

Writing Module One: The Pitch

Assignment Preparation:

What need to do before writing your pitch for this course:

1. Read *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*, “The Pitch” (331-345).
2. Read “Introduction to Dramatized Summaries.”
3. Download the “Ackerman Scenogram” and begin imagining your script’s major characters and turning points, writing concise but detailed descriptions in the fill-in boxes.
4. As you write your pitch, do several drafts of the Scenogram, going back and forth between the pitch and Scenogram and revising each
 - to tighten the prose,
 - to clarify and change the sequencing,
 - to sharpen the details, characters and turning points,
 - to create transitions that aid in readability and
 - to create a strong “hook” for readers.

Assignment Goals:

When you’re finished with this assignment, you should be able to

1. Write a clear, compelling pitch of your own script story.
2. Write and revise toward greater concision, using more significant detail and sharpening the focus of your story as you revise.
3. Workshop your pitch through one workshopped draft and revise it for a grade.

The Pitch

The pitch we’re writing for class, like the short pitch described in *SWP* (338), is:

1. A dramatized summary identifying concisely and clearly your story’s main turning points in no more than three sentences (one sentence each for Acts I, II and III).
2. A story-development tool to help you discover and focus your story.
3. Designed—along with the Ackerman Scenogram—to help you imagine, propose and focus your script idea through two pitch drafts.
4. Sometimes called a “logline,” a script description that studio script readers, agents and online script sites use to log in scripts that come in “over the transom” (like short stories coming in “over the transom” to magazine editors).
5. Also used at the beginning of a pitch meeting to give a quick overview of the script.

6. Due early in “Act One” of this course—within the first few weeks.
7. Workshopped as a group for one week and then rewritten for a grade.
8. Helpful for creating a map for writing your treatment and script.
9. Flexible and changeable: You don’t have to stick with the pitch as you write and rewrite your treatment and script. In fact, the pitch *will* change as you develop and deepen your story and characters, and that’s okay.

The Structure of the Pitch

Since most scripts and films consist of three major acts (turning points), it follows that your pitch’s three sentences must show the turning points of each act, and the more surprising those turns are, the more compelling your pitch will be, the greater the “hook” for the reader, who feels compelled to read on.

What exactly is a turning point? It’s a major change, often a complete reversal of character, dramatic situation, and/or audience expectation. As Robert McKee, author of *Story*, writes, turning points are moments when a positive turns negative or vice versa, a major reversal, which suggests a shifting change from one state to its opposite.

Here’s a way to begin:

Think of the *first* and the *last* surprise, turn or turning point in your script. Where, when and how *specifically* do you want your script to begin and end? If you had a before-and-after picture of your script’s main point-of-view character, *written in scene*, what would those pictures or scenes look like? (Remember the beginning of *Platoon*? The Charlie Sheen character is clean cut, a wide-eyed innocent, but at the end he’s covered in mud and blood.)

Here’s an example, just for fun:

The first turn (Act I—The Inciting incident):

FRED SCHLINKLEFLAPPER, 42, a bass fisherman and septic-tank truck driver in Houston, Texas, discovers that his wife SHEILA SCHLINKLEFLAPPER, 40, has colon cancer and only a month to live, and it’s probably *his* fault: he’s has been handling toxic waste for the last twenty years.

The last turn (end of Act III): Fred dumps his wife’s ashes into a Port-A-Potty and tows it with his truck into the waves of Galveston Bay.

What? the reader asks. *How’d we get from the first to the last turn?*

What’s important here is that these two turns are surprising, suggesting a *complete reversal* in character, situation and/or audience expectation, which

makes readers and film viewers ask, *Why? What's his motivation?* (In this respect, most excellent scripts are mysteries, even if there's no actual murder to solve.)

What would possibly cause Fred—who's loved his wife since Mrs. Farley's class in second grade—to go from warming her icy hand at her hospital bedside for a long, excruciating month to defying her dying wish: to have her ashes scattered in Galveston Bay?

Immediately the reader begins to extrapolate and explore motive, asking questions that may or may not answer the mystery:

Has Sheila, on her deathbed, inadvertently revealed to Fred a twenty-year affair with his best friend, business partner, bass-fishing buddy and embezzler, Bubba Boudreaux, who once turned over a Port-A-Potty while Fred was inside reading *The Houston Post*? Were the words Sheila whispered in her last dying breath, "Bubba, Bubba, baby, baby"?

You get the idea.

If your audience figures out the characters' motives before you reveal them, then the script is unsurprising, predictable, even boring. But if you explore deep motive and stay one step ahead of the audience, the characters' motives will be more surprising and inevitable, especially if you've set up and paid them off with skill.

(In my own experience, when I've written towards a *last move* I've imagined early on, I've almost always realized it's the wrong move—too easy, too predictable—so I create another reversal to surprise myself and work against *my own* expectations: After beating up Bubba with a plumber's friend, Fred regrets dumping his wife's ashes into the Port-A-Potty, tows it to Galveston Bay and drives his Ford F-100 truck into the waves, waiting to drown, until he realizes he wants to go to med school after all, and he swims ashore.)

Writing the Pitch

Here are some guidelines for writing your pitch's three sentences:

Sentence One (Act 1)

The first sentence of the pitch should describe *concisely* and *concretely*, packing in as much significant detail as possible, while at the same time combining sentences effectively and using transitions that show *time*, *place* and *cause and effect*:

1. The *inciting incident* :

- Sheila's cancer diagnosis destroys the couple's seemingly happy life together.
2. The *external conflict*.
 - Fred's decides to quit his job, enroll in med school and save his wife.
 3. Show or imply the main characters' the *internal conflicts* and *deep motivations*:
 - Fred goes on a tequila binge as he struggles with helplessness, depression, grief and irrational self-blame.

Here's the pitch's first sentence:

When FRED SCHLINKLEFLAPPER, 42, a septic-tank truck driver in Houston, Texas, discovers that his wife SHEILA SCHLINKLEFLAPPER, 40, has advanced colon cancer and only one month to live, he goes on a drinking binge and tells his business partner and best friend, BUBBA BOUDREAUX, 42, that he's quitting his job to enroll in medical school.

Notice how much information I've packed into this sentence. It may be too much, but for now it's a start.

Sentence Two (Act 2)

The second sentence of the pitch should:

1. Set up the ending in a surprising way.
2. Describe the *external conflicts* and *obstacles to the character's desire*.
 - Fred's insurance company cancels his wife's policy, refusing to pay for an experimental drug that could save Sheila's life,
 - Bubba tells Fred he's nuts, that Fred needs to keep his job to pay hospital bills, then breaks down and reveals he's embezzled \$30,000 from Fred's company.
3. Show or imply the character's *internal conflict* and *deep motivation*
 - Fred has irrational obsession with saving his wife.
 - It's impossible to invent a cure for cancer in a month.
 - Fred drinks too damn much.
 - Fred struggles with guilt and self-doubt.
 - Fred's angry with
 - Bubba for getting in his way and flirting with his wife,
 - The medical school for saying Fred's unqualified and too old to study medicine, and
 - The insurance company for canceling his policy just when he needs it.

Here's sentence two:

But when Fred's insurance company cancels Sheila's policy and the med school tells him he's unqualified and too old to study oncology, he sells his wife's Daihatsu Charade, their ranch house and his prized Skeeter bass boat, and Bubba, breaking down, offers him the thirty thousand dollars he's embezzled from Fred's company over the last ten years for a new experimental drug to save Sheila's life.

Okay, still a lot of information to digest, but the details are getting clear and the transitions are working for now.

Sentence Three (Act 3)

The third sentence of the pitch should:

1. Show a complete reversal that's both surprising and inevitable.
2. Pay off everything you've set up without being too obvious or predictable. (If there's a surprise that comes to you at the last minute, you'll need to go back and set it up—no accidents or coincidences please, no semi-tractor-trailers or trains running over the main character.)
3. Show the consequences of character choices, for better for worse. Characters who go through terrible ordeals change. They are human, flawed, and no good deed goes unpunished.
4. Show the character's *internal conflicts* and *deep motivation* (in Fred's case, feelings of betrayal, revenge, bitterness and finally, perhaps, forgiveness.)

Here's the last sentence:

Stunned by Bubba's betrayal in business and suspicious of his friend's sudden generosity, Fred asks his dying wife if there's anything she needs to tell him—no, just throw her ashes in Galveston Bay, she says—but when she whispers his best friend's name in her last, dying breath, Fred confronts Bubba about the affair he's suspected for twenty years, then beats Bubba with a plumber's helper, dumping his wife's ashes into a Port-A-Potty and towing it with his truck into the waves of Galveston Bay.

Okay, it's a silly pitch—maybe too much detail, too long, too hard to digest; it needs tightening and revising—but it's a start. Feel free to workshop it and tell me how I can improve it.

Here are a few additional suggestions for generating, writing and revising your pitch:

1. Think about how you'd explain your script story idea in three sentences to someone you don't know very well. (People who don't know you well won't think you're crazy, and even if they do, it doesn't matter.) Then have

that person tell you what's confusing about your story and give you suggestions.

2. Try pitching your idea to friends, family, anyone whose opinion you trust, and ask for concrete suggestions that will improve your pitch. (Avoid pitches *based on* the person your pitching to.)
3. Consider pitching your revisions to one person; then ask that person to pitch your idea to someone else while you're in the other room. Then have the third person pitch you story back to you just to see how memorably and clearly your story has come through. If the third person has pitched a *different* story than the one you've pitched, then your pitch needs more tightening, sharpening, and focusing.