

Writing Treatments That Sell

For someone that is new to the business of writing screenplays, the term "treatment" will most definitely be new to them as well. Basically, if a writer has an idea for a story but for one reason or another does not want to write an entire script, they'll need to know about treatments.

As stated in Kenneth Atchity and Chi-Li Wong's book, *Writing Treatments that Sell*, the primary functions served by the treatment in today's entertainment business are selling and diagnosing a story. For the outsider's purposes, what distinguishes one treatment from another is simply its effectiveness in making the sale, and/or laying out the story. So how exactly does one go about writing a treatment? Why do you need one and what do you put in it? What differentiates a treatment from a screenplay?

Agents, producers and movie studios receive hundreds of screenplays every year. Because of this, rarely does the buyer have the time to read each one without having some idea of what they are about to look at; hence the treatment becomes a very important selling tool. Atchity and Wong state that "second only to writing an entire screenplay or teleplay on 'spec', your treatment maybe the best tool for getting a foot in the door of moviemaking.

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If a screenplay focuses the story for a film, the treatment does the same thing for a screenplay. A treatment could be considered a written pitch; something that catches the buyers attention and makes them want to see more.

There are several key elements that make a treatment good and worth reading. The first is keeping it relatively brief. Generally, a treatment will range anywhere from one to twenty-five or more pages, depending on the kind of treatment it is and its purpose. The three most common kinds of treatments are Original dramatic treatments, treatments of true stories and Adaptation treatments. Another key is to keep the treatment user-friendly and straightforward.

One big difference between treatments and screenplays is that treatments are written in paragraph form where as screenplays have a very technical format. Keep the language simple yet forceful and declarative. The purpose of the treatment is to describe the events of the story so that it can be visualized and brought to life. This should be done using the least amount of words possible.

Shorter is Better?

Because the treatment is a relatively brief and loosely narrative pitch of a screenplay, it does not need to include every detail that will be in the screenplay. Therefore, the writer

should highlight the major points of the story, the necessary details that are essential for the story to make sense. The treatment is just the beginning of the writing process. The writer should use it to urge the reader into asking for more, which is where the screenplay will come in.

So what turns a good treatment into a great one? A treatment can be useful in getting your story straight, as well as getting the details of the screenplay you wish to write clearly spelled out. When you begin creating the details of the script, it's too easy to lose track of the backbone of the story. The treatment focuses on the story's backbone, allowing it to be seen clearly (Atchity and Wong). The shorter the treatment is the better.

There are several aspects of a treatment that must be in place in order for a treatment to be effective. These include a solid opening that takes hold of the reader from the very beginning. There must also be a climax to the film that strikes and satisfies them. In between, there must be a protagonist (or main character) that the reader can relate to in some way. This does not mean that the main character will always be a hero or someone that the audience likes, only that the protagonist is someone that stands out and draws the audience in. The story must also contain a central conflict around which all the action in the story revolves.

The treatment must set the mood of the film. Finally, the treatment must introduce all the main and supporting characters that will have a crucial role in the film. Describing scenes and where extras are to be placed is unnecessary. This will most likely be taken care of by the director once the film is put into production. Treatments always contain the essential characters, structure and content of every scene from the very beginning to the very end of the given story. Once you have written out the treatment, it is important to see that every scene keeps the plot moving continuously forward.

It is also important to note that if the action of the story doesn't present itself early on in the treatment (within the first couple of paragraphs), generally the person evaluating the treatment will cease reading it.

There are two kinds of action in a treatment. The first is something that happens to a major character that will result in moving the story forward. The second type of action is dialogue that moves the story forward. In general, the more the story keeps the audience edge of their seats and the more suspense the story contains, the better the picture will be.

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A good treatment wastes not a single word pulling you into the world of the story and involving you in the protagonist's conflicts. It's essential to intrigue the reader with your opening words so they will want to know what's going to happen next.

Whether you are writing a story of action, comedy, sci-fi or dramatic genre, you must begin by focusing on the characters. The characters are hands down the most important

element of any story and should generate the action, setting and point of view throughout the treatment.

The best stories show the growth and changes of the protagonist throughout. Stories in which the main character goes through little to no changes from beginning to end are generally poorly constructed and not worth a second look. A convincing main character is four-dimensional: his makeup clearly focused on his motivation, his story's mission, the obstacles he faces, and the changes he undergoes.

Finally, when the story is complete, stop. Do not try to drag out the ending by adding additional, unneeded verbiage that will only take away from the fulfilling outcome you have created. As stated by Atchity and Wong, if your career goal is not only to find ideas but also to sell them, you must begin to see everything through a storyteller's lens.

Begin to perceive life's ups and downs from a dramatic point of view. Everywhere and anywhere, in the media and in your daily existence, always ask the question, "could this be a movie?" The best stories aren't invented. They're discovered, then retold from the storyteller's unique viewpoint.

FilmMakers recommendations

ACTION CUT - This is the most unique series of learning tools in the film industry that provides an in-depth look inside the directing craft on a step-by-step, shot-by-shot professional level of production from the written page through the moviemaking process to the final film.

Writing Treatments That Sell: How to Create and Market Your Story Ideas to the Motion Picture and TV Industry by Kenneth Atchity and Chi-Li Wong

The Big Deal : Hollywood's Million-Dollar Spec Script Market by Thom Taylor

Developing Story Ideas by Rabiger, Michale