This is the last article you'll ever need to read on log lines. Our goal: a strong, pithy pitch for a movie that will keep you focused as a writer and get your audience into the theater.

WHY LOG LINES?

Originally, log lines were long thin ropes on a spool with knots tied in them that mariners unreeled behind their ships to measure their speed – in KNOTS. They counted how many evenly spaced knots passed through their hand as the sand in the hour-glass drained from the top to the bottom. The marina's log line was a necessity in helping them navigate their journey and not get lost. It told them how far they had gone in a certain direction and when to turn the boat to find their destination.

[The other advantage of the marina's log line was that if the boat got lost, the sailors simply had to follow the log line back to port. As time went on, and captains become more adventurous sailing to distant lands, the log lines got pretty big. But, after a few ships sank from the enormous weight of the reels, ships never got lost again. Why? They learned their lesson and never ventured far from port.]

Now, if that last part in brackets sounds like a joke, it wasn't intended as such for the writers reading this. It's the lie that tells the truth -- about the importance of log lines. Log lines help us navigate our writing. They also help to steer funding and attachments to our projects. And they direct audiences to theaters. Log lines are a necessary tool that keeps us focused in writing our story, and helps convince "names" to spend their time and money to get our story made and distributed. A good log line tells us how far we need to go before we arrive at a turning point in the plot. And, if we get lost, a good log line will lead us back to the beginning where we can start again.

ELEMENTS

Fundamentally, a good log line will be a single sentence that will include five elements.

The subject of the sentence will describe (1) an imperfect but passionate and active PROTAGONIST. The verb will depict (2) the BATTLE. And the direct object will describe (3) an insurmountable ANTAGONIST who tries to stop the protagonist from reaching (4) a physical GOAL on account of (5) the STAKES, if the goal is not reached.

VERB

The verb you choose to depict the *struggle* must be visual and active. After all this is a movie, not a play or a novel. Thus, the log line verb should be one of the following, or one like them that best suits the genre:

struggle, battle, contends, wrestles, grapples, scuffles, fights, wages war, jousts, duels, spars, scraps, opposes, takes on, clashes, quarrels, feuds, or crusades.

STRUCTURE

Now, take all those elements and put them into a compelling sentence in this order:

[Adjective describing protagonist] [protagonist]…[active verb]…[antagonist]…[goal]…[stakes].

What it doesn't sound right? Then, rewrite it. You do know what a *rewrite* is, don't you? As formulistic as all this sounds, expect to rewrite your log line many, many times --- not necessarily at first, but over the time that you develop your story and script.

4 QUESTIONS AND 4 ANSWERS

My friend Jeffrey Alan Schechter makes the justifiable claim that a good log line should clearly and unambiguously answer these FOUR QUESTIONS:

1. Who is your main character?

2. What is he or she trying to accomplish?

3. Who is trying to stop him or her?

4. What happens if he or she fails?

The answers to those questions, which MUST BE embodied in the log line, are:

1. A sympathetic character, who is

2. trying to accomplish a compelling goal while being opposed by...

3. a powerful and committed opponent, over

4. life and death stakes.

Log lines, as I said above, are the place that writers start. Log lines help to focus the filmmaking team as they moves through the process of writing, development, attachment, production, and then marketing. But the best log lines are usually written AFTER the movie is finished. Why? Because movies are made three times: in the writing, in the shooting, and in the finishing. And it's not until it's all over that we really know what the film is about, and what the characters are REALLY about. At any rate, log lines are critical to understanding what makes a good story.

EXAMPLES

Here are a few good log line examples.

• A naïve young man battles heartless authorities to protect the life of his girlfriend when it's revealed that she's not human— she's a mermaid.

•   A police chief, with a phobia for open water, battles a gigantic shark with an appetite for swimmers and boat captains, in spite of a greedy town council who demands that the beach stay open.

•   A Parisian rat teams up with a man with no talent to battle convention and the critics that anyone can cook and open their own restaurant.

•   A lawyer who loses his ability to lie for 24-hours, clashes with his ex-wife for the affection of their son and the healing of their family.

•   A young farmer from a distant planet joins the rebellion to save his home planet from the evil empire when he discovers he is a warrior with legendary psychokinesis powers.

GIVE IT TIME – BUT DON'T STOP

Nothing good comes easily. That adage begins and ends with log lines. Their importance in the movie industry cannot be understated. The human mind requires a respite from time-to-time to reach its full potential. Within your mind is the capacity to not only write a good log line, but construct the good story that goes with it. Write hard each day. But then relax and do something that involves physical activity aside from sitting in a chair and bending over a computer. Writing is hard work -- but you need exercise, too. I spend the mornings writing. In the afternoon I chop logs, garden, sail and chase my wife around town. You'll be surprised how your mind assimilates and solves problems when you're not trying to force it. As your project develops never stop coming back to your log line and see if you can make it that strong, pithy pitch that will sell your story.