

Why and How to Use the Premise Worksheet:

Years ago at the Sundance Film Festival, two young filmmakers tried to tempt Roger Ebert to come in and watch their movie. When he asked them what it was about, well... After a couple of minutes of listening to wandering sentences and half-formed ideas, Ebert gave them a patient smile, some patronizing words of encouragement, and then left. The writers could not tell him what their movie was about.

On screenwriter Terry Rossio's WordPlayer.com website, Terry paints a typical scenario where a reader has just finished reading a script and is approached by a producer and a director. "It is precisely at this moment that your screenwriting career will be made or broken." The reader is going to relate the script's premise in one or two sentences and if she can't because it isn't clear, no one will ever hear anything about that script (if she even bothered reading past page 10).

Simply, every screenplay needs to have a clear Premise: a main story throughline (or central conflict) which can be summed up in one paragraph or less. It's amazing how many scripts get written where this first major requirement is never done. These elements are inherently present in 99% of all well-written stories. They are simply the *Who?*, *What?*, *How?*, and *Why?* of the story. In the most common types of screenplays, the driving force behind what is moving the story forward falls into one of two categories:

- 1) THE PROTAGONIST'S PLAN-DOMINATED STORY: The Protagonist wants something (an objectified and measurable goal) so badly that nothing will stand in their way. OR:
- 2) THE ANTAGONIST'S PLAN-DOMINATED STORY: The Antagonist has a master scheme that your Protagonist must stop them from accomplishing.

Depending on which type of story it is, you will obviously have to give more weight to the *Why?* element of whoever's plan dominates the story. Also, depending on whose plan dominates the story, you must make sure that the character that wants to stop the other from reaching their goal must have: (a) a goal they want that is in strong conflict, or better yet, diametrically opposed to what goal their opponent wants, and (b) a credible reason why they want to stop them.

In *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the Antagonist (or force of antagonism) is never personified. It is a series of obstacles that all relate to Butch and Sundance's central problem: that their best days are behind them. In any Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story, the antagonist is whatever form the Mr. Hyde personality manifests itself as (which could be as an internal antagonist). If you can do a variation and make the storyline clear, you should still be able to fill out all of the required elements.

Are you ready?

PART 1: STORY PREMISE

Project/Title:

Date:

1) WHAT IS THE GENRE? (Drama, action, horror, comedy, etc)

2) WHO IS YOUR PROTAGONIST (Who is the story about, the character that we the audience follow and who is taking actions that steer the story?)

3) WHAT IS THE PROTAGONIST'S GOAL? (Identify the specific task that can be answered 'yes s/he did' or 'no s/he did not' by the end of the story)

4) WHY MUST THE PROTAGONIST ACHIEVE THIS GOAL? (What does s/he lose if the goal is not achieved - these are the stakes of the story)

5) WHAT COURSE OF ACTION WILL THE PROTAGONIST PURSUE? (What is his/her plan of action or approach to attaining the goal)

6) WHO IS THE ANTAGONIST? (the person or force of opposition that prevents the Protagonist from success)

7) WHAT IS THE ANTAGONIST'S GOAL? (Identify the specific task that can be answered 'yes s/he did' or 'no s/he did not' by the end of the story. This must be in direct conflict with the Protagonist's goal)

8) WHAT COURSE OF ACTION WILL THE ANTAGONIST PURSUE? (What is his/her approach to attaining their goal? In a antagonist-driven story, this defines the story's central conflict)

9) WHY MUST THE ANTAGONIST ACHIEVE THIS GOAL? (What does s/he lose if their goal is not achieved?)

PART 2: THEMATIC PREMISE

This will help you flesh out your story's Theme and your Protagonist's Arc.

- 10) WHAT DOES YOUR PROTAGONIST WANT? Did this desire exist before your story began? (It must!)

- 11) WHAT DOES THE PROTAGONIST NEED TO LEARN? Does it conflict with what they want? (It must!)

- 12) WHAT WILL THE PROTAGONIST DO TO MEET THAT NEED? (This is what act two is about)

PART 3: PULLING IT TOGETHER

Now that you've considered your Story and Theme, summarize your story:

(YOUR TITLE) is a...

(GENRE) about a...

(PROTAGONIST) who must...

(PROTAGONIST'S GOAL) and will execute a...

(PROTAGONIST'S PLAN) in a struggle with the...

(ANTAGONIST) to overcome the...

(ANTAGONIST'S PLAN).

Through this struggle, (THE PROTAGONIST) learns (WHAT THEY NEED TO LEARN) to achieve (THEIR GOAL). They will now realize that what they wanted when the movie began has now been replaced by what they really needed all along.

TENNESSEE SCREENWRITING ASSOCIATION's
12 STEP PREMISE WORKSHEET

This sheet is designed to boil your story down to its most BRIEF, basic elements.

1) What is the genre?

PART 1: STORY PREMISE:

2) Who is your protagonist? (brief description)

3) What is the protagonist's goal? (specific task)

4) Why must the protagonist achieve this goal? (stakes)

5) What *general* course of action will the protagonist pursue? (his/her plan)

6) Who is your antagonist? (brief description)

7) What is the antagonist's goal? (specific task)

8) What *general* course of action will the antagonist pursue? (his/her plan)

9) Why must the antagonist achieve this goal? (stakes)

PART 2: THEMATIC PREMISE:

10) What does your protagonist *want*?

11) What does your protagonist *need* (to learn)?

12) What will the protagonist do to meet that need? (This is what act two is about)

Logline: