cannot storyboard it, it is theme, not goal.
- Make the protagonist the one doing it. Active pursuit reads stronger than passive survival.
- One goal, one story. Two goals in a logline read as two films fighting over one sentence.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • GOAL

Vague: “must survive the night” or “must face his fear.” Neither one is a scene.

Concrete: “must climb the unlit cliff and keep the lamp burning by hand.” Now the goal has a place, an action, and a body in motion.

The conflict.

the force in the way. no antagonist, no story.

A goal with nothing against it is a to-do list. The logline needs opposition: the person, group, or force actively standing between the protagonist and what they want. It can be a human antagonist (a rival, a killer, a system) or an impersonal one (a storm, a deadline, a disease), but it has to push back with intent or inevitability, hard enough that success is in real doubt.

The strongest oppositions are specific and personal to this story. “Bad weather” is scenery; “a storm that has killed the power and put a mile of black cliff between him and the fuel” is an antagonist. Where you can, let the opposition rhyme with the protagonist’s flaw, so that beating it means beating themselves.

ON THE PAGE

- Name the force, do not imply it. A logline with no visible antagonist reads as low-stakes.
- Make it strong enough to plausibly win. If the outcome is never in doubt, there is no story to sell.
- Aim it at the flaw. The best obstacle attacks the exact thing the protagonist is worst at.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • OPPOSITION

The opposition is not just the storm. It is the dark itself, the one thing this keeper cannot face, now standing between him and every action the night demands. The generator is dead, the spare oil is a mile down an unlit path, and the safe, lit room is the one place the light will fail. The antagonist and the flaw turn out to be the same shadow.

The stakes and the ticking clock.

what is lost if they fail, and why it has to be tonight.

Stakes answer the reader's quiet question: so what? What happens if the protagonist fails? The answer has to be concrete and large enough to matter (a life, a family, a home, a way of being in the world) and it has to be personal to this protagonist, not a generic threat to a faceless city. Stakes are the difference between a logline that is merely clear and one that makes a stranger care.

A ticking clock turns stakes into urgency. "Before dawn," "before the ferry stops," "in the thirty days before the will pays out": a deadline tells the reader why the story is now and not some other week, and it presses the whole sentence forward. Not every logline needs an explicit clock, but the pressure of one, stated or implied, is what separates tension from mere situation.

ON THE PAGE

- State the cost of failure out loud. "Or else" is the most important phrase you are not yet writing.
- Make it personal. A threat to someone the protagonist loves beats a threat to strangers.
- Add a clock when the story has one. A deadline answers "why now?" before the reader thinks to ask it.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • STAKES + CLOCK

The stakes go from abstract to personal: not "ships might sink" but "the fishing boat rounding the headland, his estranged son at the wheel, breaks apart on the rocks without the light." The clock is the boat itself, closing on the coast through the dark. Fail before it reaches the rocks, and the son drowns while the father hides from the one thing he cannot face.

Irony and the hook.

the built-in collision that makes a familiar story feel new.

Clarity gets a logline read; irony gets it remembered. The hook is the compelling contradiction at the center of the premise, usually a collision between who the protagonist is and what the story forces them to do. A lifeguard who cannot swim, a marriage counselor whose own marriage is ending, a hostage negotiator who cannot say no to her own family: each pairing generates story before a single plot point is added.

Hunt for the irony deliberately. If your logline reads clear but flat, look for the tension between the protagonist's nature and their task, then load it into the descriptor. Often the irony is already alive in your story and simply missing from the sentence, and naming it is what makes the line feel fresh rather than familiar. A premise filmed a hundred times can sell again on the strength of one honest contradiction.

IRONY, IN THREE COLLISIONS

- The fire chief who is the town's secret arsonist. The role and the crime cannot coexist, so the story has to resolve them.
- The germophobe assigned to the case buried in a garbage strike. The setting punishes the exact thing the hero cannot stand.
- The forger who has gone blind. The gift and the loss sit inside one person, and the plot lives in the gap between them.

THE LIGHTHOUSE • THE HOOK

State the story's irony in one line and the hook appears: the man who keeps the whole coast lit cannot bear the dark himself. Every beat of the night forces him toward the one thing he has built his life to avoid. That contradiction, not the storm, is why a reader leans in.

Formulas and templates.

a scaffold to draft on, then a ruthless pass to tighten.

A formula will not write your logline, but it will keep you from leaving a piece out. The most durable one: “When [inciting incident], a [flawed protagonist] must [concrete goal] or [terrible stakes].” Fill every bracket and all four load-bearing pieces are guaranteed. A leaner cousin drops the trigger: “A [protagonist] must [goal] before [clock] or [stakes].” Use whichever the story fits; the brackets are training wheels, not a cage.

Then tighten. Thirty-five words is a sensible ceiling and twenty-five is better, so every word has to earn its seat. Cut the trigger if the goal implies it, fold the clock into the stakes, and delete any adjective doing mood instead of work. Read the result aloud to someone who does not know the story and ask what the film is about. If their answer matches yours, the line holds; if it drifts, the line is leaking, and you tighten again.

THE FORMULA AT WORK • THREE PATTERNS

“When a con man inherits a fortune he can claim only by telling the truth for thirty days, he must survive a month of honesty without losing the family he built on lies.”

“A germophobic homicide detective must chase a killer through a citywide garbage strike, hunting the one man who hides his victims where no one will look.”

“When the town’s only funeral director drops dead, a woman terrified of corpses must bury him herself before the county shuts the parlor for good.”

THE LIGHTHOUSE • LONG TO TIGHT

Long (about forty words): “When a hundred-year storm kills the power to his lighthouse, a keeper terrified of the dark must climb an unlit cliff to keep the lamp burning by hand, or the fishing boat carrying his estranged son will break apart on the rocks below.”

Tight (thirty-two, nothing lost): “When a hundred-year storm kills the power, a lighthouse keeper terrified of the dark must keep his lamp lit by hand, or the boat carrying his estranged son wrecks on the rocks.”

Seven ways loglines fail.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. Naming the character.** “Jack must stop the heist” tells a stranger nothing. Fix: replace the name with the descriptor that carries the character and the irony, “a paroled safecracker,” not “Jack.”
- **2. The vague goal.** “Must confront her past” is theme, not action. Fix: convert the want into a filmable objective, a place to reach, a thing to take, a person to save.
- **3. No antagonist.** A goal with no force against it reads as a chore. Fix: name the person or force pushing back, strong enough that the outcome is genuinely in doubt.
- **4. No stakes.** The reader finishes the line and asks “so what?” Fix: state the cost of failure out loud, make it personal, and add a clock if the story has one.
- **5. The crammed synopsis.** Two or three sentences of plot, subplots, and side characters. Fix: one protagonist, one goal, one engine; the rest belongs in the script, not the sentence.
- **6. Adjectives instead of irony.** “An epic, unforgettable journey of one brave hero.” Fix: delete the mood words and find the real contradiction; irony sells, adjectives do not.
- **7. The tagline in disguise.** A line of atmosphere with no plot in it (“Some doors should stay closed”). Fix: a tagline sells a finished film to an audience; a logline sells an unmade story to a buyer, so put the actual story back in.

THE READ-IT-ALoud TEST

Read the finished logline to someone who has never heard your pitch and ask them what the story is about. If their one-sentence answer matches your intention, the line works. If it drifts, the logline is leaking, and the leak is usually pointing straight at the same soft spot in the draft.

Your logline worksheet.

print this page. pieces first, then two drafts, tighter each time.

PROTAGONIST (IRONIC DESCRIPTOR)

THE IRONY / HOOK

INCITING TRIGGER

TICKING CLOCK

CONCRETE GOAL

GENRE + TONE

OPPOSITION

DRAFT LOGLINE 1

STAKES

DRAFT LOGLINE 2 (TIGHTER)

Keep going.

a logline is never done on the first try. it is sharpened against a reader.

The worksheet gets you two drafts. The next move is to pressure-test them against a reader who will be honest about where the line still leaks. That is what the **Logline Arena** on One More Draft is for: free feedback on clarity, irony, and stakes from Quill, your resident story editor, and a head-to-head that pits your versions against each other until the tightest one wins.

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One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a screenplay editor with industry-standard formatting, a distraction-free manuscript editor, professional export for scripts and books, and Quill, your resident story editor, for when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows too.

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