

**Using The Treatment To Accelerate Progress On Your Script
BEFORE You Start Writing.
By Marilyn Horowitz**

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How To Write A Treatment

Writing a treatment is a skill that can help any screenwriter succeed. Learning to write a treatment can jumpstart a writer's career because it allows a screenwriter to communicate her or his screenplay idea in a brief and compelling way.

I am often asked if a writer has to actually write a screenplay, or can they just sell ideas? You can sell a verbal or written "pitch," but you can't protect the idea, only the execution of an idea.

So, if you have a great idea, the only way to protect it is to write the screenplay, which can be time consuming and ultimately not efficient. Writing down your idea as a treatment before you commit to a full-length script does three things. First, you can test out an idea before committing to writing a script and second, it gives you a document that you can copyright for protection of your idea.

Part of succeeding as a screenwriter is to write at least one well-crafted original screenplay. Screenplays are hard work and take time to perfect. If you have completed a screenplay, writing a treatment can help you determine whether or not the screenplay is viable, because writing the treatment helps to create distance. This allows the screenwriter to get an overview of their work and look at it objectively.

There is no substitute for talent. If the basic story is not something an audience will want to see, no amount of rewriting can fix it. This is a problem I encounter over and over in my work as a writing coach. Screenwriters often forget that they are writing for an audience. Writing a treatment before you write your next screenplay can help you work out problems and determine whether your story idea is a diamond in the rough, or just a lump of coal. The goal is to combine stories told from the heart with a deep understanding of what other people want to see.

Craft and good ideas don't necessarily go together. I have worked on

several scripts with great ideas and poor execution and the reverse. The successful screenwriter must be able to master both aspects. One tip: Always remember that a screenplay, unlike a novel, is not a complete form in itself but a step along the path of making a film, so the goal of any screenwriter is to see the film made of his or her screenplay. It's easy to forget the goal when you are wrestling with your script.

What Is a Treatment?

There is controversy about the length a treatment can be, but the point is to communicate your story as quickly as possible, so brevity without sacrificing juice is key.

There seem to be three opinions about what a treatment is.

One opinion is that it is a one-page written pitch. The second, which I agree with, is that it is a two to five page document that tells the whole story focusing on the highlights. A third opinion is that a treatment is a lengthy document that is a scene-by-scene breakdown of a script. I consider this an outline, and a waste of time as a marketing document, though it can be an important step in the creation process. In my experience, the two to five page version works best, and an example is included in this article.

How To Write a Treatment

This two to five page document should read like a short story and be written in the present tense. It should present the entire story including the ending, and use some key scenes and dialogue from the screenplay it is based on.

What Should Be in the Treatment?

1. A Working title
2. The writer's name and contact information
3. Copyright Registration number
4. A short logline
5. Introduction to key characters
6. The answers to the following questions: Who? What? When? Why? Where?
7. Act 1 described in one to three paragraphs. Set the scene and dramatize the main conflicts.
8. Act 2 described in two to six paragraphs. Should dramatize how the conflicts introduced in Act 1 lead to a crisis.
9. Act 3 described in one to three paragraphs. Dramatize the final conflict and resolution.

The Three-Act Structure

Any discussion of treatment writing should at least touch on basic screenplay structure. Although everyone reading this article is probably familiar with this information, revisiting the basics can be helpful.

In his seminal book of fragments, *The Poetics*, Aristotle proposed that all stories should have a beginning, middle, and an end. The Horowitz System®, the visual writing method that I have created uses the expressions, "Set up, "Conflict" and" Resolution" as more evocative terms for describing the basic movements of a screenplay.

Many screenplays are organized into a 3-act structure. The tradition of writing in this form comes from the theater and was followed by filmmakers. Think of it as a foundation for building a house that others can easily identify, even if the details are new and original.

Act 1, called the Set-up, The situation and characters and conflict are introduced. This classically is 30 minutes long.

Act 2, called The Conflict, often an hour long, is where the conflict begins and expands until it reaches a crisis.

Act 3, called The Resolution, the conflict rises to one more crisis and then is resolved.

How To Write The Treatment

Find A Title

Whether the screenwriter is creating a new story or writing a treatment based on an existing script, the first step is to make sure that the screenplay has a good title. The first contact a prospective producer has with a script is the title. Pick a title that gives a clear idea of what genre the screenplay is written in. (See my 2-part article that appeared in this magazine for more detail on genre. A good title can predispose a producer or reader to like a screenplay because it suggests the kind of experience that is in store and arouses curiosity. Great classic film titles include *It Happened One Night*, *Psycho* and *Die Hard*.

One film I recently consulted on is named, *And Then Came Love*. This is a good title because it describes the story and the style or genre it's written in - a light romantic comedy. A title does not determine whether or the screenplay is good or not, but it can be a great marketing tool. There's a famous quote from Shakespeare that is helpful to keep in mind when naming screenplays: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet". Romeo and Juliet (Quote Act II, Sc. II).

If you want a producer to read your script, pick a name that promotes your story.

Write a logline

The second step is to write a logline. Preparing a log line for your screenplay is a basic marketing tool that I have repurposed for developing treatments. It is similar to the summary given in TV Guide. It is a technique for boiling down a plotline to its essence that has been described as trying to vomit into a thimble.

Follow the example below when writing a logline:

And Then Came Love is a character-driven romantic comedy about a high-powered Manhattan single mom who opens Pandora's box when she seeks out the anonymous sperm donor father of her young son.

Write a synopsis

The third step is to a synopsis. Begin by expanding the logline into a three-act story Start with the end. For example, Let's work with *The Silence Of The Lambs*:

Act 3: Clarice Starling catches the killer and saves the intended victim.

Then break down into three acts. For example,

Act 1: While still a student at The FBI, Clarice is asked to help on a case. She's eager to help and interviews Hannibal Lector who gives her a clue.

Act 2: With his help, she is able to overcome many obstacles, and finds the identity of the killer.

Act 3: She confronts the killer, saves his intended victim and atones for the death of the lamb. The scriptwriter should follow this break down for his or her story, and then expand this into a synopsis.

Follow the example below of *And Then Came Love*:

Julie (mid 40s), a successful Manhattan reporter-turned-columnist believes she has it all - a great job, a rent controlled apartment, a boyfriend and best of all, an adorable six-year-old son named Jake, whom she conceived via an anonymous sperm donor.

Her perfect world, however, is rocked when she's called in for an emergency parent-teacher conference and learns that her son has been acting up, needs to be 'tested' and is on the brink of expulsion. Overwhelmed, Julie instinctively blames herself... it's easy to do since her mother has made her feel inadequate for not being a stay-at-home mom.

Julie, however, will not concede that her mother could be right, so she places genetic blame on Jake's anonymous father. Through a private investigator, Julie learns the identity of the donor and meets him. His name is Paul, and he's a struggling actor and law school dropout. Julie has neither intention nor desire to reveal her identity to him, she simply needs to check her sources, get the facts, and move on.

A child psychiatrist tells Julie that Jake does not appear to have ADHD, but could benefit from a "father figure" in his life. Julie's boyfriend, a

charismatic photojournalist, is up for the challenge and proposes. Julie believes her life is back on course until Paul, the donor, shows up, hoping she'll promote the off-off Broadway show in which he's performing.

Jake instantly bonds with Paul. No matter how hard Julie tries to keep Paul from complicating her life, the more he does as he begins to fall for her, and she finds she can not deny her feelings for him, and her boyfriend is pushing to set a date.

(Written by Caytha Jentis, writer/producer).

Summary and Conclusion

Whenever possible, take your idea and write a treatment before you begin a new screenplay. Start by creating a logline and synopsis. Then use the synopsis and expand it into a treatment by correcting structure and adding detail.

Learning to write treatments can save you years of working on the wrong projects. If you already have a script, writing a treatment using my method will help you correct any mistakes that could prevent a sale.

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Bio:

Marilyn Horowitz is the founder of the Horowitz Center for Screenwriting and creator of The Horowitz System®, a revolutionary visual writing system. She is an award-winning New York University professor, producer, screenwriter, and New York City-based writing coach who works with bestselling novelists, produced screenwriters, and award-winning filmmakers; and a judge for the prestigious Fulbright Scholarship Program for film and media students. Marilyn is the author of five books, including *How to Write a Screenplay in 10 Weeks* and *The Four Magic Questions of Screenwriting*.

Marilyn presents more than 100 classes, seminars and workshops every year for groups across the country. She has presented *The Creative Business of Screenwriting*, *Story Development*, *Writing The Treatment* and *Overcoming The Writer's Fears* for the *Writer's Guild of America, East (WGAE)*, *New York Women in Film and Television (NYWIFT)*, *New York Script Club (NYSC)*, *Women in Film and Video (WIFV)* in Washington DC and *Women in Film (WIF)* in Los Angeles. In 2008, Marilyn was a speaker at the *Santa Fe Screenwriting Conference* in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In June and October 2011, she presented at *The Great American PitchFest* and the *Screenwriting Expo* in Los Angeles, CA. Marilyn is also a senior writer for *Script Magazine* and contributor to *Hollywood Scriptwriter*.

