

Tennessee Screenwriters Association

12 Step Story Premise Worksheet

How to use this form:

A couple of years ago at the Sundance Film Fest, 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 super-successful screenwriter Terry Rossio's WordPlayer.com website he 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).

Every script needs to have a clear premise: A main story through-line (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.

The elements above are inherently present in 99% of all well-written stories. These are simply the "who", "what", "how" and "why" of the premise.

In the most common types of screenplays, the driving force behind what is moving the story forward falls into one of two categories:

THE PROTAGONIST'S PLAN DOMINATED STORY

-- where your protagonist wants something (that being an objectified and measurable goal) so badly that nothing will stand in their way.

- OR -

THE ANTAGONIST'S PLAN DOMINATED STORY

-- where 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.

Are there variations on what you'll put on these 7 lines? Sure. 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. But if you think you're too smart to have to think out these elements, or you think your story is too complex to be able to reduce it to its 9 elements, I suggest you read a few columns at Terry Rossio's site. You'll find there (as you'll hear from any Hollywood pro) that most scripts stink because the writer didn't want to put the effort or the time into making sure their premise contained the most basic elements.

Are you ready?

Print out these instructions. You can refer to them as you fill out the Story Premise Sheet.

Take a look at the Premise Sheet. Each question needs to be answered as clearly and economically as it can. The following are hints to help you define your answers:

1) What is the genre? (The style of story; drama, action sci-fi, horror, comedy)

PART 1: STORY PREMISE:

2) Who is your protagonist? Who is the story about? The character making the decisions, taking actions that steer the story. The character that we, the audience, follow in the story.

3) What is the protagonist's goal? Identify the specific task that is answered either, "yes he did" or "no he did not" achieve his goal at the end of the story.

4) Why must the protagonist achieve this goal? What does he lose if the goal is not achieved? (The immediate stakes of the story.)

5) What general course of action will the protagonist pursue? His plan or approach to attaining his goal.

6) Who is your antagonist? Who is the person taking action that prevents the protagonist from success?

7) What is the antagonist's goal? Identify the specific task that is answered either, "yes he did" or "no he did not" achieve his goal at the end of the story. It must be in direct conflict with the protag's goal.

8) What general course of action will the antagonist pursue? His approach to attaining his goal.

9) Why must the antagonist achieve this goal? What does he lose if the goal is not achieved?

PART 2: THEMATIC PREMISE:

10) What does your protagonist want? Did this desire exist before your story begins? (It must!)

11) What does the protagonist need (to learn)? Does it conflict with what the protagonist wants? (It must!)

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

PART 3: BRING BOTH PARTS TOGETHER:

Summarize your story.

LOGLINE: (YOUR TITLE) is a...

GENRE about a...

PROTAGONIST who seeks...

GOAL and will execute a...

PLAN in a struggle with the...

ANTAGONIST to overcome the...

ANTAGONIST'S PLAN and through the struggle, learn what they...

NEED to learn to achieve their GOAL. (And they will realize what they really wanted when the movie began has now been replaced by what they really need.)

© TENNESSEE SCREENWRITING ASSOCIATION

**THE TENNESSEE SCREENWRITERS ASSOCIATION'S
12 STEP STORY 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: