

Finish The Script!

Please bear in mind that "Finish The Script!" is still a work in progress. The following sample is currently the second chapter of the book, and as with the rest of the manuscript it is being refined and edited.

The Elevator Pitch

I remember the first time I pitched. I was in Little League, and our main pitcher tore his Adam's apple. As a result, our coach put me into the game...

OK, OK, OK -- I never played Little League. I was in Brownies, but that's a whole other story. The type of pitching I want to talk about involves trying to sell your story to someone else.

Specifically, we are going to focus on the elevator pitch, which is sometimes called a logline. I know it sounds odd to be worrying about pitching your idea when you've not written a single thing, but here we are using the pitch concept only as a writing tool.

So what is an "elevator pitch"? It's a summary that's short enough for you to say to someone on an elevator ride between two floors. In it you should introduce the key elements of your story. It should be interesting enough to hook the listener so that they will want more, and it should clearly establish the tone and genre of your screenplay.

Here are several pitches for some well-known movies. Take note of what information is being presented and how it is being

presented.

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. Standing in her way is a wicked witch who more than anything else in the world wants her shoes.

A world-famous archeologist spends half his time in a tweed jacket teaching at a university and the other half going on incredible deadly adventures to retrieve lost treasures.

Contacted by the CIA, he has to stop the Nazis from discovering the Ark of the Covenant and using it to take over the world.

After a series of grisly shark attacks, a sheriff struggles to protect his small beach community from the bloodthirsty monster in spite of the town's greedy chamber of commerce.

A family man struggles to escape his small American town for a more successful life in the big city. When his constant efforts fail, he contemplates suicide, but his guardian angel visits and

the man experiences what the world would be like if he had never been born.

The world is invaded by extradimensional aliens, and it's up to a supersoldier displaced from time to lead a team of superpowered loners into battle to defeat them.

Answer key: "The Wizard of Oz," "Raiders of the Lost Ark," "Jaws," "It's a Wonderful Life," "The Avengers"

All of the pitches above clearly have several things in common: They introduce the basic premise. They tell us who the story is about (the protagonist), what the protagonist wants (the goal) and what stands in the protagonist's way (the antagonist).

Coming into this chapter, you should have an idea for a story, which means you already know one of the key elements of your pitch. As I break down each of these points, make sure you are thinking about your story in the back of your head -- because in case you've not already guessed, your assignment for this chapter is to write your own pitch.

The Protagonist

The protagonist is your main character, whose point of view you normally expect the audience to share. He or she is the person your story is about. If you were doing a formal logline in Hollywood, you probably wouldn't use your character's name when writing a pitch (as in the examples above), because unless a character is based on someone famous, the name is irrelevant. Instead, you should use broadly identifying traits and flaws, such as "dirty politician," "liberal judge," "angst-ridden teenager" or "hopeless romantic." However, for our purposes, it helps to use your main character's name. Once you've named them, you will start to identify with them.

After you've named your character, give them some sort of defining trait. Be very careful when choosing your adjectives. You don't just want words that pop; you want an accurate description that really represents your main character. Eventually, the trait will also represent your protagonist's main flaw, but we'll get to that in a later chapter.

The Goal

The next thing you need is a goal for your character. In real life, every person has a want or a need, and in writing you

should make sure that every character also has a want or a need. To make things more complicated, your character also should have a specific goal in individual scenes and even pieces of dialogue. But we don't need to worry about those kinds of wants or goals for the sake of this exercise. For the moment, we are only going to look at the big picture.

We want to figure out the protagonist's main driving force. What is the one thing they want more than anything else? Looking at the examples above, Dorothy wants to go home, Indiana Jones wants to find the Ark of the Covenant, Martin Brody wants to stop the shark killings, George Bailey wants to be a successful businessman and Captain America wants to stop an alien invasion.

So really think about the one thing your character wants, and that's what your script will be about. Your protagonist will be trying to achieve this goal, but something will get in their way. What's getting in their way (other than their own major flaw)? The antagonist!

The Antagonist

Let's be clear for a moment. When I say "antagonist," I don't simply mean "the bad guy." Sure, the antagonist could be a

villain, but an antagonist also can be any force that stops the protagonist from getting what they want. In disaster movies ("Armageddon," "The Perfect Storm," "Dante's Peak," etc.) the antagonist is a force of nature rather than a human character. In romantic comedies there are two protagonists who do double duty, serving as antagonists to each other.

So the first thing you need to decide is what exactly is preventing your protagonist from getting what they want. Is it another character? Is it wealth or social status? Is it the environment? This sets up the central conflict, which will drive your story and your pitch.

Writing The Pitch

As I explained in the last chapter, I'll be writing a screenplay alongside of you so that you can watch me go through the writing process, follow the kinds of missteps I take and see how I later correct them. So what I know right now about my story is this:

Title: "Virgin Dad"

Premise: a movie about a guy who is a virgin but ends up having a kid

That's all I know. So the next thing I'm supposed to figure out is who the story is about. I know the guy is in his early to mid-thirties and he is socially awkward, but that's it. So let's give him a name. I'm going with Simon. I may change that later, but for now it's a good starting place. In this context, Simon has an almost nerdy feel, probably because I think of the chipmunk or the character from "The Mortal Instruments."

So what does Simon want in life? The obvious answer is that he wants to get laid. However, I don't think that's the kind of movie I want to write. It's been done before: "American Pie," "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" and a bunch of other movies. That's not saying that those are bad movies or that you shouldn't write something similar. It's that at this point I know my voice, and that type of story simply isn't my thing.

I grew up watching "Dawson's Creek," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Felicity," and as a result I seem to enjoy angsty teen stuff. That means for this screenplay, I probably want a story that is more quirky and cute as opposed to raunchy. "Stranger than Fiction" and "Little Miss Sunshine" pop into my mind in terms of the tone and feel I'm after. Since that is the kind of story I want to tell, Simon's goal needs to fit into

that genre.

We know that Simon is socially awkward. That's his defining character trait right now, though it may change later. In my head, what I see for his personality is more of an arrogant nerd than an awkward dork. For example, I see him working at a research facility or somewhere he can focus only on his thing and has little human interaction. I don't see him as the kind of guy who gets nervous talking to the barista at Starbucks. He wouldn't waste his time going to Starbucks. Instead, he's the kind of guy who has a French press and brews his own coffee to the precise temperature required for the perfect cup.

So if that's what I see in him, what would he want in life? Right now I'm guessing that whatever he's doing at work, he's about to hit a big breakthrough or score a huge government grant. Something that would be epic in his field. I'll figure that out in a bit.

So now we know:

Title: "Virgin Dad"

Protagonist: Simon, who is socially awkward

Protagonist's goal: a big breakthrough at work

So the next thing we need is an antagonist, something to get in the way of Simon getting what he wants. For starters, Simon will get in his own way. That's part of the fun with flaws: you'll discover that no matter what your protagonist wants, they will always be their own mini-antagonist.

But your protagonist still needs a real antagonist besides himself. The only exception would be a movie like "Fight Club," where there are issues of self-perception and split personality. In my case, I have an obvious antagonist built into my premise. The movie is about Simon learning he's a father. That means his kid is going to enter his life and screw everything up. His kid is going to be the antagonist!

Don't forget that "antagonist" doesn't mean "bad guy." It's not necessarily the villain, unless you are writing more of an action-adventure piece. The antagonist is just the force stopping the hero from getting what he wants. So that doesn't mean the kid has to be a bad kid. It just has to be someone who conflicts with Simon.

I know right away that I want the kid to be a girl. I like creating female characters. I also like strong female characters. Since Simon is socially awkward, I know I want the

daughter to be a fearless spitfire -- it's the old "Odd Couple" syndrome. Their personalities right off the bat will cause major conflict. As for a name, let's call her Meta. I know it sounds weird, but I want her name to be a modern version of a hippie name, like Tweet or Like. So I'll call her Meta for now and then rename her when we get to character creation.

What we have now is:

Title: "Virgin Dad"

Protagonist: Simon, who is socially awkward

Protagonist's goal: a big breakthrough at work

Antagonist: Meta, Simon's spunky daughter

If I combined those elements, it would look something like this:

Simon Baker, a socially awkward 35-year-old researcher, makes the discovery of a lifetime, but before he can prove it, his world is turned upside down when Meta, his sperm-donor daughter, arrives.

All the elements are there. It's a complete sentence. Looks good, right? Well...

It has the pieces, but it doesn't really get across what I want it to get across. A pitch also must express the genre and tone of the piece. If it's a love story, that should be clear in the pitch. If it's a noir crime story, then the pitch should say so. If it's an action-adventure piece, that should be clear. In my case, I want this to say "quirky comedy."

So how do you make the genre and tone clear? Think about your audience. Who will watch your movie? Are your viewers going to be literary types who enjoy art house films? Will your screenplay end up having tons of explosions? Maybe the people who will want to watch your movie enjoy slice-of-life, slow-paced films?

I know it seems blasphemous to think of marketing before you've even written something, but it helps define what tone your movie will have. In my case, I already said I'm going for more of a quirky comedy. So other movies that come to mind are "Juno" or "Little Miss Sunshine," and if that's the tone I want to come across in my pitch, I need to add a little bit of quirkiness and fun to it.

So, with that in mind, I could rework what I had before like this:

Simon Baker, a 35-year-old virgin and robotics expert, is about to settle a \$20 million contract with the Department of Defense when he discovers he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter.

So what's changed in this draft? Well, for one, I decided to give Simon a job. Why? I decided that he's not a virgin because he can't get laid -- he's a virgin because, although he wants human connection, he doesn't have time to mess with that junk. His work is more important to him. Since I know human interaction is going to be a problem with him, making him an expert in robotics and artificial intelligence seems like a nice contrast.

Looking at the rewrite, we can see that I now have a much better description of who Simon is -- all of which I made up on the fly when writing the pitch. In addition to defining who he is, I also added the "12-year-old test-tube daughter" bit. It's enough of a hook to grab attention, and it adds a fun, almost ironic tone to the pitch. So now it's clear what type of story I'm trying to tell.

That being said, it's still a little sloppy. For example, I really want to punch it up and make it grab attention. I want my

potential audience to read the pitch and want to know more. I'm also not happy with the overall sentence structure and wording. So let's take another stab at it:

Up for a \$20 million robotics contract with the Department of Defense, 35-year-old virgin Simon Baker has to juggle his career with the discovery that he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter named Meta.

I could still rewrite it again, and if I were using the pitch to actually sell the story to someone, I would definitely rewrite it. But as a writing example, it does what I need it to do: It gives me all the major plot elements and sets up the story.

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Assignment

Write a pitch for your screenplay. Make sure you include the four major points: premise, protagonist, protagonist's goal and antagonist. Also make sure the tone of your story is clear.

How to Grade Your Assignment

The best part about using an elevator pitch as a writing tool is that it's really easy to check if you messed up or not.

Let's look at my finished pitch for "Virgin Dad."

Up for a \$20 million robotics contract with the Department of Defense, 35-year-old virgin Simon Baker has to juggle his career with the discovery that he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter named Meta.

Who is the pitch about?

Up for a \$20 million robotics contract with the Department of Defense, **35-year-old virgin Simon Baker** has to juggle his career with the discovery that he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter named Meta.

What does the protagonist want?

Up for a **\$20 million robotics contract with the Department of Defense**, 35-year-old virgin Simon Baker has to juggle his career with the discovery that he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter named Meta.

What's getting in his way?

Up for a \$20 million robotics contract with the Department of Defense, 35-year-old virgin Simon Baker has to juggle his career with the discovery that he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter named **Meta**.

What is the tone of the story?

Up for a \$20 million robotics contract with the Department of Defense, 35-year-old virgin Simon Baker has to juggle his career with the discovery that **he has a 12-year-old test-tube daughter** named Meta.

By going in reverse, I can double-check that my elevator pitch has all the things it is supposed to have.

Chapter Recap

An elevator pitch is a great writing tool that will help you build your story, which should include your protagonist, their goal, the conflicting force that's getting in their way (the antagonist) and a hint about the genre and the tone of the

story.

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