

Bridget A. Lyons

Writer, Editor, and Interpretive Sorceress

Bridget's Guide to Loglines

The time has come...you have something like a book. It has some shape, some movement, and some ideas its engaging. You're revising it, you're talking about it, and you're starting to think about putting this baby of yours out into the world.

It's time to start working on your logline.

Note that this will be a PROCESS and NOT AN EVENT! More on this below.

While writing a logline is a mandatory exercise for fiction and memoir writers, it is not as critical for informational nonfiction writers. That said, there are aspects of this exercise that are still very useful in developing your "elevator pitch," so I recommend that traditional nonfiction writers know about this process as well.

What Is a Logline?

A logline is a one-sentence encapsulation of a book, movie, or TV show that expresses the story's main conflict.

It must contain these three elements:

1. The protagonist
2. The protagonist's goal/desire
3. The antagonist or antagonizing force (also known as "the obstacle")

It may also contain these elements:

1. A quick description of the protagonist
2. A quick description of the antagonist or antagonizing force
3. The suggestion of movement or potential growth
4. The stakes
5. The setting

Let's look at each of these in detail.

The Protagonist

Typically, this one is easy: it's your main character. In a memoir, this is your narrator. In your logline, you may or may not want to use their name. It is typically less important than some other identifying aspect of them, such as their job or role in life.

The Protagonist's Main Goal/Desire

Yes, every human being has lots of goals and desires, and your protagonist is no exception. However, your book is typically driven by one big goal. It might be something very concrete, like "Sally needs to get to Mars by the end of the day or her spaceship will explode," or something much less tangible, such as "Devon desperately wants to free himself from the suffocation of his overbearing mother." Drill down until you can identify what truly propels your main character.

The Antagonist or Antagonizing Force

The antagonist or antagonizing force is what's stopping your main character from achieving their goal or attaining their desire. When another character is the antagonizing force, they are commonly referred to as a "villain." However, it's quite common that what's standing in your main character's way is not a person. It can be a concrete force (e.g., gravity, poverty), but it is more often something within the character's psyche that needs to be overcome—lack of knowledge, lack of confidence, past trauma, fear, stagnation, etc.

A Quick Description of the Protagonist

Quick means quick. Like, "a 50-something carnival worker," "a two-headed dragon," or "a transgender journalist." Job titles can be helpful here, as can other intrinsic qualities. If your protagonist is not human, then your logline should make this clear. If there's a juicy adjective that will give your protagonist a little more depth, consider adding it. But keep in mind that a run-on logline is trouble, so don't overdo it!

A Quick Description of the Antagonist or Antagonizing Force

If the antagonist is a character, then simply apply the guidelines above. If you're dealing with an antagonizing force, however, you might find yourself needing to describe the obstacle in another way—perhaps where it came from or something about how it works.

The Suggestion of Movement or Potential Growth

Let's face it: This is why we read books and watch movies and TV shows. When a story begins, the protagonist is in one place. When it ends, they're in another place. Between the beginning and the end, there is a narrative arc that almost always includes some kind of growth or change, and it is that narrative arc that keeps us engaged in the story. Ideally, the expression of your main conflict (protagonist-goal-antagonist) automatically implies movement.

The Stakes

Stakes can take the form of a time limit (see “Sally needs to get to Mars by the end of the day or her spaceship will explode” above) or a meaningful consequence (“If she can’t find a kidney donor, Sarah will die”). Squeezing stakes into your logline often adds more tension to your statement of conflict.

The Setting

If your book focuses on a character’s internal conflict, it’s not necessary to include the setting in your logline. But if you’re writing a science fiction or fantasy novel, setting is critical—the reader has to know in advance what kind of world they’ll be immersed in, whether it’s an ice planet 14 parsecs from Earth or a gender fluid fairy kingdom. Setting might also be a selling point for your book and worth mentioning for that reason. For example, if war has recently broken out in the Ukraine and your book happens to take place there, you’ll want to work this detail into your logline.

So, How Do You Put These Elements Together?

That’s the creative part! Play with this; it’s going to take time. Make every word count. Rearrange elements. Streamline, streamline, streamline.

My biggest piece of advice here is: Don’t try to TELL the story. That’s what your book does in 100-400 pages, and it’s what your “overview” will need to do in one page. Your logline’s job is to SELL your story. Capture its essence in broad brush strokes.

And don’t include your ending!

Examples

You can find fun logline examples all over the internet, but here are a few to give you the idea...

After a violent tornado 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. (*The Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum, courtesy of *The Writer’s Digest*)

A young woman growing up alone in the coastal marshes of North Carolina is suspected of murder when a popular local teen turns up dead. (*Where the Crawdads Sing*, by Delia Owens)

In a future North America, where the rulers of Panem control the nation's twelve districts through a televised fight to the death, a sixteen-year-old's survival skills are put to the test when she volunteers to take her younger sister's place in the annual event.

(The Hunger Games, by Suzanne Collins)

The unassuming hobbit Frodo Baggins reluctantly leads the nine-member Fellowship—two men, four hobbits, a dwarf, an elf, and a wizard—on a terrifying quest to destroy the One Ring before an ancient evil god destroys Middle Earth. *(The Fellowship of the Ring, by J.R.R. Tolkien)*

Next Steps

Once you have a logline you think you like, test it! Try it out on your friends, try it out on strangers, and definitely try it out on people who are familiar with your book.

Post it on your computer, and revisit it regularly. As you revise your book, check to make sure that your book and logline are aligned. If they aren't, you'll need to choose between editing your book to make it reflect your logline and editing your logline to make sure it represents your book. Obviously, the latter is easier; however, you might find that your book has strayed from what you want it to be. In that case, you have to take the longer path.

Good luck!

Further Reading

If this process intrigues you, you might want to check out a book called *Save the Cat*, by Blake Snyder. While this book is ostensibly about screenwriting, many authors consider it to be a must-have reference tool for understanding story structure.

