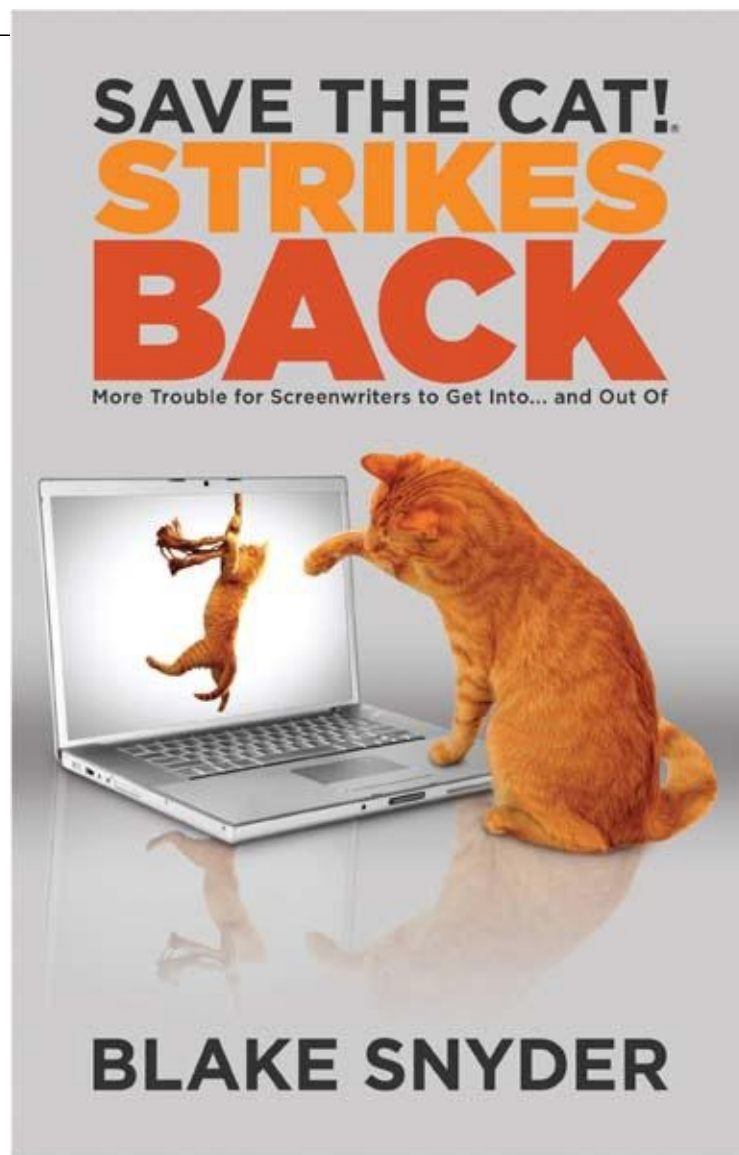


SAVE THE CAT!
STRIKES
BACK

More Trouble for Screenwriters to Get Into... and Out Of



BLAKE SNYDER



from Dean DeBlois
co-writer and co-director of *How to Train Your Dragon*



“Blake's whole approach was used in structuring the story that Chris Sanders and I brought to the project when we took it over. We had just over a year to rewrite, storyboard, edit, animate, and light the entire film. A crazy undertaking — and time was of the essence being that the release date was immovable. Our task was to take the world of the source children's book and broaden its audience by giving it a dynamic, fantasy adventure story that would deliver on the promise of the premise. Chris and I also saw an opportunity for strong emotional payoffs within its central relationships, so we made them our primary focus.

Our first step was to lay out our concept according to Blake's Beat Sheet, and from there, we laid out the detailed structure. The Board became our foundation, and we never veered from it as we felt our way through the moments of the story. I'm a big believer in Blake's approach because

everything he teaches was proven true in the years of story work I did prior to reading *Save the Cat!* The theories he touches upon are undeniable, universal truths of human storytelling, and Blake did us all a huge and lasting favor by putting them in a digestible form that people can immediately use and rely upon.”

“How nice of Blake to write this book just for me.’ That’s what you’ll be saying after you read *Save the Cat! Strikes Back*. No matter if you’re a newbie or a produced writer, Blake understands that the struggle never ends. Whether you’re rewriting or getting rewritten, looking for representation or leaving your representation, he’s got you covered. And on those days when you don’t feel like writing and all you want to do is go on the Internet and ‘research,’ read his chapter on discipline, focus, and positive energy. I guarantee you will be up and writing. I love this book!”

— Kriss Turner, Writer, *Something New*;
Writer/Producer, *Sherri*, *Everybody Hates Chris*,
The Bernie Mac Show

“Written in his signature witty, conversational style, Blake Snyder has given us another gem. As relevant to the novelist as it is to the screenwriter, this is a book no writer should be without. I’ve read all of Blake’s books, and never begin a story without his insanely useful ‘Beat Sheet’ by my side, but this time, Snyder goes one step further, sharing his own personal transformation from struggling writer to one who’s seen great success. From the most generous and genuine writer/teacher of our time, this book will inspire the reader to scale all of those seemingly insurmountable brick walls and keep going — to choose getting *better* over getting *bitter*. This book is a must read!”

— Alyson Noël, #1 *New York Times*
Bestselling Author, *Evermore*, *Blue Moon*,
Shadowland

“A dazzling expansion on Blake’s original insights, this essential screenwriting tool is practical and profound.”

— Mark Hentemann, Writer/Executive Producer,
Family Guy

“*Save the Cat! Strikes Back* is Blake’s best yet. It expands on his principles of storytelling in a breezy, colloquial style and gives us a deeper personal insight to the relentlessly positive mindset that powered his great success and his generous spirit. Blake’s life was far, far too short, but his work and his inspiring legacy will remain timeless.”

— Rick Drew, *movieScope Magazine*

SAVE THE CAT!®
STRIKES

BLAKE SNYDER

Published by Save the Cat!® Press

Cover Design:
Brian Blevins

Interior Book Design:
Gina Mansfield Design

Editor:
Brett Jay Markel

Photos on pages viii and 87, chart on page 47:
Peter Bennett/Ambient Images

Printed by McNaughton & Gunn, Inc.
Saline, Michigan

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ISBN 10: 0-9841576-0-3
ISBN 13: 978-0-9841576-0-0

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REMEMBERING BLAKE



BLAKE SNYDER
OCTOBER 3, 1957 – AUGUST 4, 2009

FOREWORD

Of course, one can't help but begin this foreword with some sort of reference to franchises.

If you're reading this book, you are most likely painfully aware that Hollywood is constantly in search of the perfect, key movie element that connects so well with people and manages to be so relatable and resonant that it leaves the audience wanting more. Discovering the magic formula that creates a movie franchise is tougher than it seems — for every *Batman*, there's an *Electra* — which means a celebration is in order when a filmmaker has successfully cracked the ever-elusive code.

I'm fairly certain that when Blake Snyder started writing his first *STC!* book, the notion of being at the forefront of creating a “screenwriting how-to franchise” hadn't crossed his mind. And if it had — he was a crafty guy, after all — I imagine the idea seemed as far away and inconceivable as Indiana Jones actually finding the Holy Grail.

Yet, here we are.

Before he passed away, Blake heard from so many of his fans, all telling him he had *absolute* cracked the elusive code! This outpouring of praise from you encouraged him to press on in his quest. With *Save the Cat! Strikes Back*, Blake — as with any good franchise creator — brilliantly found his way to a completely fresh, chock-full-of-new-material, third book in a series. Amazing. George Lucas and Steven Spielberg should take notice!

So let's take a moment to toast what Blake has accomplished in this third go 'round.

First, inspired by the workshops and lectures he'd held all over the world, Blake realized his audience wanted more — more guidance, more tough love, more common-sense advice on navigating and surviving Hollywood. He had his own experiences and anecdotes, to be sure, but he also spent the last few years *listening*. He heard thousands of questions and stories and woes from you, his loyal readers and students, and now he found the time to officially address them! So answers and reassurances to common screenwriting problems and random “what ifs” that plague rookie writers are in this book.

Next, he realized many aspiring screenwriters were having great success from the tips and the lessons presented in his first two books and, with their well-received scripts in hand, they were looking for information about “what next?” So from personal insights about agents and managers to getting and interpreting notes and what to expect in meetings, that information is in here as well.

But Blake also realized that with artistic success comes great pressure — screenwriting is a terrifying and exhausting chore on some days, an amazing but challenging career on others — so he gathered crazy tales and helpful advice from working, professional writers that present a realistic but uplifting look at the journey that is “life as a writer.”

That's in here too.

And, most importantly, Blake shares a powerful, heartfelt, and intimate story of the journey that took him from a guy who had lost his creative spirit, had stopped writing and was incredibly lost, to a disciplined, positive, and driven man with a newfound desire to write, write, write. The key to his massive paradigm shift? Blake realized his stubborn, selfish, independent streak was completely ruining whatever positive mojo he might have had, so he dug down deep, reconnected with himself,

and began writing from the heart. He started believing in himself again, and hopefully, his story will help you do the same.

With every word it is clear Blake wrote this book because he wanted you to know that when you decide you hate the story you're working on, when you think you've completely wasted the last six months of your weekends and free time, when you realize there's something off in your plot but can't figure out what, that **you are not alone!**

He goes out of his way to assure you, if you know in your heart of hearts you want to be a writer, there are many, many preventative and positive ways out of your screenwriting black hole. He wanted you to know he understood the struggle of a creative, inventive soul — that he and his friends had been there, for the highs and the lows of pursuing a non-traditional career path.

And that, in the end, it is all worth it.

To quote the first *Save the Cat!*: This book gives me “the same, only different.” You have the same witty, wise, and kindhearted Blake, with his years of experience and positive outlook, covering a wealth of information that hasn't been touched in any other screenwriting books on the market. Blake's incredible knowledge of both the art and the business of Hollywood is only eclipsed by his infectious, passionate desire to share this knowledge with any-one looking for guidance. I'm so pleased he was able to get all this amazing, inspirational work down on paper before he died.

I wish I could congratulate him in person, but I think he already knew the importance of the legacy he was leaving. This is the stuff that franchises are made of.

No wonder readers were clamoring for more!

We'll miss you, Blake!

Sheila Hanahan Taylor

Autumn 2009

Sheila is a producer and partner of Practical Pictures, known for such movie franchises as *American Pie*, *Final Destination*, and *Cats & Dogs*. She is also a visiting professor and lecturer at various film programs around the globe, including The Sorbonne, UCLA, Cal State, Tokyo International Film Festival, and Cinestory.

INTRODUCTION: OH, YOU'RE IN TROUBLE NOW!

Let's face it, if you have chosen a career as a screenwriter, you're asking for a certain amount of pain.

A hint of this happens right up front.

No matter where you come from, what your good intentions are, or how talented you may be when you even tell someone about the screenplay you're working on, you will invariably get looks.

Just saying "I'm a screenwriter" begs for an "Oh *yeah?!?*"

And the question we all hate:

"Is there anything you've written I might have seen?"

The implication here is that if you were any good at this, you would already have something so good and made and playing at the Cineplex. And no, telling Aunt Fern about your YouTube short, or the option by the producer who almost had something premiere at a film festival *near* Sundance two years ago, is not enough.

And that hurts.

If you're like the rest of us who have picked screenwriting as your profession, you get used to it. You must — because you have to. It is *who* you are. It is *what* you are. Like Lee Strasberg as Mafioso Hyman Roth says between coughing fits in *Godfather 2*:

"This... is the business... we have chosen."

And p.s. ta hell wid Aunt Fern.

She can barely write her name.

And she smells like cabbage.

That's right, just by checking the box marked "creative" in the list of skills you hope to turn into a profession, you are already in the trouble zone. And it's not just your concerned loved ones who stand in judgment of the ideas popping in your brain. The entire world at times seems like it's against you.

Why?

Partly because we're just different.

"They" do not get the adrenaline charge we get when we see that a re-struck print of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* is playing down-town; "they" do not understand the economic sense behind signing up for the 16 movies per month plan on Netflix; their minds do not flood with quite the same images as our minds do when we hear the words: "Interior, Café, Naples, 1953."

They are thinking about other things.

Cabbage, for instance.

It's like that skit I saw years ago on *Saturday Night Live*. Bill Murray is Og, the leader of a group of cavemen, strong and dumb as dirt. Steve Martin is the smart caveman, with ideas that might save the tribe. So when Steve goes to sleep by the fire, Bill picks up a rock and crushes Steve's skull, then announces:

“Now Og smart.”

Yup.

Those guys.

They don't mean it personally.

They're just waiting for us to go to sleep so they can crush our skulls with a rock — because that's what they do.

And God bless 'em!

They need us, and here's a secret... we need them, too!

And yet... the *real* pain starts when something else happens.

We're going along minding our own business, being creative, running downtown to see *City Lights*, avoiding falling asleep by the fire just in case... and then one day something goes wrong.

The script we spent months on gets rejected.

The idea we thought was brilliant draws blank stares.

The empty space in the finale of our story we thought we'd know how to fill in when we got there isn't filling in.

In fact, the whole caboodle may suck big time.

And that's when the panic sets in.

The icy flush of flop sweat races down our backs.

And a horrible thought creeps into our minds:

Maybe Aunt Fern is right!?

You know what I mean. The real trouble starts not with what others think about us, but what we think about ourselves. The default position most writers have is: “I'm secretly not good at this!” And that is, indeed, not good; that will make us crazy. It takes us away from what we need to do to make it right.

We have to avoid panic, doubt, and self-recrimination.

And just fix it.

We have to get up off the mat... and strike back!

For a while now since writing both *Save the Cat!* and *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies*, I've wanted to address that moment, the “dark night of the script” when it's just you looking into the black maw of nothingness to find your courage... and an answer. Since penning my first two *Cat!* tomes I've had the privilege of traveling the globe teaching my method, and I've seen firsthand the looks on writers' faces when I am the bearer of bad news — or at least the bearer of news that feels bad. There is nothing worse than when ideas won't work, when structure fails, when your career looks like a wasteland, or when the panic is so great all you can think about is finally checking out those late-night commercials to be a Doctor's Assistant.

And btw, where *is* the University of Phoenix?

It's not actually *in* Phoenix.

I checked.

What I want is to give you the tools to get you back up on your horse and ride like the wind like you're supposed to — every step of the way. And I'll tell you something else, the real truth of it, and what's always given me the most hope:

Trouble is good.

If you breeze through your script or through your career with-out trouble, you are doing something wrong. If you are looking at trouble as a dead end instead of a learning opportunity, like

some horrible curse you have to remove – instead of the gift that it is— you will never know the joy of real victory.

Every script has to have a “dark night of the script.”

Every career, too.

And the fact is it's only when we hit bottom, in a script or in life, that we really prove who we are. When we decide to not give up but strike back, and do so smartly, there is a clear-headed resolve that gives us a new outlook and new determination that not only solves the problem, but also makes us the steely pros we need to be. And it gives us the experience that we can one day pass on to others who find themselves in a similar circumstance.

This book is all about that challenge. The challenge we accept from the first time we raise our hand and say “I'm a writer” (which I did at age 10 at Camp Lorr and still can't really explain why), and all the challenges along the way that are the turning points in our careers and in our characters.

It is my hope that at the end of reading this book, you, too, will look on trouble as anything but a bad thing. You will welcome “hitting the wall,” “taking it as far as you can,” “being all typed out,” “having no new ideas,” and all the other lame-ass excuses you've either heard writers give or give yourself.

That's over.

Trouble?

I laugh at trouble!

Ha, ha.

See?

And soon you'll laugh at trouble, too.

No, it's not you. It's not your talent. It's not your inability to “get it” or your “not being cut out of this racket.”

It's nothing more than writing problems that need to get fixed.

If you're ready to stop your whining—*boohoo! I know Aunt Fern, yeah, yeah* — and get on with it, I'd like to quote my friend Bill Fishman's movie *Tapeheads*, starring John Cusack and Tim Robbins, and what may be the greatest line ever written:

“Let's get into trouble, baby!”

That is more than our motto. That is our battle cry.

So get ready to face trouble like a pro.

And get ready... to strike back!

chapter 1

WOW! WHAT A BAD IDEA!



Blake's First Blog/December 9, 2005

“By helping you win, I win too. We all do. And that is the only way to become not only a better writer, but to make the world a better place.”

I thought I had a winner.

My book, *Save the Cat!*, had just come out. I was doing a lot of radio and magazine interviews. And my words of wisdom for screenwriters were catching on. So when a very nice reporter for National Public Radio asked if I was working on a screenplay, I told her that I was, but when pressed to say something about it, I kept mum. I'd just gotten through telling her the key thing to do if a screenwriter has an idea is to pitch it, to get reaction.

And yet here I was: a clam.

To be honest, I felt my incredible idea was so incredible I feared someone listening to NPR might steal it. What was worse, I was just about to start writing this work of genius and I didn't want to disrupt my creative *moojoo*. I had broken another cardinal rule I tell writers about: I was going to forgo all that “working out the beats stuff.” I'd decided I was going to write “Fade In,” jump on my steed, and head for the high country. And why not? I was not only a veteran screenwriter with multiple sales under my belt, I was the author of a how-to book on the subject!

A best-selling author, I might add.

You're probably ahead of me: My script never got off the ground. After stalling my manager with promises I was working on “the one,” I agreed to share my idea before I started writing, and it's funny because as soon as the words formed on my lips — the moment my thoughts took shape there in the ether above our heads — I knew I was in trouble.

The logline for my can't-miss, perfect movie?

TWINKLE – Bereft by the death of his wife, Santa Claus has 48 hours to go to New York City, find love, and save Xmas.

Don't say it!

Everyone else did.

Did I know, asked my manager, that Tim Allen already did *Santa Clause 2*? The *right* way! Didn't I see any problem starting my nice family film with Mrs. Claus, one of the most beloved figures in a history of literature, lying dead in a snowy graveyard up at the North Pole? And what, pray tell, were we going to do about the fact Santa Claus is a jolly, 600-year-old fat man? “Oh that's easy,” I said. “He can go through a magic machine that will turn him into Tom Hanks for 48 hours. That way he can fall in love with someone like Annette Bening. I have it all worked out!”

“And when Tom turns *back* into Santa Claus at the end? Will Annette get turned into a jolly, 600-year-old fat *woman*?”

My manager and I just kind of stared at each other.

“Great title though,” I said to break the chill.

~~What no one was saying was suddenly clear:~~

Wow! What a bad idea!

I bring this up not to tell on myself, or even to judge what's good or bad, but to identify the indicating psychological features attached to the creation, and nurturing, of a stinker. Something about the whole process was suspicious, but there were indicators I chose to ignore — it turns out, to my peril.

The Seven Warning Signs I Might Have a Bad Idea:

- ▶ Fear of telling anyone about it
- ▶ Fear it might be stolen (by NPR listeners, no less)
- ▶ Fear that saying it out loud might spoil the “magic”
- ▶ Fear that if I don't write it fast, I'll lose it
- ▶ Lack of basic logic points — which I ignore!
- ▶ Lots of great “scenes,” but no story
- ▶ Not researching to see if someone already did this

I had committed every one.

Yes, some day, in some way, Santa may get lucky. But for now, *Twinkle* is in my drawer. And that's part of the moral of the story, too: *Twinkle* might have been saved. It could have gotten worked out. But by keeping it to myself, by not involving others in my “process” like I usually do, by demonstrating gobs of hubris about my skills as a storyteller, I wrecked it.

And you do this, too. How do I know?

Because you're a writer....

“And I *dig* that about you!”

Did I commit hari-kari when I learned my idea was a non-starter? Did I cry? Stamp my foot? Throw a hissy fit?

Of course.

But when it was over I did what I always do with ideas that are yet to... gel. I went to Staples to buy more yellow pads, and started from the top.

That's also what we steely pros do.

We put a nice raw steak on that black eye, and we try again.

FADE IN: A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

Getting through the exquisite pain of whether or not we have a good idea for a movie begins by being able to state that idea. I may not have had a sale in *Twinkle* (Jeesh, what was I thinking?), but when it came time to confess, I at least knew how to tell the tale to my manager. After years of working as a screenwriter, and knowing what lights up the eyes of my agents and others, I had condensed my story into a form that anyone could understand.

That can't be said of every writer.

Pro, amateur, or in between, we scribes find amazing ways to mislead ourselves and slip the surly bonds of practicality.

One of the inspirations for writing *Save the Cat!* was a visit to a friend of mine, a successful

Disney writer with many sales and assignments to his credit. I had just stopped by to say “hi” and catch up, and then made the mistake of asking: “Watcha working on?”, whereupon he excitedly said those two horrible words no one in or out of the business ever wants to hear:

“Sit down!”

I sat.

“Fade in,” he began. “A dark and stormy night...” (I’m not kidding.) And 20 minutes later, he was still pitching. Scene followed tortured scene, and yes the story was logical — to a point. But the reason he couldn’t tell me what his story was about was the fact that he didn’t *have* a story. He too had tricked himself into thinking he didn’t need to take the first step and get permission from a listener who “got it.”

He’d said: “It’s different this time. This is special.”

Whether it’s an idea we cling to that doesn’t work, or scene after scene that we spill out onto the page, we are forever falling in love with ourselves, and our inspiration. I call it [The Smell of the Rain on the Road at Dawn](#), that flash of scent, sight, and sound that makes us think we’re onto something — and we might well be! It’s the very best reason to be a writer, to find meaning where others don’t, to see things the rest of the world can’t. It charges our lives with a sense of the divine. It tells us that, yes, in fact we are special — we are at least especially sensitive. But unless we can figure out a way to forge that gossamer into something that makes sense to others...

We are the only ones who will ever know.

All I know is when my pal put that stinker away in *his* drawer, after writing about 50 pages of it, he called me up to complain: “Why didn’t you stop me?” I will give him this: At least he had a lot more pages than I had, which is nice.

But together we were still 0 for 2.

And 0 for 2 is the kind of trouble I want to avoid.

THE PITCH VS. THE LOGLINE

How do we get our ideas across? The answer is simple: pithily. From the initial inspiration in our brain, from that first moment we sit up in bed and say “I got it!” and scramble to find a pen and try to get down what “it” is, we are looking for a way to shape that flash of brilliance into a sentence or two.

And we must!

You will get many different opinions on this, but there are two ways to describe the movie idea in our imaginations. One is to come up with a **pitch**; the second is to formalize that pitch into a **logline**. What’s the difference? Well, here’s my take:

The “pitch” to me is the most sales-y way to say it.

It is the most concise, easiest-to-see, fastest-to-be-able-to-tell version that still captures the crucial of what it is.

Yes, pitches are hard, but essential.

For want of a better term, the pitch is best seen as [the elevator pitch](#), so called because when I got into an elevator with Jerry Bruckheimer, producer of *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *CSI*, and Jerry says: “Hey Blake, watcha working on?” I don’t want to have to pull the EMERGENCY STOP and say to poor Jerry:

“Fade in! A dark and stormy night!”

You have two, maybe three, floors to make an impression.

There you are. And there’s Jerry. So say something!

And make it short and sweet.

~~One of my best pitches is for a movie I sold in 2006 called *Granny*. It sold primarily because my co-writer, David Stephens, and I delivered on the premise, but the pitch can't be denied. And though it took time to hone it down to this, it never fails. So if I ever find myself in an elevator with Jerry Bruckheimer and he asks about my latest film, I won't hesitate, I'll say:~~

~~“*Granny* is a PG-13 horror movie. It's about a senior serial killer who kills teenagers who violate the rules of etiquette. And here's the poster line, Jerry: *Granny*. She's off her rocker.”~~

~~*DING!*~~

~~Jerry may not like that movie. I doubt it's one he would make, or even be interested in seeing. But he knows what it is.~~

~~And he found out in two floors.~~

~~In truth, there is no elevator, no mythic moment where it's just you and a higher-up who can change your life with 30 seconds worth of... “You're on!” But pitching is an important skill. Because at some point an audience must also be lured into seeing *Granny*, and has about the same time to figure out what it is. So the fact I can tell Jerry is good. It means Jerry can tell you...~~

~~Eventually.~~

~~As indicated, the rule on the pitch is: It's the fastest way to say it. As far as I'm concerned, anything is fair game. The best pitches include a title that tells us everything we need to know — take about the fewest number of words! But check out:~~

~~*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*~~

~~*Snakes on a Plane*~~

~~*Legally Blonde*~~

~~*Jaws*~~

~~Each of these titles pretty much says it.~~

~~And saying it fast, grabbing us in a primal way, being a good communicator, is what you want to accomplish — for doing this work up front helps everything else that follows.~~

~~I still think it's even fair game to say: “It's reverse *Big*,” the pitch that I heard from writer Robert Henny for a movie he called *Pee-Wee*, which he went on to option. I also think “It's *Fargo* in the Southwest” helps explain the 2007 Best Picture *No Country for Old Men*, because the title really doesn't.~~

~~If this feels too “sales-y” to you, too Hollywood, too artificial for your sensibilities, I hear you, brother! But I look at it more like a service, and that takes the sting out. Part of communication is the simple idea of putting yourself in the place of the person who *isn't* in your head, who doesn't get the smell of the Rain on the Road at Dawn. That's just good manners.~~

~~And you know how I feel about good manners.~~

~~The “logline” is the next step up, and it's a different mindset completely. This is the formal one-or-two sentence sketch that tells us, in brief, what the story is. You may be lured by the pitch for *Granny* when you hear it, but does it say enough?~~

~~Well, that's why we need the logline.~~

~~*Granny* is really about Amber, a 16-year-old high school girl whose mother has just died. Her widowed father has his own troubles, her asthmatic brother his, and the girls at her school are putting pressure on Amber to go over to the dark side of sex and drugs. So when a woman claiming to be her mom's estranged mother appears at her door... Amber lets the crazy lady in.~~

~~What's the logline that says all that?~~

GRANNY – Saddened by her mother's death, a lonely teen must confront a woman claiming to be her grandmother, whose strict rules lead to a psychotic murder spree.

From this simple sentence an entire plot springs forth. A hero we are rooting for, an implied “transformation” she will undergo in the course of this adventure, irony galore, and a life-or-death conflict are inherent in this mini-story.

And I said it all in one line.

I flirt with you with my pitch for *Granny*, and eventually I must deliver the goods, both in the logline and in the script. But it is from this little acorn, which takes time to work out, that a glorious oak of a movie blooms. Often the pitch is easier — and easily misleading — and that's why we must nail the logline, too — a process that leads to its own trouble...

TOO PLAIN, TOO COMPLICATED, AND HIDING THE BALL

We've all had that flash of joy, that OMG! when a great concept falls into our laps from the sky. It's like finding money in the street. But eventually we have to take a moment.

And calmly, patiently, claim it.

I put my email address into both my books and on my website www.blakesnyder.com for that very purpose. And I get a lot of loglines. It's the I-Found-Money-in-the-Street-Can-I-Keep-It? Hotline. It's like the *Antiques Roadshow* series on TV where people bring things they discovered in their attics to an expert and he tells them if what they have is a cute little *chotchke* best left dusty, or a treasure that belongs in the Smithsonian.

I get chills when a story grabs me. Even the ones that don't can be inspiring. Oddly, these tend to fall into three categories. They are either: **Too Plain**, **Too Complicated**, or my favorite... **Hiding the Ball**.

As proof, these three slightly reconstituted (but not much) loglines I received via email show what I mean:

QUICKIE – An up-and-coming banker, engaged to his boss's daughter, goes on a stag weekend in Las Vegas, and in a drunken haze marries a penniless waitress.

PARTLY CLOUDY – A bored TV weatherman signs up for reverse 911 emergency notification service — and trouble — when it begins to micromanage all aspects of his life.

DARK STREETS – A veteran detective is on the trail of a serial killer whose identity challenges the detective's belief in the law — and the supernatural.

Let's start with the fact that I'm proud of all three of these writers. They have done the job, and I applaud them. There are stories here and they've “said it” succinctly. Each gave us:

- ▶ a *type* of protagonist
- ▶ a *type* of antagonist
- ▶ a conflict and...
- ▶ an open-ended question (what will happen?)

Not only are the form, information, and rhythm of these sentences right on, they're each *kind* close to grabbing me. They even hit on the other key needs of a good logline:

- ▶ irony
 - ▶ a mental picture that blooms in our minds
 - ▶ a sense of audience and cost, and...
 - ▶ a title that “says what it is”
-

Yet each of these, in different ways, falls short. You probably get that sense, too, but remember *The Smell of the Rain on the Road at Dawn*? These writers are right in the thick of it, road dust filling their nostrils, the sun just breaking on the horizon. So let's see if we can help them see it from our POV.

The first logline is a great example of what I mean when an idea is “too plain.” *Quickie* is comedic and we get what's going on. But that's about all we get. Yes, there is a situation. Yes, it has possibilities. But there is an overwhelming urge on my part when I hear it to say: “So what?” What about this logline is unique? What about it is compelling me to run, not walk, to my local Octoplex?

And if you say, well, it will be different when you read the script... no. Scarily enough, whenever I read scripts that come from these loglines, it's more often than not the same experience. Since it all starts with the idea, if your logline is too plain, odds are your script will be, too. Yes, there's a story here, and yes, it has the prerequisites of drama, but it's kind of dull. This is especially apparent with *Quickie* in light of *The Hangover*, in which marrying the wrong girl is just one of *six* problems faced by the best men who have lost the groom in Vegas.

Too plain.

The second logline is a great example of “too complicated,” which usually starts with confusion. I was pitched *Partly Cloudy* by a good friend, a writer who has more winning concepts than most people I know, and I apologize for picking on him with this one because 9 out of 10 of his ideas are home runs. But this leaped out at me as a perfect example of how easily we go crazy at our keyboards. When he pitched this idea via email, I smiled. It seems like a fun comedy; there's a sense of comic chaos anyway. Can you spot the problem? It should be fairly obvious.

What's “reverse 911”?

You may know, but not everyone does, and if I don't, I won't be interested. And so, still smiling, I emailed this writer back with that very question. His response made it even worse! He explained that reverse 911 is “a service you can sign up for and get alerts sent to your phone. My idea riffs off of that.”

Okay, so far so good.

But then he went on to say, “The hero of my story gets phone alerts, then signs on for the optional chip implant...” Huh? Well, now I'm *really* confused. Not only am I on shaky ground with the technology he's pitching, but he's adding in something fantastic that throws me off even more.

But the real problem here is: By getting so involved with the “thing,” the device that sets the story into motion, my pal completely lost the human part. How does any of this relate to a cavewoman like me? How's this affect the hero? What's it *about*?

Again, good thinking! This writer has an eye for ideas. But...

Too complicated.

This leads to what the third idea has wrong with it, and the concept of “hiding the ball.” I love this final example because it's not just we spec screenwriters who have to confront this problem; moviemakers have to deal with it all the time.

And it costs a lot of money when we make a mistake.

Hiding the ball is really the psychological quirk writers demonstrate when they have a “secret”

a big reveal in their story. What they've got is such a whammy, such a *Sixth Sense* boffo element, they don't want to tell us about it for fear of ruining the “surprise.”

But it leads to our not caring.

That's what happened to the writer of *Dark Streets*. When I got this email, I wrote back saying “too plain.” There is nothing about this idea I couldn't see on an average episode of *Law & Order*. Well, she wrote back, it's because she didn't want to “give it away.” *Give what away?* Well, about the reincarnation story. *The what?* It took six emails to drag the real story out of this writer, and each time, she still didn't want to tell me the secret — that it's really about a cop who discovers the killer he's chasing is... himself. There's a lot of mumbo jumbo I won't go into, but the bottom line is, even when pressed, she held back from saying it! She didn't want to ruin “the best part.”

Well, I've got news: I will not ask to see that script based on what she gave me, so she'd better figure out a way to say it.

She was being too cute by half. She was hiding the ball.

And I encouraged her not to. If it's about reincarnation, tell me! If the cop is the killer, then at least give us a hint!

I love this dilemma because it even happens to the pros.

The Island is my favorite example of orb obfuscation. This is the film that came out in the summer of 2005. Directed by Michael Bay, the studio spent \$150 million to make it, and another \$50 million on advertising. Here in Los Angeles, there is a giant storage building near Santa Monica and La Brea and the whole face of the superstructure was devoted to the pulchritude of the movie's star, Scarlett Johansson. It is a poster one might see on the side of the Pyramids or The Hanging Gardens of Babylon. I dream about it late at night. Still!

They just had one small problem: The filmmakers couldn't tell us what *The Island* was about. And the title sure didn't help! (Is this about castaways? Is Dr. Moreau involved?) And as a result, it brought in just \$35 million at the box office.

What went wrong?

The problem was the story was a secret. It's about clones who discover they're being used as spare parts for their “real,” other selves. It's “*Logan's Run* with organ donors.” But they couldn't say that because they didn't want to “give it away.”

In my opinion, I think the movie would have done a whole lot better if they had given us a clue about the plot. If I knew going in that our heroes were being used like this, and had to run for their lives to escape being put under the knife, you've grabbed me — and even knowing this, I still don't know what happens, so I've got a reason to find out!

But the makers of *The Island* chose to hide the ball.

OTHER THINGS THAT CAN GO “WRONG” WITH AN IDEA

When pitching me, or anyone, your job is to identify the best part of your movie idea and push it to the forefront. There are other things that stop us from getting what you're saying:

- ▶ *Tone* - “Is it a comedy or a drama?” If I ask this, if I can't tell whether to laugh or cry, you are not communicating.
- ▶ *One Joke* - Your idea, while interesting, is limited. If I can't see where it goes beyond the gimmick, I won't ask for more.

▶ *No Stakes* - One cause of me saying “Who cares?” is there isn't enough on the line for the hero. I have to sense importance.

▶ “*What does the giant eat up there?*” - This line came from an agent who heard Colby Carr and my pitch for a *Jack in the Beanstalk* update, and he was right! Any logic flaw in your pitch is fatal and stops us all from “seeing” it.

▶ “*Heaven*” movies - This goes for “Angel” movies, “one-last-chance-to-make-good-on-earth” movies, and movies where we go into “the future” or “a fantasy world.” We can't root for dead people is one problem; the other is not knowing what your “world” is.

If you try to assuage me because “It's like *The Chronicles of Narnia!*”, I'll tell you:

- a. Write a beloved international bestseller
- b. Sell the rights to the movies.

Then I'll buy *you* lunch.

THE END OF THE LOGLINE LOGJAM!

The way out of this conceptual miasma — and the exercise that will help you take the next step turning your glimmer of an idea into a full-fledged script — has been created by our own José Silerio, my Development Director and right-hand man when it comes to script consultations. José took the basics of the *Cat!* method, including key points of the “Blake Snyder Beat Sheet” (which, if you haven't read my first two books, we'll discuss in [Chapter 2](#)), and put them into a single sentence for anyone who wants a little more *oomph* in his logline. And though it is no substitute for the simple pitch I prefer when I first hear your idea, it's a great way to take your idea-vetting process to the next level.

I still want to be pitched in one sentence, and I prefer the pithiest, easiest, way to say it. But if you have an idea that's not working, or if yours is too plain, too complicated, or hiding the ball, by plugging your story elements into this template, you will quickly see where you're coming up short — or why your idea might be a non-starter!

The template:

On the verge of a **Stasis = Death moment**, a **flawed protagonist Breaks into Two**; but when the **Midpoint happens**, he/she must *learn* the **Theme Stated**, before **All Is Lost**.

What do each of these phrases mean?

Let's start with “On the verge of.” It's one of my favorite logline boosters. “On the verge of” describes where a hero is when we begin the story; often he's going in a very different direction from where he ends up. This handy phrase also sets up what's at stake for him.

“Stasis = Death” we will be discussing shortly, but know for now it's the moment early on when the hero suspects his life is deficient, an emotional starting point implying needed change.

Why “flawed” protagonist? Same thing. Any deficit suggests there will be a “filling in” of the flaw during the story.

What sets this story into motion? That's “Break into Two,” where we see what your “poster” is —

and get excited about it!

The key plot points are “Midpoint” — the “no-turning-back” part of your story — and the “All Lost” beat, that moment when the hero is “worse off than when this movie started.” “Theme” is what your movie is “about.”

And if you don't believe these simple components can be used to troubleshoot your logline, take a look at these examples:

On the verge of **another “suit and tie” assignment, a tomboy FBI agent goes undercover as a contestant in the American Miss Pageant**; but when the **pageant receives a new threat**, she must **learn to be a woman and tough**, before she's thrown off the case and out of the bureau. (*Miss Congeniality*)

On the verge of **returning to Earth after another routine mission, a rules-obsessed warrant officer lets an unknown alien species onto the ship**; but when the creature kills one member of the crew and begins to grow in power, she must **do what is right rather than what she's been told** or else a **monster on board will meet the same deadly fate**. (*Alien*)

On the verge of **missing Thanksgiving when his flight is diverted, an uptight ad executive is forced to travel by any means possible with a zany salesman with a secret**; but when he loses the **last rental car to get back home**, he must learn that **family is more important than his job**, and **go back in time or bust**. (*Planes, Trains & Automobiles*)

Still need more information?

Believe it or not, we can also add to this simple logline template by including **The B Story** — the love interest, mentor, or group that “helps” the hero learn the lesson — and **Catalyst**, the event that sets the story into motion, and even the **Antagonist** — our hero's nemesis or obstacle and subject of his own flaw. The enhanced template is ideal for those who have a finished script to pitch:

The enhanced template:

On the verge of a Stasis = Death moment, a flawed protagonist has a Catalyst and Breaks Into Two with the B Story; but when the **Midpoint happens**, he/she must learn the **Theme Statement** before **All Is Lost**, to defeat (or stop) the **flawed antagonist (from getting away with his/her plan)**.

Take a look at how these enhanced loglines tell the tale:

On the verge of **a divorce, a bullheaded street-smart cop is trapped in his wife's office building by terrorists** and teams up with a **“desk cop” patrolman to thwart them**; but when he taunts the terrorists, and risks exposing his **hostage wife's identity**, he must learn to **adapt to change and outsmart the leader** and stop what are really thieves **from getting away with a billion-dollar heist**. (*Die Hard*)

On the verge of **losing the girl he loves, a super-powered young man's abilities start to wane as a demented criminal he helped create begins to rain havoc on the city**; but when he gives up his **crime-fighting ways**, he must learn **what it means to make a promise**, before **more innocents die** to save his city from the criminal's super weapon. (*Spider-Man 2*)

On the verge of **another meaningless year, a repressed high school nerd gets an unexpected visit from his crush** and is left on his own under the care of his loser uncle to pursue her; but when

enlisted by his best friend to win the student presidency, he must realize he has more depth than others think, before he loses his crush's friendship forever, and can finally gain his snobby peer respect. (*Napoleon Dynamite*)

All of these films can be found in beat sheet form either in *Save the Cat!* or *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies*. But for fun, try using these logline templates, either the simple A Story version or its enhanced B Story cousin on any idea you have that's not working.

I think you'll be amazed by how it helps.



Juno: Can you pitch a movie that feels Indie?

JUNO: PERFECT MOVIE, PERFECT LOGLINE?

And then there was *Juno*.

I'm in the middle of putting this book together and a writer emails to say he just saw *Juno* on the plane. He almost didn't see it, even though he knew it had won the Academy Award® for Best Original Screenplay for writer Diablo Cody. Why? Because in the airplane movie guide the logline of the film read thusly:

“JUNO – A teenage girl gets pregnant.”

Can you blame him?

This is a lousy logline and does not in any way reflect the experience that is *Juno* or what makes the movie special. And yet, at core, the editors of *Now Og Smart*, Caveman Airline's in-flight magazine, aren't wrong. So, if a movie with a bad logline can win an Oscar®, why should we ever care? Why shouldn't we go with our gut, write “Fade In,” and leave the selling to our agent?

The answer is simple.

Because nailing the pitch and the logline not only helps to sell your script — and helps you write a better story — it forces you to find its essence, the “grabber,” and push it to the forefront in your pitch, so you can better deliver in the writing.

My elevator pitch for *Juno* is: “It's a 21st-century *Scarlet Letter*.” I might go on to say: “It's *Bal*”

Boom with Doc Martens” or ask: “What if instead of saving France, Joan of Arc lived near the Mall in America and decided to have an out-of-wedlock baby?”

Have I got your interest?

Of course I do.

But what about that dreadful logline?

Although we can't control what Caveman Airlines does, when we pitch our yet-to-be-sold idea we must do just that: sell. The email query you will write is all about a good logline. Does *Juno* have one? I posed this on my website and the winning entry came from writer Christina Ferguson:

JUNO - A plucky pregnant teen from a broken family finds herself at a crossroads between the awkward teen father and the husband of a seemingly perfect adoptive couple.

Well? I don't know about you, but I'm racing to see this movie. Christina nailed it! And she makes us realize another secret: *Juno* may be an “indie”... but it's as “high-concept” as it gets.

And if you're *still* not sure whether this idea, or any one you have, is too plain, too complicated or hiding the ball, there's no better test than our new story template.

Here's *Juno*'s:

On the verge of **another dull year of high school**, a pregnant teen decides to have her baby and **give it up for adoption**; but when an afternoon with the would-be adoptive husband convinces her **she's found the right couple**, she must learn that **some things in life can't be undone** when the **seemingly perfect couple decide to get divorced**.

Can your ideas be improved by using this method?

Totally, homeskillet.

TURN IT AROUND TO STRIKE BACK!

Are you excited?

Say “yes.”

Good! You should be. Because what we've been discussing relates directly to you. If you have cringed while reading this chapter, excellent! Me too! Those “mistakes”? I've committed every one. But one thing that's been revealed for sure is: We can't hide any more.

We need to talk. We need to get in the game by not being afraid to play. To strike back we must be willing to try something new, and getting rid of our fears is the first step.

In truth, no matter how you dice it, it all comes down to hiding the ball. That's what we writers do best. We keep our ideas secret, at first just sharing with our computers, and then only with a few very special friends who understand our very special ways. We're private people; these thoughts have to germinate! We can't say it before we ourselves have a grasp of it. We can't speak it aloud until we're satisfied it's safe to share. To which I now say:

Poppycock!

Or the millennial equivalent thereof.

At the outset of this chapter, I posed the “Seven Warning Signs” that what you are working on doesn't work. Since we now have insight to fix all that, it's old news. “All stories are about transformation” and that includes the death of old ideas. So let me introduce our new creed when it comes to our pitches and loglines — and the business of spinning gossamer into gold:

sample content of Save the Cat!® Strikes Back: More Trouble for Screenwriters to Get into ... and Out of

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