

Screenplay Treatments 101

by [Marilyn Horowitz](#)

Treatment writing is a skill that can help any screenwriter succeed, at any point in the creative process. It can also help jump-start a professional writing career because a strong treatment communicates the screenwriter's movie idea in a brief but compelling way. It is a powerful diagnostic and creative tool.

I am often asked if writers have to actually write screenplays, or can they just sell ideas? You can't copyright an idea, only the execution. If you have a great idea, the only way to own it is to write it. Writing a treatment, however, is a fast and effective way to test out an idea before committing to writing the entire script. If the treatment isn't terrific, move on.

Part of succeeding as a screenwriter is to write at least one great screenplay. There is no substitute for craft, but screenplays are hard work and take time to perfect, so if a writer has already completed one screenplay, doing a treatment for the next can help determine whether or not the new screenplay is viable. Why? Because the treatment creates distance. Distance allows the screenwriter to get an overview of his or her work and look at it objectively.

If the basic story is not something an audience wants 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 start 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 as well as the reverse. The successful screenwriter is 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 to making a film. It's easy to forget the ultimate goal when you are in the midst of wrestling with your script.

Ideally, every serious screenwriter should have at least two well-written, well-structured screenplays as writing samples. Therefore, it makes sense to devote time to learning how to write treatments because they force the writer to focus on structure and character development. Once the writer gains an adequate comfort level with this type of rigorous story development, years of struggling can be saved. If the writer attains writing excellence in his or her full-length scripts, and can write treatments with his or her intended audience in mind, success is inevitable.

The key is this: If the scriptwriter wants to see the movie of the treatment that he or she has written, then so will other people.

What is a Treatment?

There seem to be three accepted versions of a treatment. One version is a one-page written pitch. The second version is a three to five-page document that tells the whole story, focusing on the highlights. The third version is a lengthy document—some say up to 60 pages—providing an elaborate, scene-by-scene breakdown of a script. I consider this third version to be an outline, and, frankly, a waste of time as a marketing document, though it can be an important step in the creative process. The point of a treatment is brevity without sacrificing juice. That's why, in my experience, the two to five-page version works best, and an example is included later 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 contain some key scenes and dialogue from the screenplay it represents.

What Should be in the Treatment?

1. A working title.
2. The writer's name and contact information.
3. WGA registration number.
4. A short logline.
5. Introduction to key characters.
6. Who, what, when, why, and where.
7. Act One in one to three paragraphs. Set the scene, dramatize the main Conflicts.
8. Act Two in two to six paragraphs. Dramatize how the Conflicts introduced in Act One lead to a crisis.
9. Act Three in one to three paragraphs. Dramatize the final Conflict and resolution.

The Three-Act Structure

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

Aristotle suggested that all stories should have a beginning, middle and end. The writing method I have developed uses the terms *Set-up*, *Conflict* and *Resolution* as more evocative words for describing the movements of a screenplay.

Breaking the movements of a story in this way gives us a three-part, or three-act, structure. The word "act" means "the action of carrying something out."

Many screenplays are organized into three act structure. The tradition of writing in this form comes from the theatre 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 One, called the *Set-up*. The situation, characters and Conflict are introduced. This act classically is 30 minutes long.

Act Two, called the *Conflict*. Often an hour long, this is where the Conflict begins and expands until reaching a crisis.

Act Three, called the *Resolution*. The Conflict rises to one final crisis and then is resolved.

Writing the Treatment

There are several preliminary steps before actually writing.

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 any script is with the title, so pick one that gives a clear idea of what genre the screenplay is written in. A good title can predispose a producer or reader to like a screenplay because it arouses curiosity and suggests the kind of experience that is in store. Great, classic film titles include *It Happened One Night*, *Psycho*, and *Die Hard*.

A film I recently consulted on is called *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. The title also suggests the excellent plot twist—that the parents find love after creating the child.

Of course, the title does not determine whether or not the screenplay is good, but it can be a great marketing tool. If you want a producer to read your script, pick a title that grabs people's attention and matches your story.

Write a Logline: The second step is to write a logline. Preparing one for your screenplay is a basic marketing tool that I have repurposed for developing treatments. Similar to the summaries given in *TV Guide*, logline writing is a technique for boiling down a plotline to its essence. It's not easy either—it has been described as trying to “vomit into a thimble.”

Here's the logline for the film: *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 write a synopsis. A synopsis is a brief summary of the plot. Begin by expanding your logline into a three-act story. I find that a good technique is to start with the ending.

For example, let's work with *The Silence of the Lambs*: In Act Three, Clarice Starling catches the killer and saves the intended victim.

Next, break the story down into three acts and start at the beginning.

For example, **Act One:** While still a cadet at the FBI, Clarice is asked to help on a case. She's eager to catch the killer and interviews Hannibal Lecter, who gives her a clue.

Act Two: With Lecter's help, Clarice is able to overcome many obstacles and finds the identity of the killer.

Act Three: Clarice confronts the killer, saves his intended victim, and atones for the death of the lamb.

The scriptwriter should follow this breakdown for his or her story and then expand it into a synopsis.

Follow the example below of the synopsis for *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, a struggling actor and law-school dropout. Julie has neither the intention nor the desire to reveal her identity to him; she simply wants to check her sources, get the facts, and move on. A child psychiatrist tells Julie that Jake does not appear to have ADHD, but that he 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, and no matter how hard Julie tries to keep Paul from complicating her life, she cannot deny her feelings for him. Meanwhile, her boyfriend is pushing to set a wedding date. Julie's hand is forced when her mother lets Paul in on the big secret. When he confronts her, Julie admits she wasn't planning to tell him that Jake was his son. Paul angrily leaves, and Julie is forced to choose between what she feels she ought to do and what she wants to do.

Once a synopsis has been completed, the writer must put away the work for a day then revisit it to make sure it is structurally complete, and that each of the main characters experience a full emotional journey. If these two components are achieved, then the work of expanding the story into a treatment can begin. While the synopsis compresses the action to convey the essence of the story, the treatment expands and dramatizes the most important events in order to cause the reader to feel as if he or she is watching a movie. The treatment should read like a compelling short story told in the present tense. Compare the degree of detail in the synopsis with the sample treatment below. Now try the process for yourself.

Sample Treatment: Lily

It's 2006. The political climate in China is very repressive. When ANNA, 20s, the young, pregnant wife of an outspoken journalist, is left widowed after a vicious assassination, friends whisk her out of the country to sympathetic expatriates in Queens, New York. Anna is placed with JUNE, another widow, who has adjusted to the new life. They share a run-down apartment in a maze of tenement buildings, serviced by a few small markets in a bad part of town. June runs the local day-care center for the working mothers in this closed Chinese community.

JON VAN, a charming and powerful local businessman who owns the center, stops by. He is smitten with June, but she rebuffs him. She angers him, but he writes it off to her recent experiences. Anna, now seven months pregnant, remains speechless and depressed until an early labor forces a bone-chilling howl of pain from her parched lips. She gives birth to LILY, a perfect little girl, but Anna is too deeply distressed to bond. It's June who holds the tiny girl and cuddles her. But as the weeks pass, the presence of the newborn slowly brings Anna back to life.

Gradually, Anna begins to ask questions about the new world she's entered. She sees that when the mothers drop off and pick up their children at the day-care center, there is tension and fear in their faces. When Anna asks why the women are so fearful, June explains that everyone owes the Syndicate, the group who helped Anna escape.

June reveals her hatred of the Syndicate, telling Anna of their exploitation of their own kind. "That's why I make so little money, Anna. Half of it goes back to them. That's why everyone's afraid; they use threats of deportation or death to keep us in line."

Anna refuses to believe June, reminding her that the Syndicate saved her life and the life of her daughter. June helps Anna improve her English but warns her to keep it a secret as the Syndicate doesn't support assimilation. Their nightly practice bonds them together like sisters, but June becomes more and more depressed and decides to run away. Anna tells her she's making a mistake.

Late one night, June tries to escape. She is caught and is beaten to death by Syndicate enforcers. Horrified at the murder of her only friend, Anna's emotional agony returns, and she takes refuge in her relationship with her daughter Lily. Jon Van visits and puts Anna to work. She takes over June's former duties and starts running the day-care center. Jon Van makes advances. Lost and lonely, Anna gives in.

Life goes smoothly until Lily reaches five and asks about her father. Anna lies and tells Lily that her

daddy was a famous patriot who saved her and many others from political oppression. Lily becomes hysterical at the idea that her father is dead. To soothe her, Anna lies and tells Lily that Daddy really escaped and came to America, where he is now searching for them everywhere, and swears her to secrecy. The fantasy helps Anna resolve her trauma over the death of her beloved husband. The more she elaborates on the story for Lily, the more she herself begins to believe it.

On Lily's first day of school, she's made fun of because of her clothes and inability to speak the language. Lily's daily humiliation at school upsets Anna. She goes to Jon Van and asks that her daughter be allowed to wear American clothes and learn English. Jon Van reminds her of the rules: traditional food, dress and language. No English in the home, no American clothes, no TV. For the first time, she argues with him. He brutally warns her to stop, reminding her of her illegal status. When she presses him, Jon Van reminds her that what happened to June could happen to her. Defeated and repelled, Anna realizes that June had told her the truth about the Syndicate, and that she has truly been sleeping with the enemy.

The months pass, and Lily becomes a faint shadow of her former, cheerful self. Anna's helplessness turns to anger and depression. Meanwhile, a rash of local thefts is terrorizing the neighborhood. During a robbery, the regular collector (another woman) is attacked and robbed. Jon Van asks Anna to take on the job and to collect the deposits from the local stores and put them in the bank. Lily's birthday comes around. Anna can't bear her daughter's despair and steals the daily deposit and buys Lily American clothes and a gold necklace. She tells Lily she can only wear the necklace on special occasions and hides it in a drawer.

Meanwhile, the thefts continue throughout the neighborhood. When Jon Van confronts Anna about the missing money, she pretends that the thief attacked her. DANIEL, the handsome thief, foolishly decides to do one last job. As he robs a store, the enforcers of the Syndicate catch him. They drag him to an alley and nearly beat him to death. Severely wounded, he manages to escape into the maze of tenements, where he breaks into Anna's apartment and hides.

Anna is out collecting, and Lily is in school. Daniel finds the necklace and pockets it. Lily returns from school. She finds Daniel and assumes he's her long-lost father just returned from a new adventure. Daniel, touched by her innocent acceptance, cannot bring himself to hurt her and plays along.

Anna returns, frightened to find Daniel in her house alone with her daughter. She's about to turn him into the Syndicate when Lily joyously announces how happy she is to have found her father at last.

Daniel is so badly beaten that he's no threat, and Anna doesn't have the heart to destroy Lily's joy. So they have a little party, and Daniel and Anna pretend that the necklace is from her "father." Anna is overwhelmed to see her little girl finally happy. Daniel and Anna continue to enact this uncomfortable charade until Lily leaves for school the next day.

Finally alone together, Anna tells Daniel to leave. He refuses. She threatens to call the Syndicate. He threatens to tell Lily he's not her father. Anna realizes that she will be accused of harboring a suspect. She asks Daniel what he wants. Daniel tells her that all he wants is a chance to recover and then get the hell away from there. Anna says she will let him stay if he will maintain the lie. Daniel agrees.

That night Daniel teaches Lily some cool English words and how to fight back against the bullies at school. We learn that Daniel was a soldier before becoming disillusioned with war. There is much tenderness between them, as though he were her real father. Anna is upset at the situation, but Lily goes to sleep, happy in the lie.

As the days pass, Lily and Daniel grow closer. Lily becomes more secure and outgoing. Daniel becomes mellow and enjoys the quiet domesticity. After Lily leaves for school, Anna and Daniel talk. Their conversations become more personal. Anna realizes they have a lot in common. She softens and takes care of Daniel. Daniel wants to know who beat him so badly. Anna reluctantly tells him about the

Syndicate.

Anna goes to the stores to collect the deposits. Friends warn her that the Syndicate has found out that she bought the necklace. She runs home and asks Daniel for help. She tells him she stole the money for the necklace. He is amused, commenting that they're both thieves, but then realizes the danger Anna has placed Lily in and tells her they must get Lily from school right away.

They arrive in time to see Lily kidnapped by the Syndicate on the way home. They pursue but cannot follow inside the Syndicate headquarters. Daniel takes Anna to stay with his friends. He agrees to help her find Lily. They decide to turn the tables on the Syndicate and break it up. The question is how? Daniel and his friends are former soldiers, now fallen on hard times. They plan an elaborate scheme to break in and rescue Lily.

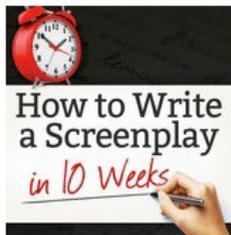
Anna must go in the headquarters alone and face Jon Van. She pretends to be sorry and offers sexual favors in return for Lily. He spurns her and tells her she must die as an example to keep the others in line. But before he can harm her, Daniel breaks in with his team. A firefight ensues. Daniel rescues Lily but is shot. As he dies, he tells Anna he was happy his life added up to something after all.

Now Anna must save her own daughter and kill Jon Van. She meets the challenge, leaving the Syndicate shattered behind her. Anna and Lily move to Long Island. She never tells Lily that Daniel, the thief, wasn't her father.

I hope this article has convinced you that treatment writing is a powerful tool, and one that you will use, keeping in mind that screenwriting is a creative process. Whichever way you are moved to work on your next project, let the story come out whole, and then fix it afterward. Don't forget to register your treatment with the Writers Guild of America. Good luck and happy writing.

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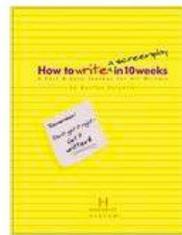
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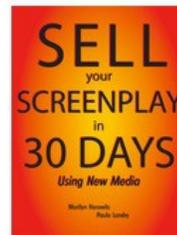
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