

SYNOPSIS, OUTLINES AND TREATMENTS

Any writer looking to have their screenplay produced will have to present it in a number of forms. Here is a brief explanation of the different formats a writer needs to master.

PREMISE

An idea for a story with a set-up or situation, with little or no story implied. e. g. "A sexist actor pretends to be a woman to get a role in a soap opera" (TOOTSIE)

LOGLINE

One or two lines which convey the central situation, usually the main character, tone, and an idea of where the story leads. This is the sort of thing you'd put in a introduction letter to a production company. Give the hook of the story, spark the listener's imagination, but leave them wanting more. e.g. "Burbank Truman doesn't realize that his quaint hometown is a giant studio set run by a TV producer, that his neighbours are actors and even his wife is a contract player. Gradually, Truman gets wise" (THE TRUMAN SHOW).

SYNOPSIS

A one-page summation of your story, such as found in a script report or "coverage" and sometimes accompanying a finished screenplay. It should establish the characters, their situation, what they are trying to achieve and a brief summary of the obstacles in their way. Make your synopsis tight, bright, and as exciting as possible.

STORY OUTLINE

Although sometimes confused with a synopsis, this is usually longer, about 2 - 3 pages, with more detail, more emphasis on character, tone, theme, and not solely plot-driven. Outlines are used by writers to check their story development. Write the action as it unfolds on the screen and avoid dialogue, unless it is particularly symptomatic of character and theme. e.g. "Lunch is for wimps" (WALL STREET).

TREATMENT

A fuller exploration of the story, about 10 – 15 pages, covering character, plot and setting. Sometimes it contains character descriptions and statements on theme and tone in addition to the story line. The main advantage of the treatment is that it allows the producer to "see" the whole film and the writer to fix story problems before writing a script, saving time and several drafts of screenplay further down the line.

SCRIPT

Normally about 90-120 pages (comedies tend to be shorter than drama and UK scripts shorter than in the US). Make sure you have the correct formatting as this shows your work is professional and allows the reader to time your screenplay – one page of standard formatted script equals roughly one minute screen time.

Write all of these documents in the present tense, staying concise and to the point. Use active verbs and descriptive nouns rather than lists of adjectives and adverbs - "Isabel storms into the mansion" is more dramatic than "Isabel walks quickly into the large house." Big blocks of writing are off-putting to the reader so break the story down into short paragraphs to make it easier to read.

PITCH

This is a verbal presentation. It can be a short 30 second 'elevator pitch', similar to a logline, during a chance meeting with a top film executive or a 5 minute sales pitch, such as you would present in a meeting with a film company. The purpose of the pitch is to intrigue the listener by presenting the concept, the main character and his core dilemma. For a great example of a pitch, see Richard E Grant in THE PLAYER.

Although getting the hang of these different forms may take a while, each time you present your story, it will enable you to distil your core idea and develop the story you really want to tell.

For more information about how to sell your script and to download examples of synopsis, outlines, treatments and formatting etc, go to RESOURCES at www.londonscriptconsultancy.com

The London Script Consultancy provides invaluable support to writers, producers, and directors, progressing their scripts to the high standard necessary to compete in the film and television industries.