

**Screenwriting**



# 10 Great Loglines

How to write  
your own logline

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# Introduction

Loglines. They seem simple, but they're not. It takes skill to distill down a story into 25-35 words or so. You need to sell your story to pique the interest of an agent or producer, make it sound exciting yet keep it as concise as possible. But the logline is also very useful during the writing process. Having your logline posted in front of you, on top of your keyboard, always reminds you what your story is about. It helps you to refocus on your subject and to find the right answers to the many questions raised along the creation of your story.

In this guide, we'll analyse what it takes to write a great logline and offer examples of some of the best.

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# What is a logline?

Simply put, a logline is a one or two sentence pitch that concisely tells what the story is about and what is the hook that will catch an audience. It should contain three key elements:

1. An interesting main character (who)
2. What he/she wants to achieve (goal)
3. What/Who stands in his/her way (obstacle)

Keep in mind the logline is different from the tagline, which is strictly a marketing tool used to excite an audience but often doesn't speak to the story specifically and is much shorter than a logline. For example, one of the greatest taglines is for the movie Alien: "In space, no one can hear you scream." However, the logline is "A space crew aboard a cargo ship investigates a distress signal, allowing a deadly alien lifeform to stow aboard their ship, intent on killing them off one by one."

Using the formula, this is an unusual case as the entire crew is considered to be the main characters, although Sigourney Weaver's Ripley is often thought of as the main character as she continues in the sequels. But if we look at the crew as a singular entity, their goal is survival and the obstacle is the alien.

## 6 Rules of the Logline

There are six key rules to writing the successful logline:

1. Be succinct but not at the expense of the important information – The above logline for Alien uses only 29 words yet we know who we are watching and what the hook of the story is.
2. Do not use a character's names. Exception - real life characters – Only if you are writing a biography or using real-life characters would you include the name of the main character.

3. Do not reveal the twist – There’s nothing about aliens popping out of stomachs or who, if any, survive the alien.
4. Use descriptive adjectives. Example: an alcoholic detective – In the above example, we use space crew as that places us in a different world.
5. The genre should be clear – It’s clear from the logline above that this is a science fiction film.
6. Stakes/Ticking clock – There is clearly a ticking clock and stakes of the alien’s plan to kill the crew off before the crew gets home.

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# 10 Great Loglines

Here are ten of the best movie loglines. We'll use the criteria outlined above to show how, in a concise manner, the six keys are addressed.

- 1. The Wizard of Oz:** “After a twister transports a lonely Kansas farm girl to a magical land, she sets out on a dangerous journey to find a wizard with the power to send her home.”
  - a.** Succinct - the story is condensed into just 31 words.
  - b.** Character description - a Kansas farm girl (not “Dorothy”) is described as “lonely.”
  - c.** No twist - Just a twister! Nothing is mentioned about who the wizard is or how Dorothy gets to him.
  - d.** Genre - With the use of words like “magical” and “wizard”, it’s clear we are in the fantasy realm.
  - e.** Stakes/Ticking Clock - Dorothy cannot get home until her journey is completed.

**2. Casablanca:** “A cynical, self-absorbed nightclub owner in Nazi-occupied Morocco must decide to risk everything and help his former lover and her husband escape the Nazis.”

- a. Succinct - the story is condensed into just 25 words (counting Nazi-occupied as two)
- b. Character description - It doesn't get more descriptive to call Rick cynical and self-absorbed.
- c. No twist - We don't know from the logline how or if they do escape the Nazis.
- d. Genre - It's clear from the description that this is a suspenseful drama.
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - by the use of the words “escape” and “Nazis”, we immediately see the stakes and the clock.

**3. Titanic:** “A young man and woman from different social classes fall in love aboard an ill-fated voyage at sea.”

- a. Succinct - It only takes 18 words to convey the story's logline.

- b.** Character description - We know the main characters are young and from different social classes.
- c.** No twist - We know the fate of the ship from history. But we can't tell their fate from the logline.
- d.** Genre - "Fall in love" lets us know this is a romantic drama.
- e.** Stakes/Ticking Clock - the "ill-fated" voyage infers a ticking clock and the stakes at hand.

**4. The Sixth Sense:** "A damaged psychologist struggles to cure a troubled boy who believes he sees dead people."

- a.** Succinct - A very succinct 15 words conveys the story's logline.
- b.** Character description - We know Bruce Willis' Malcolm is damaged and the young Cole is troubled.
- c.** No twist - Most people would be truly upset to know the granddaddy of twists before seeing the film.

- d. Genre - It's clear this is a supernatural drama/mystery
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - It's inferred by "struggles to cure" that there are a lot of stakes and a ticking clock that could mean further trouble for the boy.

**5.Argo:** "A CIA agent leads a mission disguised as a Canadian film crew to rescue six American hostages out of Tehran during the Iran hostage crisis in 1979."

- a. Succinct - Only 27 words are needed to convey the story's logline.
- b. Character description - Not just an agent but a CIA agent.
- c. No twist - Nothing is mentioned about how the mission turns out.
- d. Genre - If there's a mission and a disguise, it's usually a thriller.
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - It's clear that there is a rescue mission and a dangerous regime that wants to prevent it.

**6. The Godfather:** The idealistic son of a Mafia Don is reluctantly drawn into the mob and assumes his father's role as the head of the family's business.

- a. Succinct - It only takes 25 words.
- b. Character description - By saying the son is idealistic, we immediately see his inner conflict.
- c. No twist - No consequences are mentioned by Michael's joining the family business.
- d. Genre - The mob. Clearly, this is a crime drama.
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - The stakes are obvious by the word "reluctantly" and we can gather there is a limited time for Michael to agree to head the business.

**7.ET: The Extraterrestrial:** A troubled boy finds an extraterrestrial stranded on Earth. He defies the authorities to help the alien find his way home.

- a. Succinct - The storyline is summed up in 21 words.
- b. Character description - It's not enough that Elliot is a young boy, but he's a troubled boy.
- c. No twist - No mention if ET does get home or not.
- d. Genre - We're talking alien and troubled boy. A combination of sci-fi and family drama.
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - The authorities are after ET. Elliot has to help him get home before they find him.

**8. Rocky:** A small-time boxer gets a once in a lifetime opportunity to fight the heavyweight champ in a bout in which he struggles to go the distance to earn his self-respect.

- a. Succinct - A total of 30 words.
- b. Character description - Rocky is not just a boxer but a small-time boxer, which plays to his self-respect issue.

- c. No twist - We don't know how the bout turns out.
- d. Genre - Clearly a sports drama.
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - Rocky fighting a heavyweight champ and we know there are a limited number of rounds in a boxing match.

**9. Star Wars:** A spirited farm boy teams up with rebel fighters to save a princess and liberate the galaxy from an evil empire.

- a. Succinct - There's a lot going on in the movie, but 21 words sums it up.
- b. Character description - Luke isn't just a farm boy, enough to portray a sense of innocence, but a spirited one at that.
- c. No twist - There's no mention as to who wins the battle.
- d. Genre - This is a sci-fi adventure story.
- e. Stakes/Ticking Clock - The galaxy is at stake and it's implied there is a limited time to save it.

**10. North by Northwest:** An innocent New York City advertising executive goes on the run after being mistaken for a government agent by a group of foreign spies.

- a.** Succinct - A total of 24 words.
- b.** Character description - Three ways to describe Roger Thornhill: He's glib; he's from New York and he's in advertising.
- c.** No twist - Nothing clues us in as to how it turns out.
- d.** Genre - A character on the run is obviously a thriller.
- e.** Stakes/Ticking Clock - Mistaken identity and being on the run tell us the stakes and that there is a limited time for Thornhill to prove the truth.

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# Exercise

Test your logline skills. Here are five popular films. Write in the loglines for each. On the bottom of the last page is listed a logline for each. After you write yours, compare them to our answers. Remember, answer who (main character) wants what (the goal) and what stands in their way (obstacle)

1. My Big Fat Greek Wedding
2. Pirates of the Caribbean
3. Pretty Woman
4. Toy Story
5. Bohemian Rhapsody

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# Conclusion

When writing the logline for your screenplay, take several passes at it. When you start your story, write one to show you have the important elements: an interesting character, important stakes and some sense of a ticking clock. Then rewrite it when you're finished your draft. Chances are, the logline will have changed. But the important thing is to be concise and sell it with sizzle.



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# Exercise loglines

1. **My Big Fat Greek Wedding** - When a Greek-American woman is about to marry a WASP-y man, she must convince her Greek family to accept him and, in turn, accept her own heritage.
2. **Pirates of the Caribbean** - A charming, swashbuckling pirate joins forces with a young blacksmith on an adventure to rescue the Governor of England's daughter and reclaim his ship.
3. **Pretty Woman** - A wealthy businessman hires a prostitute as his date for the weekend, only to end up falling in love with her.
4. **Toy Story** - A cowboy doll is profoundly jealous and threatened when a new spaceman action figure supplants him as top toy in a young boy's room.
5. **Bohemian Rhapsody** - The story of how Freddie Mercury made rock band, Queen, a sensation while battling his own personal problems. (Note that it is imperative to use the main character's name because he is a real person.)