SERIES BIBLE & PITCH DECK
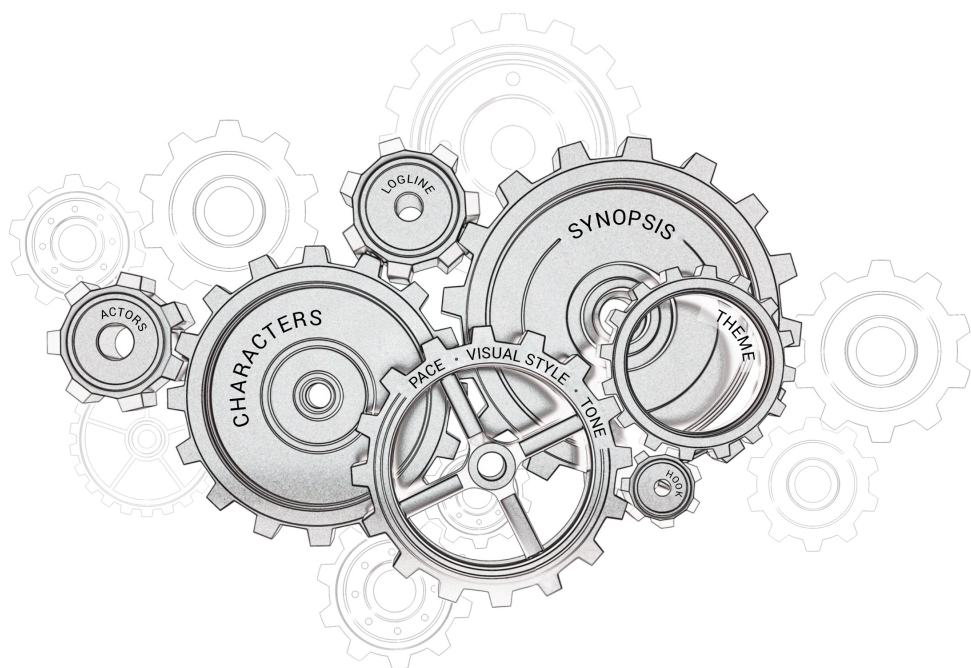
STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

VERSION 1.0

ScriptHop

SERIES BIBLE & PITCH DECK
STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

VERSION 1.0

For Features and Television

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*Version **1.0** published March 2023.*

Visit the below URL to check for updated versions of this book.

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WHO WE ARE

ScriptHop is a Hollywood technology company focused on optimizing the industry's content development process with innovative products and services for creatives and those who are integral in taking a story from concept to production.

The company's first product, **The Packet**, is currently available at *ScriptHop.com*. Per its name, it bundles everything you need to market your script or story idea in one simple link. The Packet is a first-of-its-kind product offering security, tracking, and a presentation layer that can go beyond traditional bibles and pitch decks.

It was through the thoughtful creation of this product — working with our advisory board, our partners, and our industry contacts — that the materials for this book were formed.

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ScriptHop's founders, advisors, and partners are dedicated to empowering writers with tools that optimize their content development process and improve their chances of success.

INTRODUCTION

WHY EVERY WRITER SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

This book provides an inside look at what the film industry considers the best standards and practices for the creation of pitch materials. It was created based on research and input from ScriptHop's Advisory Board (see WHO WE ARE), as well as our industry partners, executives, creatives, and other collaborators who represent or are involved with the production of scripted content. Our research was gathered more specifically from, and vetted by, actual boilerplate guidance offered to clients by management companies and agencies for the creation of a pitch deck or series bible (both sometimes being referred to as a "presentation deck"). After analyzing the industry's protocols, we synthesized them into this: the first definitive guide.

Where agency guidance tended to be opaque regarding strategies and approach, we've explicated the art of the process. This guidebook brings the notion of an ideal Hollywood pitch deck into sharper focus by adding more fulsome explanations and analyses of approach for writers new to the business, as well as for seasoned writers simply new to the presentation deck process.

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We strongly believe that every writer can benefit from creating a pitch deck or series bible — not just because those documents are a necessary marketing addendum for a series or feature, but because the process will enhance the quality of the writing and screenplay itself.

....

Completing a series bible or pitch deck helps the writer achieve newfound objectivity about the story. It invariably inspires a profound reverse-engineering process in which many writers discover they want to go back and rewrite some of their script after creating their pitch deck. The process enlightens writers to see their narrative with new eyes.

To be sure, there is indeed the more practical and business-motivated reason to create a pitch deck for your project's future:

THESE DAYS, HOW YOU PRESENT YOUR PROJECT IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE SCRIPT.

We'll cover that in the next chapter. But even if you feel you're not ready for primetime — even if you're in the process of writing your script — your project can benefit from the perspective and illuminating objectivity a pitch deck can open for you.

THE NEWFOUND IMPORTANCE OF SERIES BIBLES & PITCH DECKS

"Pitch decks," "series bibles," "look books" — these are terms a surprising number of writers are only just becoming aware of. Yet writers inside the industry will tell you that they've become as important as the script itself. This new norm, in which pitch material is a priority, is due to the so-called "Golden Age of Television," the advent of streaming, the ensuing avalanche of new scripted content, and the resulting ratio of time and urgency that further fragments the industry's already compromised attention span. No matter the specific diagnosis for a particular decision-maker's inability to focus in Hollywood — to sit down and *read* — the pitch itself has become a necessary magnifying lens and attention-deficit stabilizer.

And in many cases, your presentation materials can be *more* important than your script — even for writers fortunate enough to have representation and credits. Especially in the age of the small screen, execs want to know that your project "has legs," meaning it's built to last at least a season's worth of episodes. A pilot script often isn't enough to convince them of that.

A series bible, on the other hand, forecasts more of a sense of the show's future by plotting out an actual season with a series outline. A series outline gives execs confidence that the story has a real engine and a plot that will continue to unspool and ensnare viewers.

Along these lines, most series' successes have been built on the backs of compelling characters who have had time to grow over the breadth of the series (which is hard to determine from a pilot script). So detailing an episodic's character descriptions in your series bible can be more valuable to an exec than their sifting through your pilot script to try to figure out whom viewers might want to follow.

A darker secret a lot of writers aren't aware of: Many execs don't want a script from you at all.

We concur that this is ironic, even troubling, but then again the film business is rife with ironies. There are a number of reasons for execs wanting a bible rather than a pilot. The main one is that the exec handling your project wants to assemble a team of writers to help you build the show's identity. They might not have confidence in your voice or in your ability to execute, either because you've never had a successful show brought to fruition, or because the success you've had was antithetical in tone to the story you're trying to tell this time around. So they often want to build a writer's room in which your series can dwell on a sturdy foundation, generally with more experienced writers (more experienced in that particular genre, at least) collaborating with you.

If you're a feature/movie writer: Features, especially "specs" (original screenplays not based on other established works) are an especially endangered species these days. They deserve extra protection. If you've written an original script, you need to convey to an exec how to compensate for the marketing inadequacies they fear they'll have if they take a risk on an unknown story. To mitigate their anxiety, you need to proactively *market your screenplay.* A pitch deck or lookbook can make a difference in presenting your project in

a positive marketing light. It can actually convince a skeptical exec that your underdog story is David to Marvel's Goliath. This is important because decision-makers are worried about which blockbuster (backed by an already established intellectual property) is the rival that your original project is going against on any given weekend.

DOES THIS SOUND GLOOMILY SOBERING? DO NOT DESPAIR!

We believe once you start using this book, you'll be newly inspired by the insight we've harvested from the experts. The wisdom herein will guide you to make your artistic vision resonate with even the most distracted readers and to convince the most fastidious counters of beans that they have a commercial prospect. Even if your project isn't mainstream, a great pitch deck has the power to convince decision-makers that your story will create buzz.

Regardless of whether or not you decide to use ScriptHop's software to create your series bible or pitch deck, we bring you this book in the hopes that it will bring you and your project closer to the glow of the greenlight!

HOW A PITCH DECK GETS YOU THROUGH HOLLYWOOD'S BOTTLENECK

Attention is the most precious commodity in Hollywood. As far as execs and agents are concerned, giving you any of their attention is akin to giving you money. These are some of the most stressed and harried people you'll ever meet; they have turbulent schedules governed by an elusive and temperamental cadre of talent (powerful clients and collaborators, many of whom have an itchy trigger finger poised to fire them at any moment). While they're trying to mitigate the constant fear of losing these business interests to an even hungrier shark, they're juggling a deluge of meetings and calls, racing off to screenings and production sets, and later they're "rolling calls" (an assistant helping them navigate the backlog of a hundred calls they missed while dealing with everything else).

Agents, managers, execs, and producers have ever-shrinking attention spans due to these constant distractions. Add to all this their well-earned cynicism that most newbies aren't ready for primetime, and you can see why they generally resent giving any attention away to an unknown writer for free.

HEREIN LIES THE IRONY (AND SOME GOOD NEWS!)

In order to survive, these same Hollywood players have to be on a constant vigil for new writers and new material. In this new golden age of TV and streaming content, there are more

outlets, channels, and websites demanding more material than ever, and part of the decision-maker's job is to find new material.

You'd think a script would be a great way to be discovered. After all, it's a great way to prove a writer knows how to write pithy-yet-naturalistic dialogue or a tense thriller of a scene. The thing is, a pilot is going to run *at least* 30 pages; generally, it runs a good deal longer — 60 to 70 pages. Also, a pilot script doesn't tell networks and production companies that the writer has a *plan* that will keep the lights on in the writers' room (with a full season of episodes). If your script is a feature, a Hollywood player will be daunted by the notion of reading something that's twice as long — and therefore asking for hours of their time!

To gain the confidence of the people who matter (so they want to read your actual script), you have to engage in what might sound like a new art form, but has been a prerequisite for most successful writers since Hollywood's advent, before pitch decks as we now know them came along: the art of literary marketing.

Even writers with representation via an agent or manager had to gain their rep's full attention on their work. We've all heard variations on the theme of, "Even though I had an agent and a manager, I still had to pitch and sell myself for years." Keep in mind: Even the A-list writers on ScriptHop's Advisory Board have had countless projects rejected, often because of the way those projects were pitched and/or perceived.

Effective literary marketing — pitching — depends on your ability to present the trappings of your story. It depends on your ability to bait your readers (into wanting to read your script) by deploying concise, tantalizing doses of info that

give enticing glimpses of your vision. In many ways you're drawing from the same skill set that good screenwriting depends on: succinctly conveying narrative information.

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Your ability to prove your narrative strength in summary doses calls upon skills similar to the judo you perform with screenwriting: Use the weight of fewer words to do more heavy lifting. Adding art — a mainstay of the pitch deck (see USING IMAGERY) — helps you punch above the weight of mere words, opening the decision-maker's eyes to your vision far more vividly.

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Series bibles and pitch decks offer a progressively encouraging read that builds reader confidence that your project is worth further investment. If you deliver these summaries with artistic panache, your reader is far more inclined to summon faith and take a deeper dive into your script and all of its subtext.

HOW A PITCH DECK PROTECTS YOUR VISION

A pitch deck *isn't* just a shortcut for a decision-maker (given that it sketches out actual narrative structure in sections like the SYNOPSES and the SERIES OUTLINE). It isn't just a trailer for your story. It's something more substantial than that: a document that both empowers and protects you. Here's how:

The industry's movers are expected to have developed a certain skill set to identify good writing. But these same judges have varying levels of literacy and even the smartest ones might not share your taste. To rely on their ability to "get" the subtler elements of your script — such as subtext (writing that uses the power of implication) or even the far more obvious elements like the plot — is to rely on their ability to focus.

If you're lucky enough to get your entire script read by a properly caffeinated decision-maker (rather than their assistant) you're most likely already their client or collaborator. Even then, it's still scary to know the number of ways these readers can figure out how to miss your point.

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One of the most common ways readers miss your point is that they read a bit of your script, then get interrupted by an hour-long phone call. Once they go back to reading, they've already lost the thread. Because the most powerful people are the most starved for time, they skim more than they read.

....

In many cases, decision-makers might *never* read your actual script, even if it's your vision's beating heart and gleaming centerpiece, even if it's the reason you became a writer. Instead, they might — especially if you're an unknown writer — only scan the summaries known as "coverage" (written often by an intern) and judge your project based on that.

A GOOD PITCH DECK ADDS INSURANCE THAT THE RESONATING EFFECTS YOU WISHED THEY'D FELT WHILE READING YOUR SCRIPT ARE DELIVERED AND *UNDERSTOOD.*

FILM (ESPECIALLY INDIE FILM)

If Hollywood's literati are sometimes comprehension-challenged, the communication goal posts can move even further away for those writers trying to raise money for a film. Many investors in this space have only read a few scripts and are keenly aware of this, so the ability of your presentation materials to imbue them with faith in your project's vision is often much more influential than the screenplay itself. And let's face it, generally you're going to need some talent attached if you want to attract a substantial investment.

If you've written an indie film and are trying to nab a well-known actor, you're competing with studio features and series content for those same thespians. You need a way to command attention quickly. The only way to do that (unless you're an A-list writer) is by efficiently capturing that actor's manager's or agent's attention with the convincing implication

that "there's a big idea in this little film." Pitch decks are the best way to quickly deliver such a depth charge of inspiration and still the knee-jerk of industry skepticism.

SERIES

The importance of having a form that showcases your overall vision can't be overstated when considering a series, whether it be a limited mini-series or an idea for a show aspiring to several seasons. Managers have stated that it's nearly impossible to get a series pickup without an entire SERIES OUTLINE (see that chapter for more). In the collective minds of most production companies and networks, a series bible offers more of a *plan* than a pilot script does.

SERIES BIBLES ARE ALSO USEFUL FOR AGENTS IN GIVING THEM CONFIDENCE THAT THEY HAVE A SAVVY GRASP ON THEIR CLIENT'S OR A NEWBIE'S WORK — THAT WHEN THEY GET ON THE PHONE AND PLAY THE TELEPHONE GAME, THEY WON'T DILUTE OR ENTIRELY MISREPRESENT THE STORY.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Note: We know that many writers will want to use this as a reference book. (Some will want to refer to certain sections only and not read everything.) We have written this accordingly. In being a reference book, certain sections reiterate certain strategies.

LABELS

Throughout this manual, you'll see labels/headings (below the chapter titles) that designate whether the section applies to:

....

SERIES | FEATURES | SERIES and FEATURES

....

You'll also see that each section has one of these labels:

....

THE PITCH | THE FACTS | THE PITCH and THE FACTS

....

Any section labeled with **The Pitch** involves sections that generally encourage you to discuss, market, editorialize, commentate, and even champion your own work.

That might sound strange to you. You might assume, "The whole pitch deck *is* the pitch!" But elements like the LOGLINE and SYNOPSES are **The Facts** sections, where you are encouraged *not* to use marketing language, editorial, or commentary. The Facts sections in a pitch deck present the details that describe your story as straightforwardly as possible (almost like a news story about your narrative world). Injecting color commentary in a synopsis — such as claiming, "this sequence is really funny" — would come off as opinion or editorial to most professional script readers. (And since

you wrote the script, praising it would come off as awkward, prejudicial conjecture, especially in a synopsis).

Some sections — such as WHAT IT IS — combine elements of both The Pitch and The Facts, and therefore such sections are labeled with both.

THE ORDER OF THINGS, THE NAMING OF THINGS

and Why Your Pitch Should Be Like Haiku

The chapters in the upcoming STANDARDS & PRACTICES portion of this book are named after and represent the actual sections of industry-created series bibles and pitch decks. They are presented in the order in which we'd encourage you to create your series bible or pitch deck; this is the order in which the bulk of the industry wants to receive them.

1. Title Page
2. Logline
3. What It Is
4. Pace, Visual Style, and Tone
5. Short Synopsis
6. Full Synopsis
7. Themes
8. The World
9. Intro to Characters
10. Character Descriptions
11. The Hook
12. The Case
13. Financials
14. Series Outline
15. Where It's Going
16. The Teaser
17. Soundtrack *for pitch decks with interactive media*

Series bibles are evolving toward a more formalized layout these days because they are ultimately intended to be a corporate-facing document (for the networks). Pitch decks for a feature film have historically had a bit more latitude in terms of the order and choice of sections, as they have tended to lean more into the independent investor space, thereby employing more of the marketing aspects of a pitch deck. But with the conflation of movies and TV (as movies increasingly rely on streamers for meaningful distribution) there is an increasing formalization of the pitch deck layout for features as well.

Caveats can be found as readily as they can be found anywhere in the realm of art. For example, while loglines are the most ubiquitous summary known to Hollywood, they aren't always listed in a devoted LOGLINE section in a series bible or pitch deck. Instead, they might be folded into a section such as WHAT IT IS.

What's imperative is that you use the contents of this book to generate the content each section describes. If you choose to deploy your information in a slightly different layout, you won't necessarily lose your reader's interest. (Again, we can see ensconcing a logline in one of the other Pitch sections).

Just remember that Hollywood *does* judge whether you're speaking their vernacular; you prove you can walk the industry walk by showing you have some knowledge of Hollywood boilerplate. So we encourage you to follow the contents herein as closely as possible.

Section Titles

You might wonder, with section titles and content names like WHAT IT IS, do you have to use those exact titles/names for your sections in your pitch deck?

From our research and experience, when it comes to movie pitch decks, there *is* a little freedom in terms of how you title the content from these sections; you have some leeway to change the headlines. When it comes to a series bible, we'd simply point out that the names or titles for the sections are corroborated by agency-client facing boilerplate.

The Length of Your Sections

As we make clear in these chapters, there's wiggle-room in terms of how you construct the specific parameters and layout of your pitch deck. That being said, this book was created in the first place because so many writers — including pros — expressed how lost they feel about how to approach the process. They've had a sense there are guardrails erected by the industry, but they couldn't find a measuring stick with explanations for the measurements.

This book provides a veritable metric system, including the word counts that we've learned through research into what other agencies recommend to their clients. It then goes much further than the client-facing documents it synthesizes by introducing more fulsome elucidation.

To the Reluctant Pitch Deck Creator

We can see a lot of you renegade *artistes* out there asking: "Do I really have to provide *all* the sections and content this

book describes — and in this order — for my pitch to qualify as being industry standard?!"

The short answer is:
You'd be smart to include <u>substance</u> from <u>all</u> of them.

As we've suggested, there can be a certain leeway in terms of the amount of overlap in a few of the sections. For example, you have the freedom to editorialize and promote your work with less of a filter in sections like WHAT IT IS and THE CASE. (As the chapters on those sections elaborate, the difference between the two is that the latter adds nitrous to a writer's promotional engine, giving them truly unbridled license to advocate for their work, whereas WHAT IT IS is more of a combination of The Facts with The Pitch.) Whether you choose to use both of those sections is up to you, but they each have a specific purpose.

Again, there's an art to the degree to which you reiterate and overlap information. Your pitch deck or packet is a personal endeavor for which you might choose to leave out a certain section. The contents of this book are designed to help you fill in dimension for *all* of the facets of your vision, while keeping those facets distinct from one another.

YOUR PITCH SHOULD BE TREATED AS PRECIOUSLY AS HAIKU.

Ultimately, it's our strong belief that the most effective pitch deck is one that makes use of all of these sections, but deploys the resulting marketing language succinctly. Pay

attention to the word count guidelines...and then aim to undercut the maximum, to be slightly more concise with your verbiage. The word game of being as pithy as possible should be played with a mindset of precision, similar to that of the haiku poet. It should be approached with the same grace you'd approach writing a good script. A good writer embraces the challenge of leveraging words carefully and not using them cheaply.

SERIES BIBLE & PITCH DECK STANDARDS & PRACTICES

LENGTH

Each chapter of this guidebook gives specific parameters for the optimal length of that particular pitch section. These lengths use various metrics, such as number of sentences for a LOGLINE, or the word-count for a FULL SYNOPSIS.

In terms of the *overall* length of a series bible or pitch deck, the agents, managers, and execs have spoken: They don't enjoy flipping through 75-page documents. Which is not to dissuade you from pursuing the full force of your vision; if your muse has got you ablaze and hell-bent on keeping a reader spellbound for 75 pages...God bless you. However, you don't need such a daunting amount of text to convey your vision. Most reps won't bother to digest most of that, while some will be annoyed by having to navigate countless pages to find the specific summary they're after.

So we recommend aiming for the lengths suggested by each of this book's chapter-sections and ultimately keeping your deck to 20-30 pages (the latter if you're including a SERIES OUTLINE with a long description per episode, similar to the *Ozark* series bible). Even at these lengths, decision-makers will flip through much of your hard work to find and digest the parts they care about (summaries and the like) while getting a sense of the visual landscape. Many of them will approach your pitch deck like a sampler platter, tasting a few selections to decide whether they want to consume your entire vision. If they can nimbly navigate your project to find the sections they initially care about, they will start to drill down into the details. On that note, the navigation of your deck's length is most definitely assisted by your LAYOUT...

LAYOUT

The layout determines the contours and overall aesthetic of your series bible or pitch deck. *Where* you decide to place imagery and *how* you use it to break up, complement, or integrate your text determines a great deal of your presentation's visual impact and even the psychological effect of your pitch. Your choice of fonts and text size can make your deck easier on the eyes or make it an eyesore. Furthermore, your use of white space is another element to consider so that your pitch doesn't appear to be a colossal, shapeless wall of text.

EXAMPLES:

We intend to offer examples of successful bible and pitch deck layouts in forthcoming versions of this book. However, at this time we have chosen (for legal reasons) not to include this material. And while many samples can be found online, do note that it is often dated and may not be applicable to today's standards.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Your pitch – whether in the room or on paper – is all about presentation. Making your series bible or pitch deck pleasing to the eye suggests to decision-makers that you're thoughtful about your media (which is pretty important, considering you're writing for a visual medium).

One of the clichés and ironies about writers is that many of them are disorganized, in spite of the fact that the art of screenwriting itself relies on Herculean organizational skills to be successful. You might, in fact, be a starving artist, but your pitch documents should present a well-dressed sense of polish, or at least a deliberate aesthetic that makes clear why your document is using a schizophrenic number of fonts. (Perhaps it adds a psychological effect to your project about a deranged serial killer.) How you organize the overall layout of your pitch deck could make the difference between dynamically conveying a sense of mission or the sense that your pitch was an afterthought.

If you use ScriptHop's Packet, the layout for your content is designed to be interactive and free-flowing, utilizing digital space in the dynamic way it was meant to be used: inviting your readers to explore your story and your world. Layout and design can often be a struggle for those who are used to creating written content but aren't used to deciding how things such as imagery or white space fit into the layout. ScriptHop's Packet eliminates these stressors by automatically creating much of the layout for you and helping you design the rest. You're not challenged by aspects like text size or layout because ScriptHop's platform handles those hassles for you.

STRATEGIES

- **Pick one: *landscape* or *portrait*.** The first consideration for your overall page layout should be whether to use landscape or portrait orientation. There isn't an absolute rule here, but these are the general rules of thumb:

  For slide presentations, pitch decks often are oriented in *landscape* format (to favor the dimensions of a screen).

On the other hand, when it pertains to series bibles and decks that are being *emailed* (the most common way they're received), most of them follow Hollywood's traditional page-reading orientation: *portrait* (or the way you read a Word doc).

- **Keep each page undivided.** If you're creating your own series bible or pitch deck with Keynote (or simply using Microsoft Word), it's both advisable and advantageous to focus each page of your pitch deck on a single section or topic. E.g., if you have a page that details your SHORT SYNOPSIS, it's best to leave the rest of the page blank; it is a poor layout choice to use the bottom quarter of the page to start a new section on CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS, especially if that section needs to continue on the next page. (If a longer section like FULL SYNOPSIS needs to span multiple pages, this is fine.) Generally, you want to keep your pitch document sections discrete so that each seems important.

- **Fonts and text sizing: Choose thoughtfully.** You want your writing to be legible. Choosing some whimsical or esoteric font that few can read isn't going to do you any favors. (Don't make the reader work hard to read your writing.) That doesn't mean you can't be creative with your fonts; just make sure that legibility takes precedence.

  Some variance in fonts and sizing isn't just advantageous, it's common sense. Setting one font in a larger size for the heading of a section and a different, smaller font for the body of a section is a crucial way to give your layout its most basic and professional architecture. However, changing every other heading (so that there are various fonts and sizes) makes your presentation feel inconsistent. As we mentioned, don't use ten different fonts and text

sizes on the same page – unless you're trying to present the work of a troubled mind (or character).

Consistency generally should win the day in terms of how you select fonts and sizes for headings and bodies of text. However, there are inevitably some sections of your pitch that you feel are more important than the others, that you feel the need to call even more attention to with slightly greater amplification of the font/text size. Again, use a discerning eye to go over the whole of your presentation. If the size/font helps a particularly important section stand out in impactful relief, that's great. If it's discordantly large, use your common artistic sense to ascertain whether you need to rescale things.

- **Groom your alignment too.** In terms of the *alignment* of text (we touch on alignment of *imagery* further below), consistency is almost more crucial than font size. If you have some section headings (titles for the subject matter on a particular page) that are left-aligned, others that are center-aligned, and still others that are right-aligned, that's just a terribly disjointed way to present your pitch. Again, much like a screenplay, presenting the sense that you have a design in mind for your work (a consistent through line for your pitch's overall aesthetic) goes some distance to encourage confidence from your reader.

- **Watch your white space.** A sense of organization of *white space* (all the space that's blank around your words and images) is initially defined by your margins. You'll need an artful eye to measure the white space between headings, body text, and imagery. While it's hard to convey in writing the way to measure your use (or abuse) of white space, the best guideline is to look at each page and make sure it doesn't *feel* too busy. If it's a dense jumble of text and

imagery, you're probably not using white space effectively. But if there's too gaping a distance between your heading, the body text, and imagery, that can look as awkward as a collision between the three.

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Using a certain amount of white space can help make a certain element on the page stand out. If an image is crowded by a jungle of text without enough white space to set it off in relief, this can make the image look less like an exhibit and more like something you shoehorned in; that particular page of the document will likely look cramped and poorly designed.

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- **Be professional and deliberate with your imagery.** Refer to the chapter on USING IMAGERY for more detailed strategies about how to choose your imagery. For more on how to *orient* your imagery and *arrange* it for the layout, we offer the following strategies:

  - *Aim for quality over quantity.* Always.

  - *Tailor each arrangement to each topic.* Oftentimes, a single banner image can suffice for a section like the SHORT SYNOPSIS. But if you're showing THE WORLD, you'll likely want to offer more visual ideas of the terrain, attaching a few images that amplify your descriptions of this WORLD. In this latter case, you can also consider placing world imagery along the bottom of the page (and if you add even more imagery on a subsequent page, that's fine, too).

- *Don't contort your text (or your reader's eye).* The easiest, most foolproof, and most streamlined way to incorporate an image into your layout is to use it as the banner image of a page, aligning it at the top of the page and having it run from the left to the right margin; this works (at least in part) because it keeps the image and text from colliding. If you're inserting an image somewhere *other than* the top or bottom anchor/banner of the page (e.g., placing a single image in the middle of a page with text, such as a left-aligned image halfway down the page with text wrapping around it), this *can* sometimes bring dynamic life to the page, but it can also look like an unwieldy obstacle course for the eye. Make sure the wrap looks sharp. Having too much (or too little) white space around the image can make your attempt to add variance look amateurish.

- *You can devote an entire page to a single image (but this can bring complications).* For example, the *Stranger Things* series bible alternates between a page of text and a full-page image. While that approach appears to be simple (and it clearly worked for the Duffer Brothers), keep in mind that stretching an image over an entire page requires an extremely high-quality image, which can increase file size. This can be a concern when you're relying on email to send a deck; many email systems reject content that surpasses 10MB in size. (However, the ScriptHop Packet can include many high-quality images without impacting its sharability.)

- *Consider incorporating text into your imagery.* Adding labels or image text to images can help elucidate their relevance. In this case, not only the image, but the adjoining explanatory text should be rendered so that it's distinct from the other surrounding text. Text sizing is

crucial here: Generally, a label for an image will employ a smaller size, and (in some cases) a different font from your body text. Allowing a certain amount of white space to buffer your image can act to "frame" it such that your image text doesn't blur into the surrounding body text.

- *Try the backdrop challenge.* Some pitch decks add a backdrop, or wallpaper image (a very faint backdrop) to each page. If you add a backdrop/wallpaper, there's a balancing act between muting the backdrop enough to keep the foreground text legible, but also keeping the backdrop visible enough that it still "pops" on the page. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but if you pull it off, it can add an intriguing layer.

- *Remember another option: the margins.* Consider adding imagery to the margins of the document. Your chosen imagery can appear throughout, much like a header or footer.

....

Perhaps your story is set in a post-apocalyptic world where two major political factions are fighting a revolution. You might insert the cryptic symbols representing those factions in opposite corners of your document. Or perhaps your project is a Christmas movie and you want to frame each page with holly. Consider using your page margins to add a bit of art.

....

- **Keep your headshots tight and few.** For your ACTOR WISH LIST (which is generally part of your CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS), the traditional layout includes headshots of the different actors you envision playing each character. You might list a single character on a single page, or you

might fit up to two or three on a page (perhaps depending on the importance of each character). You can then attach photos of some (often four) different actors you think fit the part. Some guidelines for this:

- *Zoom and crop every headshot to make them uniform.* Having different sizes and shapes for your headshots looks unprofessional.

- *Cap it at four headshots per character.* Suggesting five or more actors for a single character can imply a lack of clarity in your vision.

- *See ACTOR WISH LIST* for more strategies for depicting actors and working with a wish list.

USING IMAGERY

Art, in the form of imagery, is a secret weapon in pitch deck creation. It's a potent way to package your vision because you're able to present actual evidence for it. Creating key art, photography, or a movie poster that might later be presented to the public in an advertising campaign gives a sense of what will be produced by your story or script, as well as a sense of the commercial appeal of your project.

BY GENERATING A DECK OR PACKET REPLETE WITH VISUAL ELEMENTS, YOU ARE CREATING THE FIRST SIMULATION OF YOUR STORY-AS-PRODUCT.

"Lookbook" is sometimes used as a synonym for a pitch deck or presentation deck, though (as the name suggests) it has even more of a visual focus than the typical deck. With a lookbook, you create veritable swatch samples of the feel of your project — the emotions it will evoke — utilizing imagery created or found. You can find imagery via a Google search or sites like iStock.

By adding lookbook elements to your text, you can underscore the visual power of the details in your world-building and bring character or plot elements to life (e.g., via

storyboards). This is the case whether your story is sci-fi or drama.

....

In fact, adding imagery is a way for lower-budget productions to stand out, by displaying that (although they might not have the luxury of big-budget special effects) they offer a unique sense of place, or that the story has a unique aesthetic sensibility a viewer might be fascinated to experience.

....

Images that capture your themes can have an emotional or intellectual resonance — a quality that makes the reader *feel* or *think* something about your project or ascertain that your story deals with dimensions beyond the surface plot. Such an image can conjure up a sense that there's room for narrative exploration, which is especially important for a medium demanding breadth, such as a series. As an example, THEMES can be "issues," and each issue tends to need a certain amount of bandwidth to cover, rather than just being a one-off. Conveying this thematic material *visually* can pack a wallop in terms of its visceral potency and the confidence it inspires that your series will go the distance of a season or more.

Your imagery might even provide a model for marketing that further drills down on a key element central to your story. Marketing images aren't just advertising; they're an opportunity to discover semiotics (symbols that can cryptically or explicitly propagate your story's depth) in your narrative. In this respect, they can be deceptively powerful and show that you, as a writer, know how to communicate a lot with little space (which is the secret to great screenwriting in the first place).

STRATEGIES

- **Communicate the right things.** When you choose your imagery for a pitch deck, not only do you need to take the content into consideration (i.e., is it an *interesting* image?), but you also need to consider whether the messaging and/or the element the image is meant to convey is clear and resonant. If your aspirations are slightly lower than making the observer *feel* something, you should always make sure the messaging is at least readily perceived so they're *intuiting* something conceptual about your story.

  What might be obvious to you in terms of an image's messaging might not be clear to someone else, so test some of your images with a friend and see what speaks to them.

- **Consider all images as a whole...** There's also the consideration of how the image plays holistically with the aesthetic or style of the other imagery in your presentation. In other words, you should consider the singular image, but also how it plays *in concert with* the other images in your pitch deck. For example, two different images composed of jarring, juxtaposed colors (especially in close proximity) can either convey compelling conflict...or make it seem like you don't have much of an artistic eye.

  Again, this is a case of making sure your aesthetic plan and the individual message of each image is clear. If your images are meant to communicate conflict, to suggest opposition or present juxtaposition, then the way they interact will determine the effective inflection point where your artistic sensibility resonates or misses its mark. There can be a fine line between the images effectively

communicating narrative juxtaposition in your story and merely *clashing* due to a poorly chosen color scheme.

- **...And seek to unify them...** From our experience, whether you employ some juxtaposition in your imagery or not, we believe that a consistent, unified aesthetic is far more resonant than a random collage approach that some lookbooks, decks, and series bibles fall into. The more chaotic decks often reference too many disparate images from myriad different movies.

  While you *can* use the collage approach — referencing a bunch of other movies and/or shows in the hopes that your reader likes at least one of them — this tends to smack of desperation. That approach can be far less effective than using unknown reference material and imagery *not* associated with a known film. After all, you want to *present a sense that your vision is unique.*

- **...But don't neglect variety.** While you want all your art to add up to a coherent whole, you also want to provide interesting variance in your art and imagery, especially if you're showing multiple images of the same subject or element. For example, you don't want to just plaster your deck with headshots of the same actor. If you're going to have multiple images of that actor, find images of them taking action, in motion, or simply posing in a different light. For a drama, that image might portray that actor speaking with another actor, or simply be an interesting angle that adds an emotional slant to the image.

  Similarly, if you're including images of the world in your story, you don't want to show the same elements over and over with minuscule permutation. Show a variety of the settings in your story that convey that there's interesting

terrain to be seen. (Otherwise, you might want to rethink whether you should be including THE WORLD images at all.)

- **Use high quality images only.** At the most fundamental level, be sure to consider the *quality* of every image: Is it too low-resolution? This should be obvious, but you don't want to choose imagery that looks blurry or pixelated, unless you're doing something stylized — e.g., the subject involves Victorian photography or 1990s video games. It's surprising and unfortunate how many pitch decks use such compromised images. You want your presentation to reflect your sharp imagination — and your professionalism.

  Keep in mind that larger images could increase file size. This can be a concern when relying on email to send a deck. (Many email systems reject email that surpasses 10MB in size. However, if you use ScriptHop's Packet, you don't have to worry about file size.)

- **Consider who owns the images.** In terms of the legal ramifications of using photos that you didn't create, the practice is ubiquitous in Hollywood pitch decks; the understanding is that you won't actually *profit* from the pitch deck itself (other than from the written contents that are your own intellectual property). But if you're worried about having ownership of every element in your deck, consider public domain art, art for sale, or consider taking the steps of creating your images, or having someone create it for you.

- **Remember the legal benefits of imagery.** The exciting frontier — which is still being pioneered — is the degree to which a pitch deck can actually help add further protection to your own intellectual property (your concept and script,

if you've written one) through the use of added visual media. I.P. attorneys will tell you that imagery and multi-media elements that help define your own ideas can actually add a layer of identity and ownership to your project.

TITLE PAGE

Though you can get away with simply putting the title of your project and your name on this — the veritable landing page for your pitch — we recommend putting some visual stamp on it. The image on the title page is important enough that a lot of writers will put their contact info and/or other identifying information on the *back* page of their deck so it doesn't clash with the image and title. A series bible or pitch deck that doesn't use art on its title page — the project's album cover, as it were — looks barren, if not uninspired.

Think of your title page like you'd think of your movie poster. It doesn't have to be grandiose with a kaleidoscopic collage of characters and story elements. In fact, such an approach can often create a mess.

....

Look to the now-legendary series bible for Stranger Things *(or* Montauk*, as it was originally named). Its title page is simpler than most movie posters, merely depicting a sepia-toned country road with an abandoned red bicycle in the foreground. Yet it somehow manages to intrigue.*

....

Entire volumes could be written about your creation of this banner image, how art provokes the imagination, and how to evoke emotions like the *Stranger Things* title page. So we won't do that here. This reference manual is primarily devoted to guide you through the production of your written

content. For more guidance on your title page imagery, we'd recommend you refer to the previous chapter (USING IMAGERY), take a look at movie posters online, and visit ScriptHop's website to see sample content.

LOGLINE

The Logline is the nucleus of your story.

....

A logline is generally one sentence that describes the premise, or basic concept, of your series or feature. (Some writers try to stretch it to two sentences, but this is a rare — and risky — approach.)

....

Pitching your logline is the speed-dating approach to introducing your project. It's the most fundamental way to boil your TV or movie idea down to its essence. It's also a crucial refining tool and reflecting board for your script itself: If you are *unable* to describe your script in a logline, this is a kind of litmus test reaction suggesting there are fundamental issues with your story.

Example: Breaking Bad (Sony Pictures Television, 2008)

```
A high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with
inoperable lung cancer turns to manufacturing and
selling methamphetamine in order to secure his
family's future.
```

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

If concept is king in Hollywood, the logline is your project's royal herald or calling card. It's how your series pilot, screenplay, or pitch introduces itself. You want to keep this introduction short and sweet while making your concept clear. Agents and execs read the logline to see if your story sounds interesting enough that they want to read your script, or at least learn more about your project.

They also read it to see whether you understand Hollywood's *lingua franca* — to test if you're able to color within the lines (enough, at least) and if you understand that even in this realm of art, there are rules.

Together with THE HOOK and THE CASE (which have dedicated sections of their own), the LOGLINE helps comprise the basic formula for packaging your intellectual property into an "elevator pitch" — so named to underscore its essence as a brief summary that's ready at a moment's notice. (The WHAT IT IS section is another place where you can give a version of an elevator pitch, or even get a bit deeper with a more substantial pitch.)

....

The logline is the most basic component of your pitch, the most common way for a writer to introduce their screenplay/pilot or pitch — and it's absolutely expected that every writer has it nailed down.

....

STRATEGIES

- **Keep it short.** As previously stated, an ideal logline is one sentence long. It might stretch to two sentences, but only in rare cases, and readers in Hollywood tend to dock you a few "points" in their mind if you go beyond that. You don't *earn* points for pushing this particular envelope. A longline's brevity is the most basic rule in pitching; if you can't or won't play by this rule, the industry will tend to perceive you as an amateur.

  Loglines might seem restrictive and artistically stifling to some, but you'll find that playing by the rules here can be a fun challenge.

- **Your logline should *imply* the genre.** This might not always be the case (e.g. dark comedies), but generally, a successful logline will give you some sense of the story's flavor profile without overtly stating it.

  It would be bad (or at least less artful) form to write in a logline, "This is a horror movie," especially when there are plenty of other sections in your deck to mention the movie or series genre. If you write such a bland statement in your logline, you're basically implying that you're incapable of conveying the type of movie without awkwardly relying on the most basic of crutches. Instead, genre should be gracefully *implied* — something the reader can intuit from the logline's premise.

- **Boil your idea down to its essence.** How would you describe your story to someone in one sentence? Look to the conflict at the center of your premise. If you have a hero and a villain, what are they fighting over? Or what happens to your main character(s) that takes their life in a

new direction? Or where does your character want to go (this can be a goal or destination) and what's keeping them from getting there? Focusing on the conflict/roadblock will:

- Point you toward the main action your protagonist takes in response to that conflict; and

- Help you spell out the concept itself.

- **After boiling down the essence, discard the fat.** The logline is the most efficient way to describe your premise, like an ultra-compressed version of the story's elevator pitch*. Imagine how you'd describe your film or TV series's main concept, or central conceit, if you had one opportunity to pitch it to a Hollywood decision-maker or a friend. Now distill that pitch down to one gleaming sentence.

....

*In writing circles and the film industry, an "elevator pitch" is one in which your story idea is conveyed efficiently, as if you were presenting your story to someone between floors on an elevator ride. You add components like THE HOOK and THE CASE to your LOGLINE to fill out more of the full — albeit still short — elevator pitch.

....

- **Leave the door open.** The logline should at least imply the conflict in your story, and trigger the reader to imagine the plot-threads that will unspool from it. You're opening a Pandora's Box of possible scenarios in the imagination of the reader (e.g., "After 3D-printing a hadron collider, a home-schooled teen accidentally creates a chaotic 4th

dimension ruled by Karens, turning her introverted world upside down.") As preposterous as that sounds, this logline tees the reader up to imagine scenarios involving a very sheltered teen suddenly confronted by a suggestively aggressive new world. Some of the potential conflict we can imagine might be informed by our own mental picture of the shrill, entitled folk we've become familiar with.

- **Find the irony.** Your logline will have inherent weight if it has an ironic aspect. This effect is generally caused by conflicting pairings (differences, dichotomies, juxtapositions) of characters or plot elements that interact — and more importantly, conflict — in an ironic way.

....

Example: In a romantic comedy or a buddy cop show, you might have an unlikely pairing, such as a cop teaming up with a contrasting partner. Mentioning the duo's clashing traits gives your logline that ironic flavor: "A cop with anger issues is forced to team up with an Instagram influencer to investigate a ring of possibly murderous TikTok personalities, only to find that millennials might have the answers to life's problems after all."

....

- **Learn the "math" of loglines**. If you're new to the logline game and still struggling to formulate one based on the strategies above, remember: The reductive nature of a logline requires only a couple of variables to form a kind of "story equation."

  To begin: Focus on just three elements. If you're still not sure what to include in (and exclude from) your logline, try narrowing your focus to these three essentials:

A. Main character(s)

B. Primary action/goal of main character(s)

C. Antagonist or major conflict/obstacle

Now try summarizing only these three elements in a single sentence. For example, suppose these are the three elements of your sci-fi thriller:

A. Main character(s): **a futuristic cop**

B. Primary action/goal of main character(s): **chasing a criminal through time**

C. Antagonist or major conflict/obstacle: **a time-traveling criminal sociopath who helps notorious serial killers get away with with their crimes**

One way to formulate this trio into a logline:

```
A futuristic cop chases a sociopath through time to
stop him from helping notorious serial killers get
away with their crimes.
```

Note that while this example mentions the three elements in more-or-less the same order as listed above (A, B, C), try

shuffling the order to find the one with the right impact. Another option might be:

```
A time-traveling sociopath is helping notorious
serial killers get away with their crimes, while a
cop from the future struggles to chase him
down.MORE LOGLINE EXAMPLES (FOR SERIES)
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LOGLINE EXAMPLES (FOR TELEVISION)

Ozark (Netflix, 2017)

After a money laundering scheme for a Mexican drug cartel goes wrong, financial advisor Marty Byrde tries to make amends by setting up a bigger laundering operation in the Lake of the Ozarks region of central Missouri.

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (Amazon Prime, 2017)

In the late 1950s, Miriam "Midge" Maisel has her seemingly idyllic life turned upside down when she discovers a hidden talent she didn't know she had: stand-up comedy.

Stranger Things (Netflix, 2016)

After the mysterious and sudden vanishing of a young boy, the people of a small town begin to uncover secrets of a government lab, portals to another world, and sinister monsters.

The Queen's Gambit (Netflix, 2020)

The story of orphan Beth Harmon's rise to become a world-renowned chess champion, defeating drug and alcohol addiction along the way.

MORE LOGLINE EXAMPLES (FOR FEATURE FILM)

Titanic (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

An attempt to salvage a priceless treasure from the legendary sunken Titanic reveals the epic story of a survivor — now an old woman — of inter-class romance and courage on the fated ship.

The Hangover (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009)

A bachelor party weekend in Vegas turns into a mystery as four friends must piece together what happened to them during their epically debauched night.

CODA (Apple TV+, 2021)

When Ruby — the only hearing person in her home — discovers a passion for singing, she must choose between family obligations and her dreams.

Whiplash (Sony Pictures Classics, 2014)

Under the abusive direction of his famed music teacher, an ambitious student struggles to realize his dream to become one of the great drummers.

10 Things I Hate About You (Buena Vista Pictures, 1999)

Two misfit high school students — an embittered iconoclast and a misanthropic bad boy — are coerced into dating, only to find real feelings budding for each other.

WHAT IT IS

....

WHAT IT IS utilizes elements taken from the other sections of this book. Though it's listed after LOGLINES (because that's the order in which it should be delivered to the reader) it makes sense to create the other sections in this book first as constituent limbs and then to see which ones you want to assemble into the body of WHAT IT IS.

....

This section is the intro, overview, or "water cooler pitch" of your series or feature. We say "*water cooler*" — rather than the more familiar "elevator" pitch (a common industry term we first mentioned in the chapter on LOGLINES) — because there's more time in WHAT IT IS for discussion, description, and your opinion than you'd have in a typical elevator ride.

WHAT IT IS is your opening explanation of your project after your LOGLINE. It includes The Pitch — *unlike* your LOGLINE or SYNOPSES, which are just The Facts summarizing your story, traditionally devoid of editorial, marketing, or qualifying language.

WHAT IT IS introduces your vision *your* way with more editorial flair — or room for commentary. Here, you're *pitching* or presenting the story with your own motivational explanation for the reasons the characters, plot, or story are going to be compellingly interwoven throughout. This is your first opportunity in your bible or deck to make the reader

"get" what your story is trying to say, to help your vision resonate — to whet your reader's appetite to read more.

The goal is to present the facets of your story with some sense of your vision. Elaborate on your conceptual details; attempt to persuade decision-makers with a general, but evocative sense of how compellingly the cast will interact with the concept and the dilemma(s) you've thrown at them.

Example: Ted Lasso (Apple TV+, 2020)

Ted Lasso, on its face, is a series about a soccer coach. But it's much more about the relationships, the drama, and the comedy that ensues between the characters. It's a show that's almost jarringly positive at a time when audiences are clamoring for a little light in the darkness.

Ted is an American college football coach who is unexpectedly recruited to coach an English Premier League team, AFC Richmond, despite having no experience coaching soccer. He doesn't realize that team owner Rebecca Welton has hired him because she hopes he'll fail — destroying the team is a way for her to get revenge on the previous owner, her unfaithful ex-husband. Ted's hiring provides for a volatile situation, as the British take their soccer as seriously as murder, and Ted's happy-go-lucky approach to life initially seems like more of an affront to their passion than a boon.

Ted will prove to be deeper and more philosophical than his seeming pollyannaish-ness would suggest. His ability to let the insults and doubt wash off of him belies the hard-earned truth he's ascertained, the unorthodox methods he'll employ to overcome various challenges with the team. He has to get a once great, now aging player, Roy Kent, and the new prima donna, Jamie Tartt, to collaborate, even though the two can't stand the sight of one another. He has to figure out a way for this underdog team to actually win some games.

Over time, Ted's charm, personality, and humor begin
to win over Rebecca, the team, and those who had been
skeptical about his appointment. Lasso is not only a
fish-out-of-water in terms of the sport he's landed
in; he faces plenty of culture clash living in the
U.K., where nobody takes their sports more seriously.
Ted has a southern accent and some southern
sensibilities that juxtapose him all the more starkly
with the Brits. But he'll also defy the expectations
of American audiences who hold certain stereotypes
about the South and Midwest.

Ted will manage to touch the lives of the other
characters in ways that change them forever — they,
as well as the audience, will look at the deceptively
simple coach in new ways as each episode peels back
another layer.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

This is your opportunity to pitch all the facets of your project in overview and to make decision-makers *feel* something about your story.

WHAT IT IS gives the writer license to combine some of the facts of the narrative with some sales razzle-dazzle. (Just be careful to summon the powers of subtle persuasion and not the ham-fists of a car salesman.)

Aside from fleshing out some story details, your main goal here is to leave a strong impression about how viewers will be moved, excited, entertained, or shocked and what will get them wrapped up in the story.

By presenting a sense of the story's general contours and parameters, you give your reader more of a grip on your

project than when they're bogged down with a slalom course of intricate plot points (leave that to your SYNOPSIS).

IF YOUR STORY WAS AN EXPERIENCE, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?

If the LOGLINE is a way for agents and execs to quickly "kick the tires" of your premise, WHAT IT IS opens the hood to show a few of your story engine's moving parts, delving into narrative elements and the overall impression viewers will have.

Here you're giving a broad sense of your conflict, character, and themes, as well as some general understanding about the story itself: how the characters and plot intersect (rather than getting too into the weeds of your plot).

....

As mentioned, unlike your SYNOPSIS and some of the other summaries where you're not supposed to editorialize (it's considered bad form to provide your own commentary to characterize the story, e.g., "These scenes are intense."), here, you're encouraged to present the palette of your vision, to explain the ramifications of your story, to characterize and editorialize as needed.

....

BY *COMPOSING* THE "WHAT IT IS" INTRODUCTION TO YOUR SERIES OR MOVIE, YOU'RE ALSO LEARNING HOW TO *TALK* ABOUT IT.

If someone (like an exec) asks about your project, you don't want to "um" and "uh" through an unpracticed description, nor do you want to recite a plot SYNOPSIS. WHAT IT IS isn't about telling the *whole* story; it's about unveiling an *overview* of your vision.

Even if you have no intention of verbally pitching your feature to anyone, practicing how you would describe it to another person will clarify and concentrate your ideas, helping you see what's most central and exciting in your story and refining your vision for it.

....

When you've been stuck in a screenwriting bubble for months or even years — or just stuck on that napkin you wrote your initial idea on — it can be difficult to see your story's forest for the trees. WHAT IT IS forces you to define your story's identity in simple, compelling terms — not just for your readers, but for yourself.

....

STRATEGIES

You'll see in the guidance below that WHAT IT IS can be created utilizing elements from several other of the dedicated sections in this book, as this section is really the cornerstone of your pitch. You can use elements such as a plot point or two from your SYNOPSIS, as well as your most salient details from sections like THE HOOK, THE CASE, THE WORLD, and THEMES.

....

Note: All pitch decks benefit from some overlap of information; just be artful about the degree to which you overlap. Repetition should fortify your vision rather than wear out its welcome.

....

Though the thoroughness of the guidance for WHAT IT IS might make it seem challenging, you can see from the provided examples of actual shows and movies that the length of this pitch can be relatively short. We have gone to substantial lengths to ensure that you have a wealth of information on how to achieve the desired density for this empowering pitch. *To that end, we provide guidance both "in brief" and "in detail."*

Also note: We believe the best way to approach the tips below (as well as most of the guidance in this manual) is to channel the process onto paper by practicing and pitching it out loud. Write down your pitch as you say it aloud, or record it, then play it back and write down the details that really stand out and resonate with you. (You can also pitch to a friend or colleague and have them tell you what resonates with them). *This approach will help you discover what is most affecting about your own vision.*

TIPS FOR "WHAT IT IS" (IN BRIEF)

- This broad, topographical view of your series or movie should make the conflict clear and indicate the waypoints of opportunity and misfortune that will open on your characters. Present a glimpse of plot pathways without going too far down any particular path. While your main goal is to get your reader or listener to see the potential in the overall concept, you're providing tea leaves that forecast how the story will sustain its entertaining impact for two hours or an entire season of shows. This section should give a sense of the experience and feeling your series or feature will impart. What makes your story exciting, funny, or moving in broad — yet intriguing and resonant — strokes?

- Think of WHAT IT IS as a macro view of your project, with some micro details peppered in. Paint a broad picture, then punctuate those broad strokes by diving in with a bit of detail, honing in on a few plot points (events or major actions) where your characters are standing at your story's forked road and your audience is contemplating what they're up against.

TIPS FOR "WHAT IT IS" (IN DETAIL)

- **State the format** and at least **evoke the genre** of your series or movie. For TV: Is it a half-hour comedy? Or is it an hour-long drama? Is your feature a thriller? Fantasy? Horror? Or all of the above?

  You can see in our example of the movie *Whiplash* (at the end of this chapter) that while that movie's genre isn't overtly stated up front, the "flavors" are described to make

the description of its genre seem more artful; more importantly, it makes the case that this movie defies expectation. Simply stating "this is a drama" wouldn't make nearly the same splash.

- If you haven't already, **state your LOGLINE**. If you have already introduced it in its own initial section, reimagine or reiterate it here. (If you think perfection is worth repeating, copy it verbatim — restating your one-sentence concept is fine).

- **THE HOOK can be used** as its own section in your deck (and you can read more about it in its own dedicated chapter), but — like a LOGLINE — it can also be used as a component of WHAT IT IS. Note that in our example for *Whiplash* (in the examples below) we actually start with THE HOOK: *"Whiplash* is *Full Metal Jacket* meets Juilliard."

  The HOOK, just as it sounds, is a great way to pull somebody into your story. Though there are various ways to create a HOOK, using a reference to another movie can be an effective way to orient the person you're pitching to, giving them an immediate foothold to climb progressively up the ladder of your pitch (rather than have them flailing as they try to grasp everything).

....

The first three bullets above might amount to a single WHAT IT IS sentence, several, or even a paragraph, depending on how you approach this section. Our Whiplash example goes on from the HOOK:

"Whiplash is Full Metal Jacket *meets Juilliard. At first, it might seem like the typical artist-with-ambition movie, as it follows a young jazz drummer, Andrew Neiman, who's accepted to a prestigious music conservatory. You might even think that initially this is some modern update of the movie* Fame*. But any notion of that gets flipped on its head as Andrew meets the music teacher who will become the chaotic fulcrum of his world: Terence Fletcher."*

....

- **Elaborate on your premise** with more description of the story's facets: Provide one to two paragraphs about the conflicts and crises that arise and how your character(s) will confront them.

  Don't get bogged down too much in delineating all the specific plot points; give a more general sense of the conflict and crises and the story's overall flavor profile. Conflate the bulk of individual plot points (that's what a summary is: conflation or combination) in order to paint an evocative picture.

....

If you were pitching what Mission: Impossible is, you wouldn't get into the weeds about four different scenes where Tom Cruise chases after a briefcase with a bomb in it (that briefcase is otherwise known as a "MacGuffin," or a generic plot device). Instead, you might pitch how classic espionage elements (tropes like the briefcase) give rise to unique set pieces and describe one or two of those set pieces: "The high-octane nature of the action scenes involve a fight over a bomb in a briefcase that takes place in a rocket with cars and hydraulic lifts inside. At one point, our hero drives the car down the shaft of the rocket..."

....

Similarly, note that in our example for *Whiplash* we mentioned two of the more lurid plot points in order to make an impression.

In other words, describe your project in *exemplary, evocative* ways that conjure images in your reader's (or listener's) mind* with measured detail. (It helps that a pitch deck also offers ample opportunities to present *actual* images as well.)

....

*When you describe what the characters will be doing, it should be clear enough that your audience can imagine those characters doing those actions on screen. This is what we mean by "evocative" (one definition being "bringing strong images to mind.")

....

- THE CASE has a dedicated chapter you can read up on further in this book, but, like THE HOOK, it can also be used as a component of WHAT IT IS. **THE CASE involves**

making arguments in favor of your project, the most salient of which can be woven into WHAT IT IS. You can see how we use a CASE in our example of WHAT IT IS for *CODA* below: "As we get to know Ruby's family, *CODA* shows the world of the deaf in a new, more visceral way. When this family signs, there's passion in it! For example, there can almost be a sense of violence in the signing motions when they're angry."

- Though there are dedicated CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS and INTRO TO CHARACTER sections, you should also **touch on your main character(s)** here as part of your conceptual overview.

- Your main character's **inner conflict**, or flaw, is often that magic ingredient that transforms them from bland to fascinating. (If you haven't figured out your character's inner conflict, now would be a good time to reverse-engineer things: Go back to the script or your outline and get back into that character's psyche.

- If it's a driver of the drama in your story, mention any specific **character traits or personality quirks** of your main character(s) e.g., "Bill is pollyannaish, glib, and his can-do attitude makes him sound weirdly like he's been transported from a sit-com set in the nineteen-fifties. This has much to do with the fact that he was homeschooled and only allowed to watch media shot in black and white. So his sudden desire to move to Hollywood and become an agent is fraught with challenges..."

- Though there's a dedicated THE WORLD section in this book, **you can mention how your characters interact with their milieu here** as well; the environment certainly *should* affect your characters. Just keep the bulk of your

discussion about the place your story is centered in THE WORLD section.

- **You can touch on the major THEME(s)** your story will cover. Maybe it examines a particular conundrum that's part of the human condition — for example, one that is exacerbated by technology. (E.g., "This will focus on dating in the digital age by following the meet-*not*-so-cute misadventures of a robotics engineer with the personality of Mark Zuckerberg. It will also explore how social media isolates us and digs us into deeper trenches of tribalism that affect our relationships.") Perhaps it deals with a specific issue: "This dark comedy follows a young climate activist — inspired by Greta Thunberg — who calls upon the resources of her mobster father to help her save the planet."

  You can effectively and efficiently touch on both character and theme in WHAT IT IS: "Seen through the eyes of a pharmaceutical saleswoman who's starting to question her own integrity, this show will explore how drug companies became no better than drug pushers."

- If there is **something specific about the aesthetics of the sensory experience the viewer will have**, you can also mention them here. If your deck has a PACE, VISUAL STYLE, AND TONE section, save your deep-dives into those elements for that section. The WHAT IT IS section should give no more than a general impression of them.

MORE "WHAT IT IS" EXAMPLES

Whiplash (Sony Pictures Classics, 2014)

Whiplash is *Full Metal Jacket* meets Juilliard. At first, it might seem on its face like the typical artist-with-ambition movie, as it follows a young jazz drummer, Andrew Neiman, who's accepted to a prestigious music conservatory. You might even think that initially this is some modern update of *Fame*. But any notion of that gets flipped on its head as Andrew meets the music teacher who will become the chaotic fulcrum of his world: Terence Fletcher. Fletcher is a music mentor we've never seen in a movie — a tyrannical force of nature whose ambition as band leader is seemingly greater than any of his students' ambitions. Fletcher is so hellbent on success with his band as they compete in various competitions, he's willing to go to nearly psychotic lengths to achieve that success. He believes that verbal abuse and even violence is an acceptable form of "directing." In one shocking scene, he throws a cymbal at a musician's head. But even more unsettling is a scene where he slaps Andrew repeatedly, every time Andrew fails to meet an incredibly challenging rhythm, where the humiliation Andrew endures is worse than the violence itself.

The very reason that Fletcher is able to get away with his extreme methods is because all of the students are ambitious and if they were to say anything, they fear they'd be kicked out of the band or the school itself.

There's a bit of mystery in this movie as Andrew and we (the audience) try to understand why Fletcher bullies his students this way. Initially Fletcher is a cipher — an inexplicable threat, an icon for the antagonist life throws into our lives, who has it out for us without any explanation. But we'll learn that Fletcher believes that where he sees potential greatness, it has to be hammered into shape to meet its full potential. Andrew is the flip-side of this —

in some ways almost as self-destructively determined to "make it."

This is a drama with a lot of music, but it literally leaves a trail of blood in the wake of some of the more exciting jazz band scenes, as Andrew proves to be every bit the force of nature that Fletcher is. The two will literally collide.

CODA (Apple TV+, 2021)

Ruby Rossi is the only hearing member of her family; her parents, Frank and Jackie, and older brother, Leo, are all deaf. This drama will capture all the love and conflict within that experience and the collision that Ruby experiences between her "safe" deaf world and the outside hearing world.

The Rossis live in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Ruby assists with the family fishing business and plans to join full-time after high school. As we get to know Ruby's family, *CODA* shows the world of the deaf in a new, more visceral way. When this family signs, there's passion in it! For example, there can almost be a sense of violence in the signing motions when they're angry. The signing won't be alienating to the hearing audience. It will be dynamic and draw them in and help define the world of *CODA* as something new and different in film.

The division between the hearing and unhearing worlds becomes all the more heart-wrenching for Ruby as she discovers her love of music and yearns for her family to understand, even if they can't experience it. Because of her family, Ruby is an outcast at school. It's only the music teacher, Mr. V, who realizes Ruby has a gift for singing, and encourages her to try out for Berklee College of Music. Ruby suddenly is in a tug-of-war between her family (who depends on her to help them navigate their business and the rest of the hearing world) and becoming more independent — living her own life and pursuing a dream that ironically her own family can't appreciate. Her devotion to her family compromises her commitments to Mr. V, and the

two sides threaten to tear her apart emotionally. As the universally powerful aspects of music collide with her silent world, the silences themselves will be felt, and the way her family communicates through sign language will take on a music of its own.

In an age when singing competition shows have built media dynasties based on the simple formula of telling stories about artistic struggle, the conflict between Ruby's two worlds will make her artistic journey the kind of larger-than-life story audiences clamor for.

The Crown (Netflix, 2016)

The Crown is an historical drama portraying the life of Queen Elizabeth II from her wedding in 1947 to Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, until the early 21st century.

The first season depicts events up to 1955, with Winston Churchill resigning as prime minister and the Queen's sister Princess Margaret deciding not to marry Peter Townsend. The second season covers the Suez Crisis in 1956, leading to the retirement of Prime Minister Anthony Eden; the retirement of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1963, following the scandal of the Profumo affair; and the birth of Prince Edward in 1964. The third season covers 1964 to 1977, beginning with Harold Wilson's election as prime minister and ending with the Queen's Silver Jubilee, also covering Edward Heath's time as prime minister. Camilla Shand is also introduced. The fourth season is set during Margaret Thatcher's period as prime minister from 1979 to 1990 and also focuses on Lady Diana Spencer.

PACE, VISUAL STYLE, AND TONE

PACE, VISUAL STYLE, and TONE are three elements that clarify your artistic sensibilities and your narrative's "vibe" in the reader's mind:

- **Pace** describes the rhythms of your series. For example, is your show meant to be a modern sendup of screwball comedies of the 1950s, and your dialogue mimics that rapid-fire style? Or is it more slow, lingering, contemplative?

- **Visual Style** is how you envision the overall visual approach to the filming (or on-screen result) of your series without getting too detailed. Discuss what's crucial to your vision, especially if it's not obvious. For example, someone might think your sci-fi story is ripe for CG glossiness, but you envision a grittier take, shot in black-and-white with a lot of handheld shots and practical effects to help bring the action and emotion down to earth.

- **Tone** is how you imagine the delivery and interpretation of the action, dialogue, and plot — your intended "spin on things" — and it's where your piece's "voice" really resides. For example, maybe your episodical is a nihilistic actioner, but it's entirely tongue-in-cheek about the incessant mayhem; your characters' delivery is meant to ring flatly deadpan, even as they leave epic destruction in their wake. Get that across to the reader who might misread that tone, like the intern assigned to be your judge and jury.

We've seen this too many times: After reading a script, the reader doesn't even know what genre it's in, let alone how to read its quirky tone. Sometimes that's a failure to communicate on the writer's part, but other times it's because the readers (and even some execs) are fresh out of college and don't know how to process something like a dark comedy. PACE, VISUAL STYLE, AND TONE can help redirect your more distracted interpreters, giving them a clearer understanding of your vision and wavelength. This can also help convince shrewder readers of the degree of thought and preparation that you're investing in your script's dialogue, action, and descriptions.

IF YOU'RE LUCKY ENOUGH TO GET AN ACTUAL DECISION-MAKER TO READ YOUR SCRIPT, THEY'RE LIKELY TO SKIM IT OR READ IT IN PIECES. WHICH MEANS THEY GET ONLY A FRAGMENTED VISION OF HOW YOUR PROJECT WILL PLAY ON SCREEN. THIS SECTION HELPS ENSURE THEY WON'T TURN A BLIND EYE TO SOME OF THE CRUCIAL COLORS OF YOUR NARRATIVE PALETTE.

Example: The Afterparty (Apple TV+, 2022)

The Afterparty is a series that explores various
aesthetic approaches, bends genres, and even ventures
into other mediums, while it follows the whodunnit
story through it all. So it will venture from being a
straightforward drama/mystery (with comedic elements)
to an episode that's purely animated, to an episode
that's shot more like a horror movie. These aesthetic
approaches reflect the character each episode focuses
on, serving as a reflection of their psyche. So, for
example, the animated episode will be spurred by the
fact that it's Maggie, a child, telling her side of
things, as she's being interviewed by Detective
Dancer. There's a bit of tongue planted in cheek
through all of the episodes, the murder never making
the proceedings truly grim, and this slightly
insouciant tone will give license to the changes in
perception

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Never rely on the compressed imaginations of Hollywood's decision-makers (be they producers or their interns) to see your project with 20/20 vision. They don't have time — and it does take time — to intuit all the nuances of how your story will look and feel. If you're lucky enough to get an actual decision-maker to read your script, they're likely to skim it or read it in pieces, which means that their own vision of how your project will play on screen is going to be fragmented. This section helps ensure they won't turn a blind eye to some of the crucial colors of your narrative palette.

Again, PACE, VISUAL STYLE, AND TONE can help redirect your more clueless interpreters, giving them a clearer understanding of your vision and your story's wavelength. This can also help convince shrewder readers of the degree of thought and preparation that you're investing in your script's dialogue, action, and descriptions.

STRATEGIES

- **Make this section your own.** While this section is an opportunity to articulate artistic facets that a reader might not otherwise see, it is also optional and your approach to it is ultimately up to you. If it doesn't help a project's presentation, leave it out. But do consider how free-form — and how adaptable to your project's style — this section is.

- **Consider what your script *doesn't* say.** Sometimes, being explicit in your packet materials and spelling out some of your choices can compensate for what isn't in the script (since so much in a screenplay is implied, and your readers aren't always experienced). Many scripts function on the subatomic language effects of subtext (what's *implied* by the writing, as opposed to *stated* directly), and some purposefully steer clear of wearing any emotion on their sleeves (or their characters' sleeves). In the digital age of alienation, it's become nearly trendy for some sophisticated screenplays to deliberately leave a great deal unsaid (and unfortunately, due to the limitations of the reader, *unfelt*) on the page. Saying it *here* can play to your advantage: You can underscore some of the artistic choices you're making that might not be obvious to the reader. Dark comedy and satire are especially prone to being misread.

....

You'd be surprised how many readers will read the broadest of comedy and not get that it was intended to be a comedy at all. (There are countless cases of famous, successful screenplays having been entirely misinterpreted initially. See: Charlie Kaufman.) A space to make the nuances of your material clear — that it's meta or subverting the genre it's set in — can be a godsend, especially should your script fall into the hands of an unseasoned reader.

....

- **Stress the unusual (if it's truly part of your vision).** An unorthodox approach to any (or all) of these three elements — one that isn't typical for your genre or subject matter — can help your project stand out. For example, if your historical drama moves at a stylized, surprisingly brisk clip for a period piece, then you should definitely mention it here (for PACE). If your story's subject matter is serious, but the delivery of your characters is ironically sunny and chipper, that would be something to highlight (for TONE).

- **Find the exceptional in the conventional.** If (to continue the example) your historical drama's pace *isn't* breaking any speed barriers (slow or fast), consider why that conventional choice was a savvy one. Conveying that you were very deliberate with your choices — and how those choices enhance the unique essence of the story — can show a reader or decision-maker your "sense of economy" (of time, in this example), help to further sell your sensibilities to them, and earn yourself a read.

- **Let the director direct.** Unless you're the show runner or a director, be careful about getting *too* deep into the weeds about how your series or movie will look when discussing VISUAL STYLE. Talking about which lenses to use or

specific film grammar (e.g., "We'll shoot that crucial last scene with an OTS shot"), might seem out of place. That being said, if the narrative implies an aesthetic (e.g., a thriller that would benefit from hand-held shots, or a project that would seem to demand *CG* effects, but you think will be much more successful with *practical* effects), these are certainly all suggestions you can offer. Just stick to points intrinsic to your story — ones that are suggested by the narrative itself and really are fundamental to the success of your project.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

FEATURES | THE FACTS | 100 – 250 WORDS

....

For TV synopses: See SERIES OUTLINE.

....

A SHORT SYNOPSIS is a fundamental proving ground for decision-makers to see that you have a more substantial grasp of your story beyond your LOGLINE. Being a purely "The Facts" section, your SHORT SYNOPSIS should only summarize your plot; avoid editorializing or sensationalizing your story with a sales pitch — unlike certain other sections (like WHAT IT IS) wherein you have free rein to editorialize and pitch.

A SHORT SYNOPSIS's relative brevity will help you drill down on the core elements of your movie without getting lost in the details of too many plot points (leave the details to the FULL SYNOPSIS).

With the SHORT SYNOPSIS, you're providing a jaded agent or exec with another foothold on your narrative ladder, elevating them into the mindset that your project is more than just a pretty one-liner. By giving a brief summary of your story, with a very high-level view of your plot and characters, you can draw readers deeper into your project.

Example: Whiplash (Sony Pictures Classics, 2014)

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Andrew Neiman is a young jazz drummer determined to
rise to the top at his elite music conservatory.
Terence Fletcher, an instructor known for his
terrifying teaching methods, discovers Andrew and
transfers the aspiring drummer into the top jazz
ensemble, forever changing the young man's life.
Andrew's passion to achieve perfection quickly
spirals into obsession, as his ruthless teacher
pushes him to the brink of his ability…and his
sanity. Fletcher tortures his students, sometimes
using violence and humiliation to get them performing
at the level he wants. Still, Andrew's ambition seems
no less formidable than Fletcher's inexplicable
bullying, both forces colliding as much as
collaborating in the attempt to make great music.
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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Decision-makers are drowning in impossible schedules, but the SHORT SYNOPSIS is a quick, manageable read that builds their confidence that they have a dexterous grasp on your work (whether you're their client or a prospective one). They want to be able to hold in their working memory a bit of the tangible storytelling — a few particles of plot and character beyond the LOGLINE's nucleus.

For writers trying to get into Hollywood's bottleneck, you're filling in some of the variables to convince the powerbrokers that your script is worth their time.

Like most sections of your pitch deck, boiling your concept down to this distillation will also benefit your writing by revealing the main elements of your story to *you*. As humans, we're more accustomed to this summarizing form of storytelling than all the other forms of pitch materials. This is thanks to encapsulated summaries coming to us daily in the form of Wiki's, TV guides, and word-of-mouth blurbs — those

blurbs that are written and those that are verbally relayed to us by friends. The SHORT SYNOPSIS has become ubiquitous enough that it's almost like the modern form of the campfire story. Since we've been practically raised on this short synopsis form, seeing our own work through the same lens helps us sharpen our vision.

STRATEGIES

- **Don't get granular yet.** For a SHORT SYNOPSIS, your goal is to summarize or generalize the events. Don't get too into the weeds by describing too many plot points or too many character details. (These deeper dives belong in your FULL SYNOPSIS and CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS.) Here, give the reader more of a general *sense* of your plot and populace. The SHORT SYNOPSIS should pique the interest of the reader by teasing up the elements of your project, fusing and encapsulating your plot points rather than detailing all of them. How you present this verbal movie trailer calls on crucial writing skills, challenging you to summon enough detail for the reader's imagination so that the story sounds compelling rather than unmoored in vagueness.

  Focusing on the main characters and antagonist is the smart way to go.

....

For a heist movie like Ocean's 11*, where much of the setup involves the main character recruiting a ragtag crew, you wouldn't list each of the eleven recruits and describe all of their quirks. (Save that for the FULL SYNOPSIS.) Instead, summarize: "Danny recruits 11 different crew members for the heist, each with skills crucial to the scheme's success." You might mention a few of the most important characters and specify a skill or two to give a sense of the story, but certainly not all. Conflation is your friend here.*

....

- **Leave us wondering where it's headed.** Unlike a FULL SYNOPSIS (where you are expected to summarize the entirety of your story) the SHORT SYNOPSIS usually suggests the general proceedings of your movie, giving a sense of what the thrust of the action will be *without* explaining all the consequences. It's fine — even encouraged — to leave your loose ends dangling. (Your FULL SYNOPSIS will tie things up more completely.)

- **Focus on conflict.** Make sure you communicate the conflict your characters will confront. What is the central dilemma? Who is the antagonist? What are your main characters up against? (Man? Beast? Nature? These are all possible antagonists and sources of conflict, depending on your story.)

- **...And remember the *inner* conflict too.** Do your characters have an inner conflict that is crucial to the story? Inner conflict can involve inner demons (as in schizophrenia), an addiction, or simply something that's all in their head and/or has them emotionally tied up (such as a debilitating lack of confidence). If it's important to the story (and an inner conflict tends to be *very* important to a

good story), the SHORT SYNOPSIS could include this when it mentions your main character.

- **Queue up a subplot.** You can also mention a subplot or two. Suggest how these threads and characters will intersect to take your story in compelling directions.

- **Try writing from memory.** If you've written a full script, try writing your SHORT SYNOPSIS from memory alone. Don't start scrolling through pages to remind yourself of all the plot points; trust your memory to be crucially selective in picking the eventful moments (and leaving out the kitchen sink).

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Unable to remember your plot from your script?

In this case, it's possible your script's development might need more thought:

1. *Read your script again, then try to tell it in short summary again. If you're still having trouble writing/telling a SHORT SYNOPSIS from memory, it's a sign there might be some missing ingredients in your script.*

2. *Flesh out your story with the help of some of the other sections (such as THE WORLD, CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS, or WHAT IT IS). After getting a fresh perspective on your work in one of those sections, return to the SHORT SYNOPSIS.*

3. *Finally, having fleshed out some meat on the bones of your story, you might have new ideas on how to revise your overall project accordingly. In this way, creating a SHORT SYNOPSIS is a great way to reverse-engineer and transform a troubled script into one that resonates.*

....

- **Tell it aloud.** One approach is to write the SHORT SYNOPSIS the way you'd verbally tell it to a friend. (If it helps, literally tell it to an actual friend.) You'll find that the most salient story elements of plot and character rise to the surface when you simply and naturally *tell* a quick summary of your story aloud before committing it to type, or perhaps *while* you're typing. Channel the spoken summary into written sentences, then refine the result into something professionally and compellingly written. Your friend can give you notes on what stood out to them: what was compelling and what wasn't.

- **Check for quality and length.** Dictate your SHORT SYNOPSIS into a voice recorder, then play it back. Is it compelling? Does it truly reflect your story? And (perhaps more mundanely) is it a good length — about a minute to a minute-and-a-half? (If you read aloud some of our examples below, you'll find that some actually take less than a minute to tell.)

MORE SHORT SYNOPSIS EXAMPLES

Titanic (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

Set aboard the eponymous ship, this follows the epic doomed romance of Jack and Rose, whose love conquers their class differences even as the ship heads toward the fated iceberg. Jack is a bohemian artist relegated to a lower deck with the other lower-class urchins, while Rose is trapped above in high society — a kept woman engaged to Cal (an arrogant heir) more for her mother's sake than her own. After Jack stops Rose from jumping overboard (her desperate attempt to escape), they fall for one another. Like a high seas version of *Romeo and Juliet*, the two figure out ways to rendezvous with each other on board (in spite of their social strata and Cal's jealous eye). Once the

ship is fatally struck and all hell breaks loose, the
two must try to escape from Cal's lethal wrath

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (Universal Pictures, 1982)

The discovery of an alien hiding in his backyard
leads a young boy, Elliott, to form a friendship with
the extraterrestrial — nicknamed "E.T." Elliott and
his siblings attempt to hide the discovery from their
mother, and as the boy forms a deeper bond with the
alien, he finds they're able to channel each other
psychically. Meanwhile, nefarious interests intrude
from the outside world: The FBI has become aware of
the alien and is intent on experimenting on him. When
they manage to capture E.T., the alien becomes sick,
and it becomes clear to Elliott that his friend must
return to his own planet if he's to survive. Elliott
must attempt a daring rescue to get E.T. to the
returning flying saucer before he dies from the
illness.

The Hangover (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009)

Four friends go to Vegas for a bachelor party and,
after a night of debauchery, wake up to a veritable
crime scene of comedic horrors. Their addled memories
are hazy as to what happened, and as to why their
suite looks like it was ransacked by the mob. Plus
there's a tiger in one of their rooms! Compounding
the mystery, one of the four has gone missing. The
remaining trio head out on the town to look for their
friend and piece together clues, learning that their
collective forgetfulness is due to having been
drugged, and that the tiger belongs to Mike Tyson.
The mystery deepens as they discover one of the three
got married to a sex worker, that they are indeed in
trouble with the mafia, and they must set things
right by returning certain items discovered in their
possession. Their quest becomes the apotheosis of the
"What happens in Vegas…" marketing campaign.

CODA (Apple TV+, 2021)

Ruby Rossi is the only hearing member of her family; her parents, Frank and Jackie, and older brother, Leo, are all deaf. She assists with the family fishing business and plans to join full-time after high school.

When shy Ruby notices her crush at school, Miles, signing up for choir, she impulsively does the same. After Ruby's initial embarrassment on the first day in class, Bernardo "Mr. V" Villalobos is impressed by her beautiful singing voice. He pairs Ruby with Miles for a duet at the upcoming choir recital.

Mr. V encourages Ruby to audition for Berklee College of Music, offering her private lessons to prepare. Ruby agrees, but her increasing commitments to the family business force her to make some tough choices to navigate this new world of artistic expression. Her newfound independence seems to be taking her away from her family, who depend on her hearing and are unable to appreciate her musical gift.

FULL SYNOPSIS

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For TV Synopses: See SERIES OUTLINE.

....

The FULL SYNOPSIS tells what happens in your feature by detailing its events (or plot points) and showing how your characters change over the course of the story.

Unlike a *SHORT* SYNOPSIS, it summarizes the entire story and "gives away" the ending

Example: Titanic (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

In 1996, treasure hunter Brock Lovett and his team board a research vessel to search the wreck of RMS Titanic for a necklace containing a rare diamond: the Heart of the Ocean. From the wreck, they salvage a safe containing a drawing of a young woman wearing only the necklace, dated April 14, 1912 — the day the ship struck the iceberg. Rose Dawson Calvert, the woman in the drawing, is brought aboard the research vessel and tells Lovett of her experiences aboard Titanic.

In 1912 Southampton, 17-year-old first-class passenger Rose DeWitt Bukater, her fiancé Cal Hockley, and her mother Ruth board the Titanic, a luxury liner flaunting a breathtaking extravagance never seen before in ocean travel. In this opulent setting, Ruth emphasizes that Rose's marriage is their best chance to resolve their family's financial problems and allow them to retain their upper-class

status. But it's clear Rose isn't in love with Cal; feeling trapped and distraught in the engagement, she contemplates suicide by jumping from the stern. Jack Dawson, a penniless artist, suddenly intervenes and discourages her. Discovered with Jack, Rose tells the suspicious Cal that she was peering over the edge and that Jack saved her from falling. Cal is unimpressed by Jack's act of heroism, but Rose suggests that Jack deserves a reward. Cal invites Jack to dine with them in first class the following night, where Jack and Rose develop a tentative friendship, despite Cal and Ruth being wary of him. Following dinner, Rose secretly joins Jack at a party in third class.

Aware of Cal's and Ruth's disapproval, Rose initially rebuffs Jack's advances, but it's clear she's smitten — all the more as she's seeing further proof that her marriage to Cal would be a loveless one. After rendezvousing on the bow at sunset, Rose takes Jack to her state room; at her request, Jack sketches Rose posing nude wearing Cal's engagement gift, the Heart of the Ocean necklace. They evade Cal's bodyguard, Mr. Lovejoy, and have sex in an automobile inside the cargo hold. On the forward deck, they witness their ship's collision with an iceberg and overhear the officers discussing its seriousness.

In his safe, Cal discovers Jack's sketch of Rose and an insulting note from her, along with the necklace. With the Titanic's impending doom still mostly unbeknownst to the passengers, Jack and Rose attempt to inform Cal of the collision. Cal instead retaliates by having Lovejoy slip the necklace into Jack's pocket and accusing him of theft. Jack is arrested, taken to the master-at-arms, and handcuffed to a pipe. Cal pockets the necklace.

Horror and panic descend on the ship as it starts to sink. Rose escapes Cal and her mother, who has boarded a lifeboat; Rose frees Jack. On the boat deck, Cal and Jack encourage her to board a lifeboat; Cal claims he can get himself and Jack off safely. After Rose boards one, Cal tells Jack the arrangement is only for himself. As her boat lowers, Rose realizes that she cannot leave Jack and jumps back on

board. Cal takes his bodyguard's pistol and chases Rose and Jack into the flooding first-class dining saloon. After using up his ammunition, Cal realizes he gave his coat — and consequently, the necklace — to Rose. He boards a collapsible lifeboat by carrying a lost child.

After braving several obstacles, Jack and Rose return to the boat deck. The lifeboats have departed and passengers are falling to their deaths as the stern rises out of the water. The ship breaks in half, lifting the stern into the air. Jack and Rose ride it into the ocean and he helps her onto a wooden panel buoyant enough for only one person. He assures her that she will die an old woman, warm in her bed. Jack dies of hypothermia but Rose is saved.

With Rose hiding from Cal en route, the RMS Carpathia takes the survivors to New York City where Rose gives her name as Rose Dawson. Rose says she later read that Cal committed suicide after losing all his money in the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

Back in the present, Lovett decides to abandon his search after hearing Rose's story. Alone on the stern of Lovett's boat, Rose takes out the Heart of the Ocean, which was in her possession all along, and drops it into the sea over the wreck site. While she is seemingly asleep or has died in her bed, photos on her dresser depict a life of freedom and adventure inspired by the life she wanted to live with Jack. A young Rose reunites with Jack at the Titanic's Grand Staircase, applauded by those who died on the ship

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The FULL SYNOPSIS provides crucial benefits to both you and the readers you want to impress.

How the Full Synopsis benefits you, the writer:

You keep greater control over your presentation. When studios and agencies receive scripts (even from A-list writers), they pass them to their story departments or readers/analysts to distill each screenplay into a Synopsis (a.k.a. "coverage"). These readers spend a fraction of their day summarizing your storyline, and you don't get to pick your script's reader, who might be nothing like your target audience, might not "get" your vision, and might even be actively biased against your genre. (Think of that person who automatically detests all horror films. For a horror screenplay — even a really good one, full of depth and wit and nuance — they might write a shallow and dismissive synopsis.)

By creating your own well-written FULL SYNOPSIS that travels with your script, you provide your own summary. Agents and execs can refer to *your* work, rather than that of an overworked intern who has nothing invested in your project.

By writing a full synopsis, you get greater insight into your own story. Like an x-ray, a FULL SYNOPSIS reveals the anatomy or basic structure of your story. Gaining such an overview of your plot (your story's major action and events) gives you an objectivity that might have been lost during the writing of the script. In short, it can help you see the forest for the trees.

If something isn't working in your screenplay, writing a FULL SYNOPSIS may help you realize what the issue is, and even lead to a major epiphany, such as: There aren't enough actual events in your story for you to generate a synopsis! Through the process of trying to write a synopsis, you can discover there aren't enough events because there's no conflict. And

you can further deduce that there's no conflict because you don't have an antagonist. That's a revelatory process.

How the Full Synopsis benefits agents and studio execs:

It's a time-efficient way to understand your project. Writers don't often think about the actual time commitment it takes to read a feature-length script, so we're a bit repetitive on the subject: It takes the average exec, actor, or investor several hours to read a screenplay. Given their schedules, it's often too long a journey for them to take, and it's why so many projects are ignored entirely. Your FULL SYNOPSIS can help entice them into investing that time in your script. (Which means, of course: The more engaging your synopsis is, the more likely it is that your actual script gets read.)

Their workplaces expect it, and even thrive on it. The FULL SYNOPSIS is a part of the "coverage" document that agents and execs bring to meetings about projects they are involved with or are considering. Synopses become part of the lifeblood for their creative food-chains (even regarding A-list clients' scripts), feeding into conversations with actor clients, other producers, etc., where they need to have a more detailed handle on a project in order to promote the script to *that* individual to read.

Even if they've read your script, they still have so many projects dancing around in their heads that they need to be reminded of the details, so they often use a FULL SYNOPSIS to help them be more effective in talking shop — actually discussing how to develop the script to get it closer to production. Having a stronger sense of the scope of the set pieces in a script could lead a manager to think of an approach to get the project produced.

STRATEGIES

- **Stick to the facts. What actually *happens* in your story?** Which is to say: *Don't editorialize;* don't make comments or add your opinion. A FULL SYNOPSIS that includes your personal critique — e.g., "By the way, this scene is really funny!! :)" — looks amateurish. Save that commentary for other sections where you *can* freely editorialize, such as THE CASE or WHAT IT IS. Here, let your plot descriptions speak for themselves.

- **Stay present-tense.** As in the screenplay itself, always write your FULL SYNOPSIS in the present tense using *active* language that emulates the tone, energy, and movement of your story. For example: "Rob decides to meet with the informant. When he arrives at the rendezvous point near an isolated trail head, he's nearly hit by sniper fire. He barely escapes a hail of bullets, falling down a ravine. He has to scale a harrowing cliff-face before making it back to the ranger's station."

  If you have flashbacks (or flash-forwards) that are crucial to mention, state the time-shift but keep your language present-tense: "We flash back to: Sarah in 1985. She's at a Madonna concert where she meets Jim for the first time. Back in the present, we see Sarah and Jim fleeing the strains of marriage..." Breaking these time-shifts into separate paragraphs can make the transitions clearer for the reader.

- **Conflict = substance.** If there isn't enough happening to generate a full synopsis, that uneventfulness is likely due to the *conflict* in your story (or rather, the lack of it). If you don't have an understanding of conflict and you're

struggling to write a full synopsis, now would be a good time to refer to any number of good screenwriting books.

- **Action = character.** Most of what we learn about your characters from the full synopsis should be eventful. Rather than just describing some character idiosyncrasies, give a sense of your characters by describing what they *do* in the story or what *happens to* them. The most telling window into your characters is how they act (and react).

  You can describe your main characters' traits, but stick to the ones that truly drive the story. For example, if your lead is being harassed because of how they look, that would be important to mention.

  Your FULL SYNOPSIS should chart some sense of the characters' arcs: how they change or grow, or suffer the consequences of *not* changing. (Shakespeare made a living crafting unchanging — yet incredibly potent — characters for his tragedies.)

....

You can track the "beats" (the moments) that help define the character arc while describing the events. Let's say you're writing about a lawyer who has a change of heart about their current case due to how they've been affected by their client. You'd want to track the major beats through the three acts of your script that "spell out" out what caused that attorney to have the change of heart.

Save your full character details — personality, appearance, backstory, etc. — for your CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS section. In your FULL SYNOPSIS, stick to details crucial to the story's events and how these details factor into the character arc. Some examples of character details to mention here (because of their clear role in the story's events):

- *Your lead is an overweight, nerdy kid suffering at the hands of bullies.*

- *Your lead is a chronically shy woman who decides to become a standup comic.*

- *Your lead adheres to a strict religion, which brings no end of complications to his job at a slaughterhouse.*

....

- **Forget the forgettable.** A good way to approach writing the FULL SYNOPSIS (if you have a completed script) is the following:

    1. Reread the first 20 pages of your script.

    2. Close your script, then (without referring back to it) jot down the important *events that stick in your memory* from what you've read.

    3. Imagine you're *telling* these events to someone (if it helps, do so out loud) and write that "telling" of it down.

    4. Refine what you've written so it's efficiently, crisply, compellingly told.

    5. Repeat with the next 10-20 pages, and so on.

    What's effective about this approach? You're forcing yourself to rely on what is memorable about your story. As we've mentioned, there's a universal human trait that tends to limit your memory to the truly important events or moments of your script (rather than clog it up with incidental details). You don't want the proverbial

"everything but the kitchen sink" here. You want the major events told through engaging summary.

MORE FULL SYNOPSIS EXAMPLES

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (Universal Pictures, 1982)

A small group of aliens secretly visits Earth to gather plant samples in a California forest. While these seemingly peaceful, otherworldly botanists harvest specimens, government agents appear on the scene. The aliens flee in their spaceship and, in their haste, leave one of their number behind.

In the San Fernando Valley's suburbs, ten-year-old Elliott is trying to flatter his way into his older brother's Dungeons & Dragons game by picking up a pizza for them. When he returns home, he sees a strange light coming from the shed in the backyard. Going to investigate, Elliott discovers the alien, but it promptly flees. Having seen the alien's diminutive stature, Elliott has decided it's less a threat than a worthy mystery, and is determined to find him.

Elliott is treated to skepticism by his mother Mary (who is raising her children on her own) and brother Michael about what he thinks he saw; they write it off as a coyote that's apparently been a recent nuisance. Undeterred, our young protagonist leaves Reese's Pieces candy to successfully lure the alien to his house. Before going to sleep, Elliott realizes the alien has followed him and is imitating his movements.

Elliott pretends to be sick the next morning in order to stay home from school and spend time with the alien. Later that day, Michael and their five-year-old sister, Gertie, meet the little green man who is hiding in Elliott's closet. They agree to keep him a secret from their mother. When they ask the alien

about his origins, he communicates by levitating several balls to represent his planetary system and then demonstrates his powers by reviving dead chrysanthemums. His signature power reveals itself to be using his glowing fingertip to heal a minor flesh wound; when doing so, he says, "Ouch."

At school the next day, Elliott begins to experience a telepathic connection with the alien, in which he feels everything the creature feels: Due to the alien's drinking beer at Elliott's home, Elliott behaves as if he's drunk at school, then begins freeing all the frogs in his biology class. As the alien watches John Wayne kiss Maureen O'Hara in a movie on television, Elliott kisses a girl he has a crush on, resulting in his being sent to the principal's office.

Meanwhile, the alien starts learning English by repeating what Gertie says as she watches Sesame Street and, at Elliott's urging, dubs itself "E.T." E.T. reads a comic strip where Buck Rogers, stranded, calls for help by building a makeshift communication device and is inspired to try it himself. Elliott helps E.T. as the alien builds a device to "phone home" using a Speak & Spell toy. Michael notices that E.T.'s health is declining and that Elliott is referring to himself empathically as "we."

On Halloween, Michael and Elliott hatch a plan to aid their newfound friend, dressing E.T. as a ghost so they can sneak him out of the house. That night, Elliott and E.T. head through the forest, where E.T. makes a successful call home. The next day, Elliott wakes up in the field feeling sick, only to find E.T. gone. Elliott returns home, where his mother has been distressed about his having been missing. Michael searches and finds E.T. dying next to a culvert. He brings E.T. home to Elliott, only to discover that Elliott is also dying. Mary is terrified as she discovers her son's illness and is introduced to the dying alien for the first time, just as government agents descend on the house.

Scientists set up a makeshift hospital at the house, interrogating Michael, Mary, and Gertie while treating Elliott and E.T. Our duo's mental connection disappears as E.T. appears to die while Elliott recovers. A heartbroken Elliott is left alone with the motionless E.T. When he professes his love for E.T., he notices a dead chrysanthemum (the plant E.T. had previously revived) coming back to life. To Elliott's joy, E.T. comes back to life and reveals that his fellow aliens are returning.

Elliott and Michael steal a government van that E.T. had been loaded into and a chase ensues, with Michael's friends joining them as they attempt to evade the authorities on their bikes. Suddenly facing a police roadblock, they escape as E.T. uses telekinesis to elevate them into the air — they fly toward the forest while still riding their bicycles.

Approaching the alien spaceship that has arrived to pick him up, E.T.'s heart glows with portent as he prepares to return home. Mary, Gertie, and Keys, a friendly government agent, show up for the farewell. E.T. says goodbye to Michael and Gertie, as she presents him with the chrysanthemum that he had revived. Before boarding the craft, E.T. embraces an emotional Elliott and reassures him, saying, "I'll be right here," while pointing to Elliott's forehead with his glowing finger. He then picks up the chrysanthemum, boards the spaceship, and it launches, leaving a rainbow in the sky as everyone watches it disappear.

The Hangover (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009)

Two days before his upcoming marriage to Tracy Garner, Doug Billings travels to Las Vegas for a bachelor party with his best friends Phil Wenneck, Stuart "Stu" Price, and his future brother-in-law, Alan. Driving in Doug's future father-in-law Sid's vintage Mercedes, they arrive at Caesars Palace, where they relax in their luxury hotel suite before celebrating with a few drinks on the hotel rooftop.

The next morning, Phil, Stu, and Alan awaken with
pounding headaches to find they have no memory of the
previous night. Doug is nowhere to be found. What's
more, Stu's missing tooth is in Alan's pocket, their
suite looks like it's been hit by a typhoon, a tiger
is in their bathroom, a chicken is in their living
room, and in their closet is a baby (whom Alan names
"Carlos"). The visual icing on the cake of their
predicament is Doug's mattress impaled on a statue
outside of Caesars Palace. When they head to the
valet for their Mercedes, he delivers an LVPD police
cruiser. Their attempt at a last-hurrah weekend of
revelry has suddenly transformed into a deepening
mystery.

Using a trail of clues to retrace their steps, the
addled trio make their way to a hospital, where they
discover they were drugged with Rohypnol — causing
their memory loss — and that they came to the
hospital from a chapel. Making a beeline to the
chapel, they learn that Stu married a stripper named
Jade, despite being in a long-term relationship with
his abusive train-wreck of a girlfriend, Melissa.
Outside the chapel, the trio is attacked by gangsters
saying they are looking for someone, and our heroes
flee.

Escaping the gangsters, the trio tracks down Jade,
discovering that she is the mother of the baby.
Having resolved one mystery, they are then arrested
by the police for stealing the police cruiser. After
unknowingly volunteering to be targets for a taser
demonstration at the precinct and suffering a
particularly charged episode, they are released. They
retrieve their impounded Mercedes, only to discover a
naked Chinese man named Leslie Chow in the trunk.
Chow jumps out of the trunk, beats the startled trio
up with a crowbar, and runs away. It's now that Alan
confesses that he's the one who drugged their drinks
to ensure they had a good night, believing the drug
to be ecstasy.

Returning to their hotel suite, our protagonists get
another rude awakening as they find the boxer Mike
Tyson waiting for them. He orders them to return the

tiger to his mansion immediately. Stu drugs the tiger with the remaining Rohypnol, and as they drive their sleeping cargo towards Tyson's home in the Mercedes, the tiger suddenly awakens and attacks them. They jump out of the car and shut the doors, then push the vehicle — with the caged beast inside — the rest of the way to the mansion.

Returning, their car is intentionally hit by a black Cadillac Escalade. Their assailants reveal themselves to be the gangsters from the chapel, and their boss is Chow. Chow accuses our heroes of kidnapping him and stealing $80,000 that was in his purse. As they vehemently deny this, Chow tells them he has Doug, and he'll kill him if his money is not returned. Unable to find Chow's $80,000, Alan — with help from Stu and Jade — uses his knowledge of card-counting to win an astounding $82,400 playing Blackjack. The next morning, our heroes rendezvous with Chow in the desert to exchange the money for Doug, only to find that "Doug" is not their missing friend, but rather, the black drug dealer who sold Alan the Rohypnol.

With the wedding set to occur in a mere five hours, a desperate Phil calls Tracy and tells her that they can't find Doug. When "Black Doug" mentions a clue, "If you take Roofies, you're more likely to end up on the floor than on the roof," Stu has an epiphany as to where their missing friend is. The trio races back to their hotel where they find a badly sunburned Doug on the roof. They forgot they moved him there on his mattress the night before as a prank. It turns out that Doug had thrown his own mattress onto the statue, in an attempt to signal help. Before leaving Vegas, Stu makes arrangements to go on a date with Jade the following week. Jade also reveals how deranged Stu had been from the roofies: He apparently pulled out his own tooth after Alan dared him to.

With a mere four hours till the wedding and with no flights to L.A. available, the four race home. Along the way, Doug reveals he has possession of Chow's original $80,000. Despite their late arrival, Doug and Tracy get married. It's now that Doug learns the damaged Mercedes was a wedding gift. Meanwhile, Stu

angrily breaks up with abusive, domineering Melissa.
As the reception ends, Alan finds Stu's digital
camera containing photos of the events they can't
remember, and the four agree to look at the pictures
together before deleting the evidence of their
exploits. All of them, except for Alan, are shocked
and awed by what they see.

THEMES

Themes are the broader ideas, motifs, or issues of your story that transcend — loom larger and broader than — your specific setting/characters/events. They are the spine of your story, the underpinning "message" that should resonate throughout your scenes in a universal way with the wider world and the varied lives (real and emotional) of your audience.

A theme is almost like *a melody* or *theme music* that becomes apparent from your text's overarching focus. Some examples:

- Love

- Pride comes before the fall

- Oppression/Freedom

- With great power comes great responsibility

Once you have identified your theme(s), expound on how they manifest in your story (such as in the example below).

....

The reason we label THEMES as both The Facts and The Pitch is because a project's theme(s) — especially for a series — are one of the more important generators for the story that lend themselves to discussion; the theme sustains a series, but it can also seem elusive on its face. Simply writing that a series is about "love" can leave a reader cold. The ability to interject your own analysis about why these themes will be meaningful for audiences and how they will sustain series longevity can be crucial to this section.

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Example: The Crown (Netflix, 2016)

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Duty vs Individuality
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The Crown explores how Queen Elizabeth II had to
subvert her own individuality — her personality, her
opinions, even her allegiance to her family — in
order to wear the crown, both a powerful symbol and
an albatross. The exploration will excavate the
complexities of her choices, such as her decision to
choose the responsibility of her office, at times,
over her own blood.
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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Theme is often thought of as your story's "message." Some writers make the mistake of seeing this as a more abstract, less necessary element for their series; others might see the notion of a "message" as something preachy. But theme is one of the most important drivers of a good story, giving the viewer a sense of what all the drama's fuss is "*really* about." (And — theme or no theme — your story is only as preachy as your writing is.)

....

On the surface, your plot might follow a cult member and some shocking events that ensue as that character becomes more radicalized; but below the surface, the deeper theme is about alienation, moreover, how the character has been alienated by society and how the darker corners of social media have given her or him a misguided sense of belonging. Depending on how you wrote that script, your theme could be, "Alienation and the yearning to belong can spur us to dangerous extremes."

....

THEMES can make the difference between your story being merely entertaining or truly resonant. Even in the world of professional (working) feature writers, our industry experts have found that theme is sometimes treated as an unfortunate afterthought — and the lack of it is the reason for a lot of projects failing. This is a major oversight when you consider that theme provides much of a movie's "depth" or substance, emanating your story's essence or soul, and activating the sense of a greater relevance or importance.

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Consider a thriller involving a serial killer: Is it really just a suspenseful show about gruesome murders? Even the best writers (perhaps because they are so skilled in the gifts of dialogue and cinematic vision) make the mistake of assuming that their dialogue and vision are enough to carry a season's worth of ballistics, blood squibs, and vfx.

Instead, perhaps it's a serial killer series with a feminist theme: Having been the victim of a patriarchal power structure, this killer (a clerk in an oppressive, abusive corporation) is taking control in her own way — albeit a horribly misguided one. Your theme could be "oppression" or, even more ambitiously and controversially, "freedom."

....

STRATEGIES

- **THEMES vs. LOGLINES: Know the difference.** While your LOGLINE might touch on, or even overlap with, your THEME(s), because both involve your story's subject matter, LOGLINES are more plot- and concept-focused, while your THEME content is a kind of universal reflection — a broader observation or viewpoint that says something relatable about your main character, while also saying something about the human condition. (Which is why a THEME is often thought of as the "message" of your show.)

- **Consider a topic statement...** THEMES n be summed up by your project's "topic," such as the two examples below. (Just consider expanding on such a statement in more detail.)

  - "This will be about corporate corruption."

  - "While this is a thriller that entertains with its twists and turns, the story deals with gender identity."

- **...Or a through line / theme line...** THEMES can also be expressed in a phrase (sometimes called the "through line" or "theme line") that reads almost like a proverb summed up by the story. A proverb is like a universal message — a god's-eye observation on the human condition. Another way to think of a theme in this light is akin to thinking about a fortune cookie's aphorism:

  - "Attempting to win at all costs can cost you your integrity."

  - "With great power comes great responsibility."

Themes expressed with such a theme line or through line can be foundational to your writing, like scaffolding to a physical structure. Some screenwriting theorists argue that you should hold every scene of your script up to your theme like a mirror; if that scene doesn't reflect some element of your theme, it might not belong in your script at all.

- **...Or a single word or subject.** A theme can also be distilled into the simplest of words or phrases, such as the, "Pride comes before the fall" theme in *Titanic* (and that script obviously has a central, simpler "love" theme as well). The single-word approach can be useful to you as a writer, sharpening your focus to ensure your script is zeroed-in on your theme. But don't just name the theme; *discuss* it to make the reader (or audience you're presenting to) feel that your story is going to evoke this reaction or intellectual conclusion.

- **Also consider the themes that are active in your characters' desires and arcs.** Think about the overall journey of your character and their *character arc*. What will your characters learn about themselves or their world? Watch the pivots your character makes at forked roads in your plot; this often spells out your theme like a Ouija board.

  This particular expression of theme (from your character's desire and efforts to achieve that desire) is what some writers call the "spine" or "super-objective" of your story. It's as much the needle-and-thread stitching your scenes together as the plot is, even if it's less visible.

- **Know what to reveal (and how).** There's a difference between *knowing* your theme (in terms of understanding

the underpinnings of your story structure) and being aware of what to communicate to actual decision-makers about your feature's story structure.

The simplest way to conceive a theme for a pitch is to think about the topic, subject, or issue your movie will touch on. This is the easiest way to convey thematic content to execs (who generally care less about the actual craft and scaffolding behind your writing, and far more about the end product).

That being said: Conveying *some* of your project's more intricate structure — how it pivots around the theme — can also show your expert handle on your material. Just be careful to start by telling execs in broad strokes what your show's themes are, and *then* you can give them a few choice glimpses into the molecular makeup (the behind-the-scenes thinking that went into crafting your theme).

WATCH THE PIVOTS YOUR CHARACTER MAKES AT FORKED ROADS IN YOUR PLOT, AT THE NEXUS OF CONFLICT; THIS OFTEN SPELLS OUT YOUR THEME LIKE A OUIJA BOARD.

- **Try a music metaphor.** For your own writing process, you should certainly know the deeper anatomy of your thematic structure as if it were not only your story's *message,* but also its *music*. So remember:

- Themes are like music: The most effective ones resonate with a certain stealthy grace.

- Many projects suffer because they deliver theme(s) too faintly, like a bass line you can hardly hear.

- Or they're ham-fistedly overstated like crashing cymbals.

- Finding the balance is how a writer chisels a script into something artfully formed.

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Side-note: Themes and Subtext

If movies and TV shows were written without subtext, and characters just said what they felt and meant all the time, the medium would implode. Here's why:

Imagine a writer who's never learned about subtext. He's writing a scene in which a corrupt politician is confronted by his friend, an honest attorney. Here's the actual dialogue he unfortunately crafted:

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                 ATTORNEY
     I'm mad at you because you've corrupted
     your office and betrayed your voters.


                 POLITICIAN
     Well hey, I'm feeling guilty about
     corrupting my office, but I'm going to
     deflect what you're saying and act like
     I've done nothing wrong.
```

That's all text and zero subtext (and also obviously not how humans actually talk). There's clearly a theme here, but it's painfully obvious. It plays like Muzak rather than Mozart.

A nuanced ear is crucial to finding convincing dialogue capable of delivering your theme on a subtextual level — almost subliminal, but felt nonetheless.

*If your series is about a tiddlywinks competitor and the theme is really just that the main character or main characters on the team **want to win badly**...that kind of limits the depth of your project.*

*But if it's about the main character using steroids and other nefarious tactics to win at tiddlywinks, then realizing **the price of that success is their soul**...well, that's obviously more ludicrous than emotionally moving (because...tiddlywinks), but it's still a more interesting theme.*

....

SOME SCREENWRITING THEORISTS ARGUE THAT YOU SHOULD HOLD EVERY SCENE UP TO YOUR THEME LIKE A MIRROR; IF THAT SCENE DOESN'T REFLECT SOME ELEMENT OF YOUR THEME, IT MIGHT NOT BELONG IN YOUR SCRIPT AT ALL.

THE WORLD

At a time when *world-building* has become a trendy term (it's a much more commonly touted ingredient in the Marvel Age), THE WORLD is a section with newfound importance in Hollywood, and can even be useful for more character-based drama series. It summarizes the setting and how the *milieu* — the place and its population — contributes to your story. Present your story's environment and a *general* description of the types of people (or creatures) who inhabit it, as if your location(s) were the stars of your series.

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This section is labeled as both The Facts and The Pitch because a project's world offers some of the general trappings and terrain that help market your story as an appealing product. We don't mean that your story's world necessarily makes for products in a Happy Meal. We mean that when you're discussing THE WORLD in your story, it's like looking out at the view and assessing why audiences will want to spend time in it. This section offers space to "sell" your world's real estate.

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Example: Ted Lasso (Apple TV+, 2020)

The world Ted inhabits is actually the collision of several. He's from Wichita, Kansas and has been a college football coach most of his adult life. Now he's been hired to coach a soccer team in England, even though he knows next to nothing about the sport. AFC Richmond is an English Premier League team; as such, it inspires the passion and wrath of the local populace even more so than American football does in the US. British soccer fans are infused with the sport to the extent that it's more akin to politics. The local pubs erupt in hellfire as they learn that this American "wanker" has been hired to steer what amounts to a part of their cultural identity right into the gutter.

The British tend to be immune to American, pollyanna-ish Zen, the latter being what Ted tends to live by. They're a blunt and unromantic tribe when it comes to their love of the game — you put up (wins on the board) or shut up. Ted's players view him with as much jaundice as the rest of the populace, initially. After all, they have to be able to attend the local pubs without getting drinks hurled at them.

Cultural clash ensues, the British crossing their arms as Ted keeps an optimistic smile on his face. While in other ways, the pressures Ted faces in the British world (such as the merciless media skepticism about his coaching) are recognizable to this American, albeit with the nuances of local customs constantly keeping him at a distance. There's a tabloid presence in England that can threaten to ruin a soccer star's — or coach's — life, and further threatens the local populace's sense of identity because they're being made a laughing stock by Ted.

The game of soccer itself brings all sorts of challenges to an American football coach. A soccer goal sometimes seems to take a lifetime to score, proving often to be a patience game or a marathon (though the series will obviously focus on the exciting moments), and the very nature of this long game contributes to the first season's plaguing AFC

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Richmond with a run of tied games. There's a lack of
team spirit amongst AFC's players, largely due to
their resistance to Ted's leadership initially, and
their sense that they're already a joke.
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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Context is everything. Your project's world is a huge part of its personality — in fact, it's one of the most defining traits of a series or film. Networks want to know that the metropolis, town, or backwater your characters inhabit is rich with dramatic, comedic, or horrific potential — enough that you can generate a season's worth of episodes (though some stories lend themselves better to a more concise, limited series).

Presenting that you have a sense of the importance of the raw materials of world-building can give decision-makers confidence that the sum of your project's parts will make for a great script read.

Take a moment to think about *Westworld, Atlanta, Game of Thrones, Ozark,* and *The Crown*, and notice how much their richly textured settings and ecosystems influence your own mental images of those stories. To some degree, the world itself is as important as any single character on the show and certainly has everything to do with shaping your cast.

Whether the movie *is Jurassic World*, *Up In The Air, Nomadland, The Wolf of Wall Street, Avatar,* or *Talladega Nights,* when you think of those movies, you're thinking as much about the setting as you are the plot. You're thinking of dinosaurs, airports, mobile homes, Wall Street, and racetracks. The main reason anyone saw *Waterworld* was because of the world itself.

CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING. THE WORLD IS A HUGE PART OF YOUR PROJECT'S PERSONALITY — IN FACT, IT'S ONE OF THE MOST DEFINING TRAITS OF A SERIES OR FILM.

STRATEGIES

- **Review your story's locales.** Though you should have a sense of the details of your story's world festooned in your mind, you can also remind yourself of the locales. (If you have a script and you use ScriptHop, its A.I. will automatically help you generate a list of your script's locales.) This will refresh your memory regarding the details of where some scenes are situated and how they fit into the larger environment of your movie.

- **Retool content from other sections.** Don't be overly concerned if you're repeating or overlapping a bit with some of your other summary descriptions. As we've noted, pitches tend to do that to a degree, though you obviously don't want things to get too repetitive in terms of the language you use. Refining your pitch materials by reviewing the various sections of your pitch deck or series bible will refine your echo effect; as mentioned, you want any overlap to fortify your pitch rather than to wear out its welcome.

  If you were to write a SYNOPSIS or pitch THE HOOK or CASE for *Jurassic Park,* you would be doing yourself a major disservice not to mention THE WORLD itself — some mention of the environmental visual feast that will draw

audiences to the movie is very much in order. So don't let the repeat of such crucial details or your quest for iterative perfection be the enemy of a good presentation. Instead, revise your deck or packet so each section focuses mostly on the defining details of that section.

- **Paint a verbal picture** of the landscape and the elements at play in your project, *showing* execs how much there is to harvest from the terrain. When you discuss the world, your reader or audience should be able to quickly use their own imagination to gauge the expandable space for plot and character growth within those locations.

- **Show the populace.** What *types* of people inhabit and help define your world? What elements of *culture* are involved? Is this Wall Street? Is your story focusing on day traders? Is this Eastern Siberia and your story follows an Inuit tribe? What world does your main character come from that makes this new world a fish-out-of-water experience for her or him?

  In the first example, is she an MBA from Appalachia and this is her first time living in a big city? In the second, is your main character indigenous, but, because he's discovered a tech magazine that's floated to his isolated village, does this threaten his perspective on life with his people? What cultural elements are in conflict? It can be as simple as a coming-of-age story where a kid from Manhattan is sent to live with relatives in the country — not all conflict has to be steeped in complicated sociological complexity, but can be built on simple lifestyle shifts (e.g., from spoiled city living to hardscrabble agrarian labor).

- **Look for *juxtapositions* inherent in your locales.** Are there parts of the populace, say, on either side of the tracks, that

are predisposed to conflict? You can touch on the specificity of some of your characters here (rather than staying macro and topographic about the larger community) and suggest how certain traits of your character(s), their background, or racial/ethnic makeup, might create conflict within the world you're describing.

- **As ever, pitch it aloud.** Refine this entire process by pitching this world aloud (to yourself via your trusty audio note recorder, or to a friend): What bubbles up to the surface as you describe your world to a friend or to yourself? Jot down notes as you go. You'll find that pitching aloud will bring out a naturalistic (less forced) and more salient approach, helping you whittle away what's superfluous.

Example: Jurassic Park (Universal Pictures, 1993)

Industrialist John Hammond has created a theme park of cloned dinosaurs — Jurassic Park — on Isla Nublar, an island off the Costa Rican coast. We'll be introduced to this world as if it were initially a safe place to view and experience the resurrected giant reptilian wonders. As Dr. Grant and his team arrive on the island via helicopter, this reveals a spectacularly beautiful paradise with waterfalls and lush jungle vegetation. Heading to the theme park itself, we'll start with a trip to the visitor center — a welcoming, fun, and tidy place — where we'll see a video presentation that exalts the methods of cloning dinosaurs. Next, the characters go on a safari ride through the enclosures where we see everything from Velociraptors to T-Rexes. All of this inspires awe and wonder, like a Disneyland zoo of mythic predators brought to life. Hammond's initial presentation of the surface of Jurassic Park is entirely positive.

```
But looming behind the scenes, Hammond and his park
staff are sweating, knowing the potential for
disaster. And they're right to worry: Pandora's Box
will soon be opened by the loss of power to the tour
vehicles, as well as the electrified fence. With tech
and security disarmed, the tour group now faces a
primal world of survival. With no barrier between
them and these monsters, Dr. Grant and his team now
come face-to-face with the terrifying lethality of
the carnivorous creatures. The jungle becomes both an
enemy and a survival resource. A few work stations
provided for the Park staff will also serve as
strategic refuges for the characters, and they'll
discover that the smaller Velociraptors are in some
ways more dangerous than the gargantuan T-Rex — the
raptors have an eerie cunning that no one expects.
One scene will return our paleontologists to the
majestic wonder of the park as they climb a giant
tree to view some refreshingly gentle Brachiosaurs.
While most of the encounters with the dinosaurs will
take place in the jungle, the finale will have cast
and creatures circling back to the visitor's center,
where the monsters will invade the civilized spaces
(the buildings), and one especially intense scene
will involve the children of the group trying to
outsmart a Velociraptor in the confines of a kitchen
space.
```

NOTE: This example could also have deeper dives into many things, such as descriptions and info on the lay of the land that is the Costa Rican jungle — even descriptions of the flora and fauna beyond the dinosaurs.

*ScriptHop's Packet allows for **interactive** deep-dives into content without adding to the overall "wall of text" that a traditional document must present linearly. This allows you to go much more in-depth for those who are curious without risking the lost attention of those who lose interest when seeing too much text.*

For example, a fifty-year history of THE WORLD that the audience won't necessarily see (even though it does shape the story) can be relegated to an unobtrusive — yet still available — deep-dive.

INTRO TO CHARACTERS

The INTRO TO CHARACTERS is a general introduction to your characters and how they interrelate *as a whole,* as a network or as oppositional forces. It is different from traditional CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS (sometimes referred to in the industry as "Character Breakdowns"), for which we've provided a separate chapter.

The INTRO TO CHARACTERS describes the characters' relationships, the actions and changes they provoke in each other, the conflict between them, moreover, the major narrative currents created by their interaction.

Again: Do not confuse this with the CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS section, which focuses on each individual character separately.

....

Unlike the CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS (a purely "The Facts" section), the INTRO TO CHARACTERS can involve more of your opinion or editorial about your players. It involves presenting more of a showcase of the dramatic opportunities offered by them; you can, to a degree, "promote" your characters and your project itself by discussing their potential to win over an audience.

....

Example: Ozark (Netflix, 2017)

(Note: This is an excerpt from the actual *Ozark* series bible. We've kept it intact, replete with grammatical quirks.)

The Byrdes are you. We'll see and feel ourselves occupying these characters because they will have earned it. They'll be framed as real people. Money-laundering is a device. A complex interesting one but still just a device used to put ordinary people in extraordinary situations. We'll identify with Marty, feel his fear, his obligation to his family, empathize if not agree with his choices and subsequent rationalizations. We'll understand why Wendy cheated on Marty, want to hold it against her, be unable to. Leaning on themes of family, forgiveness, loyalty, corruption, redemption and wish fulfillment, we'll walk right up to the ethical line with our characters, retreat, then charge across. Come face to face with our own weakness. Love. Self-loathing. We'll revel in our characters' victories, cringe at their losses and feel for them as we see ourselves reflected. We'll ask ourselves what we want and what we'll do to get it. And once tasting it, what will we do to hang onto it? We'll explore the dynamics of marriage, watch the forces of money, sex and expectation whittle away existing relationships and form new ones. Having introduced violence early in season 1, we'll take a beat, let the characters and the story breathe to insure that our audience doesn't become anesthetized to the blood and bone to come. Each episode will start with either an evocative teaser of scenes from future episodes or a flashback that sheds light on or deepens the mystery around a recurring character. Above all, the show will have heart. Eyes will shine, throats will lump and last scenes will bring a half-whispered "God damn" of satisfaction.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Your characters are one of your most valuable assets, especially when it comes to *episodic* narratives. The dramatic ebb-and-flow of almost any good series is based on the show's characters and how they catalyze or spur each other. Your INTRO TO CHARACTERS presents the tapestry of humanity almost like a holistic system. Distinct from your CHARACTER *DESCRIPTIONS*, which delve more into characters as individuals, the *INTRO TO* CHARACTERS weaves your characters together like a community — or, as they may be oppositional forces (and one or more of them should be, if you're going to have conflict!), at least like an ecosystem, logistically relevant to each other. Though they might live on opposite sides of the tracks, they will certainly intersect. Give a bird's-eye view of the interplay of your characters, suggesting how these inter-personal dynamics will hook the viewer.

While the industry cliché is that "concept is king" in a *feature film*, that's a somewhat simplistic maxim that tends to overlook that character is a crucial ingredient for most good movies. It's the humanity that makes your movie emotionally engaging.

THE DRAMATIC EBB-AND-FLOW OF ALMOST ANY GOOD SERIES IS BASED ON THE SHOW'S CHARACTERS AND HOW THEY CATALYZE OR SPUR EACH OTHER. YOUR INTRO TO CHARACTERS PRESENTS THE TAPESTRY OF HUMANITY ALMOST LIKE A HOLISTIC SYSTEM.

STRATEGIES

- **Focus on the whole.** If you were to make a math analogy, the INTRO TO CHARACTERS is where you look at the entire formula for your cast and how they "add up" as variables; a cooking analogy would make this the recipe for your cast and how they create the meal of your narrative. (Whereas CHARACTER *DESCRIPTIONS* are where you dive more fulsomely into each character as individual variables or ingredients.)

    Note that these are guidelines. You can, and certainly will, mention some of the individual details of individual characters; there is, of course, some overlap with CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS. It's just that there's a discrepancy in terms of the overall mission of the two sections. INTRO TO CHARACTERS is designed to address the fact that, generally, your characters don't exist in a vacuum.

    Along the lines of the caveat above, if you have a story that really focuses on one character — to an extent that if

you have other characters at all, they are merely used to offset the main character — then you can certainly use the INTRO TO CHARACTERS to zero-in on this character. You should still be using the other opportunities this section allows, such as invoking more editorial verbiage to "sell" the merits of this character and your project, e.g., "Burt has struggled to be noticed his whole life — the fact that he literally can't get arrested for some of his disastrous political stunts *will be both hilarious and resonant for everyone who's searched for relevance.* By the end of the series, he'll be unforgettable." (Note: The italicized portion of that example is what we mean by "editorial" language; you wouldn't want to use such verbiage in a purely "The Facts" section, such as CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS.)

- **Find the nucleus.** What is the central conflict, dilemma, or situation that ties your characters together and creates a *dynamic*? Is there an internal conflict that's *global* for the cast — e.g., alcoholism, cynicism ("isms" are a great place to look), mental illness, or guilt — that challenges their ability to navigate life? Are they in rehab or jail together? Is there an external or physical conflict one character contends with that has repercussions on the others — e.g., a physical handicap, drug addiction, supernatural possession? Or simply a behavioral trait, like their being hyper-judgmental of the world around them?

- **Consult your THEMES.** Though you can also touch on themes more thoroughly in the dedicated THEMES section, it can be effective here to mention a central theme and terms of how it relates to the main character and/or the way it *ties multiple characters together*. You can cite how each of the characters fits into this theme.

Is your project about the search for meaning in the digital age, as seen through the eyes of a group of teens? Is it a story about ambition gone awry, as seen through the eyes of some Wall Street traders? Maybe it's a story about justice, where your bank robbers are targeting those Wall Street traders. If you decide to mention a THEME in your INTRO TO CHARACTERS, be sure to provide some insight about how your character(s) relate (and inter-relate) to it.

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- **Find and focus on the humanity.** Generally, you should strive to make the characters *relatable*. If your main character is tough to identify with because he's a homicidal maniac, there should still be an effort made to explain *why* we're following said maniac — is there a window of understanding through which we can gain access to his dementia? Perhaps there's no window of insight, no comment that you're making, and you're simply interested in an objective character study; you can explain that position here as well: "This is an unflinching look at a controversial subculture seen through the eyes of our anti-heroic main character..." Again, the INTRO TO CHARACTERS is a powerful way for you to *pitch or promote* your reasons for designing the characters the way you have (whereas CHARACTER *DESCRIPTIONS* really shouldn't touch on your methods).

  Why should we care about your character(s)? If they're bank robbers, is there a Robin-Hood-esque motivation that will win sympathy from us? Or is there another aspect to their lives, adjacent to the robberies, that affects how we feel about them? (For example, one of the robbers lost a child in a horrible accident caused by her employer; now she wants revenge via heist.)

- **How does the uniqueness of *these* characters make a unique whole?** Touch on any specific character traits or personality quirks that cause a specific dynamic in your story (between that character and other characters).

- **Bring out the *inner* conflict.** Your characters' inner conflict is often that magic ingredient that transforms them from bland to fascinating. This is a fantastic way to make us care, and you can explain here how that inner conflict interweaves with the rest of the characters.

- **How does the world of these characters impact them?** Though there's a dedicated THE WORLD section for your packet, you can mention how your characters intersect with their milieu here, too; the environment certainly *should* affect your characters. (Just keep the bulk of your discussion of *place* for your THE WORLD section.)

  If this story is about the juxtaposition of two characters from two socio-economic backgrounds, the difference between their two home environments might (and likely *should)* shape a lot of their interaction in your story.

Example: CODA (Apple TV+, 2021)

Ruby Rossi is the only member of her family who can hear. Her father (Frank), mother (Jackie), and brother (Leo) are all deaf. Though Ruby attends a public high school, her life has been anchored in her family's world, making her less confident about her own goals and how she interacts with her peers. While going to school, she helps her family run their fishing business, planning to join the business full-time once she graduates. In turn, Frank, Jackie, and Leo have relied on Ruby — perhaps too much — to help them navigate the outside world. They seem to expect

her to be their lifeline to the hearing world without enough consideration of where she might want to go with her life.

Though silent — communicating only in ASL — Frank, Jackie, and Leo are a colorful trio, full of humor and passion. Sometimes they're hilariously blue and crude, and her parents aren't shy about their love life. We'll see them in all their glorious, messy humanity, as opposed to other movies that have failed to portray the deaf community as being anything *but* exceptional. Ruby loves them to an extent that makes it all the more difficult for her to choose between remaining with them or pursuing a career in music.

Ruby's initial crush on Miles, a boy at school, leads her to music initially. But it's really the music teacher, Mr. V, who becomes the pivotal gateway to this new world as he challenges her to be devoted to their practice sessions, which in turn challenges Ruby's time for her family, creating a tug-of-war between Mr. V and the Rossis, with Ruby in the middle.

When Ruby and her family communicate, we'll see how dynamic and engaged with each other they are (in many ways, their signed passion will show all the more visibly than spoken communication) and how rooted their family ties are in their tight-knit world, expressing the tug-of-war all the more viscerally. As they pull her eyes with signing hands, they're pulling at *her* to stay with them for the foreseeable future, while Ruby's ears hear the calling of her musical gifts.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

It's a well-known adage that "character *is* story." That should give you enough of a reason to add CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS to your process. Character descriptions lay out the details about who your characters are, *how they fit into your story,* and whom you imagine playing each role. Each description is a paragraph of relevant physical details, personality traits, important backstory, and motivation. You should include at least a sentence or two about how the character participates in the plot, including their *character arc:* what they learn or how they evolve in the course of the story. Even minor characters — though their personalities and backstories might be largely undeveloped — still play a role in your story. This narrative contribution should be their (and *every*) CHARACTER DESCRIPTION's focus.

The CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS section is also where you typically place your actor headshots for your ACTOR WISH LIST. See the chapter dedicated to that topic for more about how to create your layout.

Example: Ozark (Netflix, 2017)

MARTY BYRDE (40-50s)

Father. Husband. Provider. History buff and backyard gardener. Drug cartel money-launderer. The catalyst of *the story*, Marty has spent the last 16 years — his entire parental life — enduring the relentless anxiety of a prison-or-grave secret. It's heightened his powers of rationalization, fostered an imaginative inner monologue and worn his edges

smooth. Dimmed the spark that first attracted his wife Wendy. Arriving in the Ozarks armed with Clean-or-Die marching orders, Marty will arc through the seasons, traveling from the brink of self-sacrificial suicide in Episode 2 to the lethal king of a lake land empire worth hundreds of millions by the beginning of Season 4. It won't be until Season 5 before Marty's obsession with all things money starts to fade.

Example: Titanic (Paramount Pictures, 1997)

JACK DAWSON (20s)

A lanky, unkempt American drifter. An orphan artist, he has adopted the bohemian art scene in Paris. He is also very self-possessed for his age, having navigated life on his own since he was a teen. He's won two tickets to ride the Titanic. Despite his humble origins, he falls in love with upper-class (and upper-deck) Rose after saving her from throwing herself overboard, only to learn she's doomed to a loveless engagement to Cal Hockley. He attempts to romance her, despite their separation by social status and deck class, even as their lives become threatened not only by the doomed vessel, but by Cal himself. Jack ultimately comes to realize that his love for Rose is larger than life itself.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS are especially crucial to your goal of attaching any actor of note. The potential for character growth is what tends to convince agents and execs that there will be real dramatic (or suspenseful or comedic) range for their client to explore. We've pointed out the fallacy in the cliché, "concept is king" — like TV series, feature films tend to be emotionally resonant *only* when the characters have been treated as tantamount to the narrative.

As mentioned above, one of the most powerful maxims for writers is, "Character *is* story." Your character's arc, or the way your character changes over the course of your plot, is the main dramatic force that drives the plot and changes the shape of your story. (After all, how can you have drama without the forces of change?) Your characters' major choices and actions define your story's pivot points (more commonly known as plot points). If you just have an action-thriller with no conflicting choices, repercussions, character growth or decline...well, you'd better have the most ballistically fantastic set pieces ever (and even still, good luck with sustaining an actioner devoid of a compelling personality behind the wheel).

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS provide crucial casting information for agencies hunting for roles for their actor clients. This is why the CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS section is the section in which you generally exhibit headshots of the actors to create your ACTOR WISH LIST (again, see that dedicated chapter for more on ACTOR WISH LIST layout). Because their clients have told them the sorts of roles they're looking for (e.g., "I want to play more quirky characters"), the right character description might entice the agent and their client to read your screenplay, especially if they're doing targeted searches.

***Do you need to write CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS for* minor characters too?**

Yes! We discuss this in the "Strategies" section of this chapter, but let's qualify this here. If you're creating a pitch deck in PDF format, the notion of scrolling through some of your minor characters in a PDF can be a drag. But the fact of the matter is that agencies also have junior agents seeking roles

for clients who aren't necessarily looking (or qualified) for *leading* roles; they might need smaller parts to build their résumés. And this situation could get you closer to the green light: If a junior agent gets excited about your project, they could help bring it to the attention of more senior agents and A-list clients for the lead.

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Fun Fact: *In the agency world, some extra-hungry agents are known to have conniption fits if there aren't descriptions for* all *the characters. In fact, there are whole* agencies *that require all the characters to be covered, all the way down to MAILMAN #5.*

....

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL MAXIMS FOR WRITERS IS, "CHARACTER IS STORY." YOUR CHARACTER'S ARC, OR THE WAY YOUR CHARACTER CHANGES OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR MOVIE, IS THE MAIN DRAMATIC FORCE THAT DRIVES THE PLOT AND CHANGES THE SHAPE OF YOUR STORY. (AFTER ALL, HOW CAN YOU HAVE DRAMA WITHOUT THE FORCES OF CHANGE?)

STRATEGIES

- It's up to you whether you include photos of actors to create an ACTOR WISH LIST for each character (we go more into detail about why you would want to do so in the dedicated chapter on the ACTOR WISH LIST). If you are going to create an ACTOR WISH LIST (using actor headshots), you can either start getting a sense of your overall layout for your CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS and how the actor headshots will fit with them by adding them first or you can write the descriptions and then fit the photos in afterward. It really depends on how you like to approach the overall layout for your pitch deck (starting with imagery or text as an initial anchor).

- **Adopt a learning mindset.** Before you dive into the tips below and start composing your CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS, take a moment to note: This will be an exercise in building your own sense of self-knowledge about your characters and your story. You're developing your muscles of memory regarding your script, seeing what rises to the surface as being truly important, and learning to re-tell it in summary. This mindset will make your descriptions stronger and can help you see your whole project (and how to make it better) more clearly.

- **Start your descriptions with the standard structure.** Each CHARACTER DESCRIPTION typically describes the character's traits in the order below (for major characters, at least). This sequence orients and guides the reader, helping them gradually build a solid impression of who this character is:

    1. **Physical appearance**

2. Personality

3. Backstory

4. Major actions the character performs or experiences in your plot

5. Relationships with other characters of note in the story

6. Character arc: how they learn/evolve in the course of the story

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A Note on Physical/Demographic Identifiers:

We encourage you to make your casting choices with diversity in mind. This not only widens the spectrum of possible portrayals of each character, but could widen your project's opportunities as well; Hollywood has become much more interested in movies that offer roles for a diverse cast. In practical terms, this means defining only those identifiers (gender, age, ethnicity, and nationality) that are truly essential for each character. By leaving the rest blank, you maximize the casting possibilities for that character.

That being said, the age *of each character as you envision them can be an important parameter to mention.* ***In the end, be true to your vision.***

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- **Wondering how to approach any of the six CHARACTER DESCRIPTION traits? Consider the following questions.** While many of these traits might overlap and influence one

another, here are some ideas to consider when approaching them individually:

1. **Physical appearance:** Is the character attractive? Unkempt? Gaunt? Dapper? Alarmingly muscular? Be concise and don't write a novel. Remember: Your readers are judging whether you'll be a good screenwriter from these summaries, and being a good screenwriter means being concise; keep your physical descriptions focused on truly relevant details that show who this character is — for example, a mohawk or a mullet can imply a lot about a person. The same goes for wardrobe: Don't go into the minutiae of their clothing *unless* that tells us something about who they really are. (E.g., "Bill never leaves home without a pocket protector.") Note that this quoted example would likely also appear in the script; if a character's physical detail is important enough to be in the script, don't skip it in their CHARACTER DESCRIPTION.

2. **Personality:** Is the character loud? Withdrawn? The class clown? Naïve? World-weary? Flamboyant? Generally, a few sentences — or even a few adjectives listed in a single sentence — can express a good amount of detail about how a character behaves, their default way of interacting with others, etc.

3. **Backstory:** Were they adopted? Did they grow up in a rough neighborhood or a restrictive culture? If so, how has that informed their approach to life or to the plot? Did they accidentally kill someone in a car accident (and continue to carry the burden of guilt)? Sometimes, this backstory might be only subtly

mentioned in your script (such as in a line or two of dialogue), but a little more detail here could inform an actor of the choices they make when playing the character. This backstory can tie into your character's **Inner Conflict**, which we'll discuss in a moment.

4. **Major actions:** Any major character's participation in the plot involves the *central conflict* in your story and the actions they take in response. Remember that character *is* action, so make this the centerpiece of each description. One way to achieve this: Paraphrase from your SYNOPSIS, combining individual plot points (actions taken by your character) into a few sentences that generally describe the *overall* action. Another method: Rely on your memory and knowledge of your own story or the screenplay itself, so you extract what is most memorable (and most important).

   - Remember that this is about the character's participation in the plot, even if it's a minor character. For example, TAXI DRIVER #3 might have no direct participation in the central conflict, but they might "exchange comedic banter with [your protagonist]."

5. **Relationships:** What important relationships does your character have in your story — a love interest, a manipulative friend, a mentor? Who is the main character's antagonist in the story? These can all be mentioned here, generally in a sentence or two.

6. **Character arc:** Reflect on the actions they've performed (or experienced) in the plot and what they've learned or how they've changed as a result.

In some stories, the lack of an arc is part of the point of the story, such as in certain tragedies or dark comedies; in some tragedies, for example, the anti-hero learns absolutely nothing…and that is the point! But it's important to make this clear.

- **Now dive deeper.** While the following character traits are unfortunately sometimes forgotten by writers, they can actually make all the difference, saving a script from seeming shallow, and a character from seeming one-dimensional:

  - **Worldview:** Are they cynical, Pollyanna-ish, paranoid? (This might have a lot to do with their *inner conflict*.)

  - **Inner conflict:** This might be caused by something in their *backstory* (see #3 above). It might be something external to the character, but becomes inherent to their character, such as a physical handicap. Perhaps they're an athlete who lost a limb and their own self-worth in the process. Perhaps they are struggling with Alzheimer's and their own sense of identity due to their issues with memory.

    Sometimes the inner conflict of a character isn't entirely spelled out in the SYNOPSIS (because it's only touched on in a subtextual way there, just hinted at through the events of the plot), so make sure it's conveyed in your CHARACTER DESCRIPTION.

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Other examples of inner conflict:

- *She's wrestling with her guilt over her recent conversion from Catholicism to Judaism.*
- *He's obsessive-compulsive to an extent that he's alienated most of his friends.*
- *She's haunted by the death of her twin sister.*
- *He's struggling with addiction.*

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- **Remember: Concise writing** = **good writing.** As with other sections, think of your Character Descriptions as a way to show decision-makers that you know how to deliver information succinctly (which, again, is generally a hallmark of good *screenwriting*). So the more concise you are with CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS — showing your economy with language and ability to deploy important details without too many words — the more it encourages confidence in a decision-maker that your project is going to be worth their time.

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An example of concise writing in action:

If your character is a hitman, you wouldn't list every hit he carries out in the story, and you don't want to regurgitate your SYNOPSIS. Instead, you might say something as brief as:

"He's an assassin for a top-secret fringe group working for the Kremlin, but his conscience starts to get to him when he's asked to target a political activist he's developed feelings for."

Notice that this single sentence describes and/or suggests several things about this character:

- *What he does that's noteworthy*
- *The sorts of actions he will take in the story (he kills for a living)*
- *The inner conflict he will confront (his conscience)*
- *Some plot involving his romantic feelings for another character (without relating too many of the actual events)*
- *His character "arc" or evolution: "his conscience starts to get to him when he's asked to target a political activist…"*

Also note: Assuming this hitman is the lead character, the example above could — with just a little tweaking — serve as this screenplay's LOGLINE as well. (Some overlap is both inevitable and necessary between CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS, SYNOPSIS, and LOGLINE.)

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- **Start with the high-level info.** While brevity is golden, sometimes a CHARACTER DESCRIPTION (especially of a major character) might require a certain length. If yours runs particularly long, bear in mind that you want to lead with the most important story details first. Some of your more rushed readers won't have time to read every description to its end.

- **Don't overlook your minor players!** Minor characters (such as TAXI DRIVER #3, who might have just one line of dialogue) are in your story because they have some influence on it, so they merit descriptions too. (Again, this is based on our collective industry experience, such

as the irate phone-call from an agent because TAXI DRIVER #3 didn't have a description.) By providing a description, you lessen the chances that an intern is going to write it for you (likely at 2 am with addled attention). That being said, here you can state the obvious and keep it short and sweet — e.g., "He picks up Salma and drives her to the airport. They exchange some funny banter about life."

ScriptHop's Packet offers the ability to show the important descriptive material for a character toward the top and includes a "see more" button to expand. This helps keep readers engaged and not put off by large walls of text. Additionally, you can include all the supporting characters you wish (even TAXI DRIVER #3) that are only shown when the reader chooses to see all of the characters.

ACTOR WISH LIST

You might place a number of photos of actors you're referencing throughout your series bible or pitch deck, but the most obvious and helpful place to mention and depict your ACTOR WISH LIST is your CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS section. Whether you're sending your series bible or pitch deck directly to an agent who represents a particular actor you want to cast, or simply wanting to give a producer or investor a sense of the person this character is, suggesting an actual actor (or several) for the role, with a photo, can add layers of contextual weight to your deck, helping the reader envision that role or character more clearly.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Attaching an actor to your project is akin to knocking over the first domino that gives the rest their kinetic energy – and if you're a newbie, it's the moment you pull Excalibur from the stone! Getting an actor to sign onto your series or movie generates the first burst of excitement about your project and often can even generate a news story about it before your project gets greenlit. The first step toward attaching an actor is having a vision about which actors might fit each character and exhibiting that vision in a pitch deck.

STRATEGIES

- **Be clear about which actor is for which role.** Especially if you're providing multiple actor choices per role, the most common way to display them in a CHARACTER DESCRIPTION is to put their headshots directly underneath or above the character name. Space these headshots in such a way that they're not cramped; leave some white space between them.

  And in your ACTOR WISH LIST, do use *headshots*. Other types of actor images (e.g., an action shot that evokes the flavor of a particular role) belong in other sections.

- **Zoom and crop every headshot to make them uniform.** Having different sizes and shapes for your headshots looks unprofessional.

- **Decide which casting approach is right for each role.** There are a number of schools of thought regarding how many actors to suggest for each character:

  1. *Suggest none.* Some writers decide not to suggest any at all and to let the character speak for themselves. The rationale: To show an actor is to prejudice the voice of the read – meaning the reader will read the script in that actor's "voice" (or *their idea* of that actor's voice) and end up missing the true voice intended by the writer.

  2. *Suggest one.* Some writers display a single actor they're hoping to attach. This is typically the way to do it if you're sending your pitch deck to an agent for their particular client.

3. *Suggest several.* Some writers depict several actors. We recommend this approach, especially if you don't have an agent representing your work (and who might know how to reach a specific actor). But even if you do have an agent, listing multiple options can cast a wider net – particularly if your first choice is an unlikely one – and help give your agent (or any other reader) a clearer notion of the *type* of actor you're aiming for. This can help readers (especially those with connections) find candidates who could fit the bill: "Hmm...George would never do this...but we have Jim, who's George-esque...he just might do it!"

- **Be clear when casting against type.** In certain cases, showing a certain actor could position readers to think of your project in a way that's antithetical to your intention. In such cases, consider a side note about your casting idea.

  For example, if you list Dwayne Johnson for a part in your quiet drama because you have an interesting opportunity for him to "play against type" (to play something distinct from the roles generally expected of him), you might add a note explaining your choice – and perhaps enlightening a reader who might otherwise be confused and/or skeptical.

- **Tailor your choices to your audience.** If you're targeting a particular agency, it would generally be strategic to include only those actors that the particular agency represents; though, in some rare situations (if you want to play with fire), depicting an actor at a rival agency could remind your targeted agency that you're also considering a competitor.

- **Choose only actors who truly fit each character.** This may sound obvious (and we hope it does), but you'd be surprised how many writers choose a star merely because

they love the actor – or the potential box office that actor would bring. If you plaster four entirely incongruent superstars next to a CHARACTER DESCRIPTION, it might be confusing for your reader (and might suggest that you're artlessly wanting a big star, regardless of whether they fit the role). Which is not to say that each character's actor choices need to be similar, but there should some rational reasons why you've matched them all to this role.

....

Some writers will go into some detail regarding their casting vision, explaining the reason they want a certain actor. This can help reframe the reason you have seemingly contradictory choices for the same character. (Continue reading for where/how to do this.)

....

- **Clearly separate casting notes from CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS.** If you include casting notes to argue your case for a specific actor playing a role (e.g., "Salma Hayek would be great for this part because..."), make these notes obviously separate from your "just the facts" description of the character. Casting notes can come before or after the description (whichever works better with your content), but consider putting your casting notes in a different text style (that doesn't clash with your other content, of course) to ensure zero confusion between the two.

- **Aim for well-known names.** Unless you're reaching out to a particular agent or manager for their smaller, lesser-known actor, it's a good idea to use actors that are well-known enough that they serve as a true reference point. This means the actors you choose should seamlessly

conjure up an idea of what your character might be like in the mind's eye of the reader.

- **Label headshots only when necessary.** Listing an actual actor's name within the vicinity of a CHARACTER DESCRIPTION (i.e., labeling a headshot) should be based on the actor's star power and recognizability. If you're depicting Tom Hanks, any agent who doesn't know what Tom Hanks looks like probably should consider another career. Then again, if you're listing Mr. Hanks alongside some lesser-known actor who *does* need naming, you'll lose a sense of consistency by naming the lesser-known actor only; so in this case, you might state the obvious.

  Another thing to consider: If you're sending your deck to an actor's rep, they really ought to know what their client looks like without your needing to label the headshot. (Just make sure you choose a photo that hasn't caught that actor at their most disheveled.)

  In most cases, the ultimate focus should be on the character. Headshot labels often detract from the context rather than adding to it, so if you don't have to label your headshots (because these faces are easily and widely recognized), don't.

THE HOOK

THE HOOK is your story's existential statement.

THE HOOK is a short affirmation of your project's value, where you call attention to your narrative's most unique or intriguing facet — the singular reason it should exist. In a sentence or two, spell out what makes it special enough to hook an audience. Instead of describing the concept or premise (like you do with a LOGLINE), declare:

1. What makes your story original

2. How your story takes familiar narrative tropes or elements and combines them into a unique creation (the ever-commercially-viable "familiar but different"), such as, "It's A meets B."

3. How your story takes a new angle on a thoroughly explored subject

Like the LOGLINE, the HOOK should be kept short and sweet (two sentences *at most*). But *unlike* a LOGLINE (or a SYNOPSIS), the HOOK is one of the elements of a pitch where you can editorialize — i.e., state opinions about or qualify your own project (THE CASE and WHAT IT IS being other important "The Pitch" sections). But be artful and *don't oversell.* Think of it as a second chance or parting shot at the exec getting off the elevator after you've told them your LOGLINE.

Example: Stranger Things (Netflix, 2016)

```
A 1980s sci-fi Spielbergian universe, but with a dark
side.
```

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

While your LOGLINE's micro-summary of your plot (what the story is about) is an attempt to capture the nucleus of your concept, it still might not explicitly convey the importance or novelty of your series. Figuring out THE HOOK answers the question, "Why does this deserve to exist?" Writing it is a come-to-Jesus moment that asks: How is this different, or at least a twist, on other existing narratives? What are you adding to the narrative world?

You're showcasing your concept in a different light, suggesting why it will snare an audience:

- "This is the story of the first female attorney in the U.S."

- "This is a hard R fairytale."

- *"Cast Away* set in outer space."

- *"Succession* meets *The West Wing."*

STRATEGIES

As mentioned earlier, THE HOOK is different from the LOGLINE. While a LOGLINE describes your premise in a sentence, a HOOK takes a step further to express how that premise or your approach to your story has value, is unique, or simply should exist at all. This gives you a way to leverage a concept that might sound a bit overly familiar; it's a way to

point out a facet that a reader might not see immediately due to the compressed nature of a LOGLINE/premise. (In fact, because Hollywood was built on a business model of making familiar-but-successful films, your likening your premise to a recent hit could become an asset rather than sounding like a stale liability).

There are a few approaches to THE HOOK. Try any (or several) of these approaches — perhaps even combine two or three — and see which one resonates:

- Underscore (in 1 sentence) what's really special and unique about your story.

- Get meta: Describe how your story introduces a new element to a well-worn genre.

....

Perhaps you're writing a story about class differences in 1700s Europe, but the LOGLINE suggests little regarding the story's unique tone, which you can mention in THE HOOK: "A slapstick comedy set in the Age of the Enlightenment."

....

- Suggest how it breaks the mold with an unexpected hybrid (via Hollywood's "analogy game."). Describe how two seemingly disparate movies or series or genres might combine to make your movie or show, such as:

  - *Joker* is a supervillain story crossed with *Taxi Driver*.

  - *Glengarry Glen Ross* meets *Squid Game*.

....

The classic 1992 film The Player *does an excellent job of both portraying and skewering the sometimes-overused analogy approach to THE HOOK. If you haven't seen this movie, it might give you some ideas on how (and how* not*) to craft this style of HOOK.*

....

- Perhaps your series introduces an unfamiliar subject or unexplored terrain, giving it intrinsic bragging rights:

  - This is a drama about the greatest pyramid scheme in history.

  - This is the first movie to cover the competitive world of Chess Boxing (which is an actual thing).

- Remember: Even if your concept/subject isn't new, it's possible that the *way* you've told your story is unique:

  - Though the story of ____ has been told before, this retells it as a musical.

  - While other biopics have focused on _____'s rise to fame, my story focuses on her final years, when her fame was slipping away.

- Elaborate on a particular contextual element that the LOGLINE merely hints at:

  - This deals with a subculture in the 1950s that was considered radical at the time.

- This is about a little-known uprising that was historically significant because...

MORE HOOK EXAMPLES

Breaking Bad (Sony Pictures Television, 2008)

```
King Lear set in modern times. This series aims to
deliver one of the most dramatic character arcs in
history, where we watch a good school teacher go
epically bad.
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Ozark (Netflix, 2017)

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Breaking Bad in the backwater, Ozark similarly
explores an Average Joe who must turn to the dark
side in order to help his family survive.
```

The Crown (Netflix, 2016)

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The most intimate and detailed portrait of the
world's longest-reigning female monarch, Queen
Elizabeth II.
```

THE CASE

THE CASE adds insurance that the reader "gets" what you're trying to say. This section is your most unfiltered chance to argue in favor of your project, to explain your vision and your story's purpose. This is the moment where you bear passionate witness to why your story deserves to turn into a series or movie.

....

Whereas WHAT IT IS marries some of your opinion or editorial with description of the story, THE CASE can be unbridled opinion.

....

What's fascinating is that in completing this section, you will likely come to new conclusions about what's important to *you* about what your story is trying to say.

If you're a pro, it adds assurance that your series is being effectively represented. After all, who knows your project better than you?

Example: Ted Lasso (Apple TV+, 2020)

At a time when there's so much negativity in the
world, *Ted Lasso* follows the titular character, a
coach who's disarmingly positive. At times, Ted seems
almost too pollyanna-ish to put much stock in him,
but the cynics he'll cross paths with soon learn they
ignore him to their own detriment. Ted's optimism is
hard-won and his inspiration comes when you least

expect it as he wins over the skeptics and conquers bullies. The series will comedically juxtapose his nearly dumbfounding belief in himself — an American football coach who's never coached soccer in his life — with those who doubt him, such as owner Rebecca, true curmudgeon Roy Kent, and naturally gifted (and entitled) stars like Jamie Tartt. There are so many dark, negative series populating the streamers lately. *Ted Lasso* aspires to be an oasis in the TV desert — a truly feel-good story that perforates its little-engine-that-could spirit with acerbic humor (and the fact that the British take their soccer soooo seriously, it's as funny as it is scary).

THE CASE IS YOUR MOST UNFILTERED CHANCE TO ARGUE IN FAVOR OF YOUR PROJECT, TO EXPLAIN YOUR VISION AND YOUR STORY'S PURPOSE. THIS IS THE MOMENT WHERE YOU BEAR PASSIONATE WITNESS TO WHY YOUR STORY DESERVES TO TURN INTO A SERIES OR MOVIE.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Even after reading your LOGLINE, HOOK, SYNOPSIS, or even the script itself, the reader might not yet grasp the core importance of your project. THE CASE is an opportunity to make that importance land and state more overtly what your story is trying to say, to ensure the reader "gets" it.

....

You might be writing about a couple of bumbling, idiotic characters, but here you can display the intelligence to your approach as you fervently and eloquently detail your vision, showing the level of thought that went into the purposefully skewed world of your simple-minded characters.

....

Your ability to write passionately and clearly about your vision is an opportunity to explicitly persuade your reader on the merits of your story. It's impressive to know the number of ways readers or decision-makers can miss your point. (One of the most common is that they read a bit of your script and get interrupted by an hour-long phone call; when they go back to reading, they have already lost your thread.) With THE CASE, you have an opportunity to make sure that if they missed what's so great about your story, you can still make them *get it*.

Make no mistake: In completing this section, *you* might come to new conclusions about what's important to *you* and about your story's purpose. THE CASE is a chance to underscore what makes your series's or feature's heart beat — to get to the core importance that might not yet be grasped from your LOGLINE, HOOK, SYNOPSIS, or from your script.

STRATEGIES

- **Follow THE HOOK's lead.** Ideally, THE CASE should read like a natural continuation or expansion of the HOOK's claims. (While THE HOOK is like a one-liner that sums up the reasons your show is unique or puts a spin on things, THE CASE is a more expansive argument in favor of your

series or movie.) And when ending your CASE text, consider the FINANCIALS text that might follow (which will focus more specifically on your financial argument).

- **Indicate why the audience should (and will) care about your story.** If your story is biographical or historical, for example, you might expand on the importance of the events in question, e.g., "This is a little-known but extremely important moment in Europe's global conquest..." Is it about an issue many will relate to, such as civil rights? Or is it simply about an aspect of the human condition — as simple as a coming-of-age story that you believe will stoke the nostalgia of a sizable audience? Stories both large and small can be campaigned for just as effectively with the right approach, so consider your arguments like a good marketer would.

- **As with THE HOOK, remember:** Even if your concept/ subject isn't new, it's possible that the *way* you've told your story is unique:

  - "Though this story has been told before, this retells it as a musical."

  - "While other biopics have focused on _____'s rise to fame, my story focuses on her final years, when her fame was slipping away."

  Using THE CASE, you can expand on your project's twist-on-a-trope suggested by THE HOOK, leaning in more verbosely to market your inversion of a familiar element, explaining why it amounts to real leverage rather than being a liability.

- **Consider current events.** Is your show timely? Is it especially relatable and resonant, given the current news headlines or cultural trends? This is one way to mark its importance (and allure) for today's audience.

- **Imagine the word-of-mouth.** What might audiences be chattering about after seeing a few episodes of your series? While the overall story and its subject matter — writ large — might be the thing, it could also be a more specific *angle*. Are there unexpected twists? Is there a surprising aesthetic approach — perhaps you wrote each episode of your horror series with no scene breaks, dictating that each episode should be shot in one continuous take?

- **Don't assume you need to portray your series or feature as being a "big" production.** In an age when special effects and bombast seem to dominate the screen, there's always an appetite for more modest productions that loom large in terms of roles with dramatic heft and characters with interesting idiosyncrasy — emotional impact can transcend humble production size. So make a strong statement about the copious amounts of character that will unfurl over a season or two.

- **You can make multiple CASES.** You're not restricted to just one case. You can make several (though we'd recommend you use our suggested word limit).

- **Put on your lawyer or agent hat.** Imagine your script is your client, and your job here is to extoll, praise, and defend its merits and value.

- **Be passionate, but don't oversell or brag too much.** Saying, "This is going to be the best comedy series in years" reeks of a lack of self-awareness.

....

Instead, you might detail what will make your comedy both unique and effective, e.g., "The lead character, a sheltered house-wife, has time-traveled from the 1950s to the present day, and is suddenly surrounded by 'woke' characters. Her fish-out-of-water, un-p.c. cluelessness clashes with modern attitudes, such as the MeToo movement, to hilariously catastrophic end."

....

- **Consider production details (*if* they help build a compelling CASE).** For example, after stating a unique location, you might elaborate: "This is a limited horror series that can be shot mostly at one location — an asbestos factory — making it inexpensive to make, and the uniqueness of the location will contribute to the story's originality, as well as to its satirical tone." Generally, such information should be left to the FINANCIALS section, but if you feel it's a particularly strong aspect for your CASE, you can mention it briefly here.

MORE "THE CASE" EXAMPLES

These CASE examples are shown preceded by their HOOKS to illustrate the recommended continuity from THE HOOK to THE CASE.

Breaking Bad **(Sony Pictures Television, 2008)**

THE HOOK

There's only so much misfortune a good man can take.
King Lear hasn't seen anything yet.

THE CASE

Breaking Bad is a series offering the ultimate
character arc as it follows a good man who will (by
society's standards) turn bad in epic proportions.
Life has dealt him a series of cards that are
irrevocably unfair, and knowing his future has been
radically shortened, he turns to a life of crime —
making meth — in order to provide for his family.
Walter's good intentions to help his family will lead
to darker and darker consequences and the series will
convincingly sell the improbable notion that such a
square and Average Joe could become a veritable crime
lord and monster.

Succession (Warner Bros. Television, 2018)

THE HOOK

You're going to love watching this family — which
looks suspiciously like the Murdochs of Fox News fame
— destroy itself.

THE CASE

With tongue planted in cheek, *Succession* follows a
family of unabashedly reprehensible people, a dynasty
of monsters, who run a global media empire that just
happens to look exactly like the Murdoch family. We
follow Logan Roy's children jockeying for pole
position as he appears to be aging out of the role as
head of the conglomerate, and we'll delight in seeing
incredibly unsavory (often comedic) characters tear
each other apart. This show will be one of the few
series to successfully command an audience despite
having almost nobody to sympathize with, the reward
being its satirical tone and the sheer satisfaction
of seeing a family one-up each other with fiendish
stratagems that are always just desserts.

FINANCIALS

Talking dollars and cents in a pitch deck makes the most sense if your project is an indie film. Forecasting the business life of your story in a compressed way can help an investor see some exciting fiscal possibilities.

Some writers discuss their FINANCIALS in a dedicated section. Others discuss it in THE CASE section or briefly mention it in their WHAT IT IS overview section. Some create a "Comparables" (often known as "Comps") section/page. Comps present the box office results of other film projects that emulate their project's budget parameters and/or deal with subject matter relevant to the project in question.

Whatever approach you choose, your goal is to speak to the commercial viability of the story: why you're convinced that it will "put butts in seats" and (depending on your project) how it might start small but "platform out," etc. You can also discuss promotional tie-ins, product placement, and other potential bonuses (as long as you stay high-level about such specifics).

Example: La La Land (Lionsgate, 2016)

In the last decade, the blockbuster attention garnered by movie musicals such as *Mamma Mia!*, *Les Misérables*, *Chicago*, and *Dreamgirls* has made it clear that the modern movie musical is a colossus. The success of "riskier," original adaptations — such as *Once* and *Moulin Rouge!* — prove that even these musicals can find a passionate fan-base and platform to wider audiences.

La La Land is set in present-day Los Angeles and is intimately focused on the love story of the two leads; this relatable focus offsets and magnifies the spectacle of the musical set pieces that punctuate their relationship. *La La Land* celebrates the classic form of the musical in a much more familiar time and setting than its predecessors (such as in the opening dance scene, which takes place on an L.A. freeway).

It also grounds the spectacle in the realistic conflict that comes between the two main characters, aiming to appeal even to the musical skeptic. Unlike *High School Musical*, *La La Land* is meant to conquer everyone from Disney's audience to Los Feliz hipsters and indie film sophisticates. It pushes back on the notion that musicals are sappy. In fact, they can be bittersweet, and that bittersweetness enables a musical like *La La Land* to make a name for itself, carving out its own perch in the canon. As the characters chart a path through Hollywood and trendy L.A. haunts, and the story navigates a universal tale of dreams throttled by ambition, becoming a wedge against love itself, *La La Land* plans to attract audiences both young and old...even the tragically unhip.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Investors, producers, and the industry at large often consider financial arguments (for and against your project) as much as — if not more than — they consider your actual story, and they might not yet "see the light" regarding its ability to return on investment. Here you can highlight a built-in audience they might not have thought of, or a subplot they missed that capitalizes on a trend, or even a tie-in product that could create a cascade of good fortune.

This is an opportunity to excite these decision-makers about such selling points — especially before their accountants can give a more dispassionate assessment. Make the case that your movie or series — even a seemingly quiet indie drama — will generate enough media buzz to impress the box office or TV ratings. Decision-makers need to know that your project isn't just "art for art's sake," but also has the ingredients for commercial success.

And if the production boasts other economic benefits (such as inexpensive or tax-advantageous shooting locations), those count as more points in your project's fiscal favor.

STRATEGIES

- **State any substantial money already invested in your project.** Obviously, if you have concrete financing in place, this is something to state up front, but *tread carefully here*. Do not overstate things or make claims you can't back up; if you do, you'll be quick to get a bad reputation, and you'll be out of Hollywood before you're in. (Remember: It's a small town where people talk.) If some company has merely said they're interested in financing your project, this doesn't count. You need paperwork.

  You also need a sense of scale. If you've written a project that will take $100 million to produce, it's not worth mentioning that your cousin is chipping in $10k. (Why? Because that is a paltry 0.01% — one ten-thousandth — of the total price-tag.) However, if you have a smaller indie film that will cost $500k and you have friends and family committed to a full half of that cost, that *is* worth mentioning — but again, be ready to back this up with documentation.

- **Look for practical financial advantages.** Also on the theme of scale: If there are tax credits tied to your filming locations or other fiscal boons, you can mention these here. Just make sure they're compelling numbers.

- **Look for the topical.** Does your story touch on any trends or hot-button topics in the news? While that's certainly something to mention in THE CASE section as well, you can also make the specific argument in FINANCIALS that such aspects will augment your marketing. Your story's topical nature could mean exponential media amplification (i.e., free advertising!) for your project, such as news outlets discussing your film or show because they're actively looking for material to supplement their discussion on the topic.

- **Consider your (first) target audience.** Discuss the demographics that would be motivated to see your production. Is there a niche demographic from which to platform (build) a larger audience?

- **Name successful Comparable projects to create "Comps."** Perhaps your story isn't earth-shatteringly original; maybe it's proudly on a mission to emulate other successful genre fare. Even if it's wholly unique, you can discuss the success of other projects in your genre and the loyal audience that you're confident will show up to yours.

  Create a chart with thumbnails of the comparable movie titles and the corresponding box office data. This is generally a pretty simple chart or graph with the titles (or thumbnails) and associated numbers; this presents the notion that your film could trend in a direction similar to those other movies' numbers. You can put such a chart in the first third of a page and then add promotional text

below it (using some of the other strategies listed herein).

You can take a simpler approach to Comps without using a chart or any visuals. Instead, provide a few meaningful stats without bogging down this section with granular figures, e.g., "With the recent success of productions like _____ and _____, it's clear that audiences are hungry for fare like this." You can then elaborate on the elements you think similarly tap into that hunger.

- **Answer this question: How will your story make the public hungry?** Perhaps your plot has a shocking twist that would make M. Night Shyamalan jealous and that you're confident will generate word-of-mouth. This word-of-mouth is literally going to help sell your production, so the specificity about how your story will generate said word-of-mouth is a worthy selling point.

- **Envision the marketing.** Discuss your plan on how the production will tease up the "twists" in your story in an effective trailer campaign. Perhaps even a cryptic poster that piques interest (e.g., "What does that symbol mean?") could be a part of your strategy.

- **Be confident, but realistic.** Don't claim that your quiet indie film will rake in tentpole profits; that only makes you look dishonest and/or deluded. But you can still speak confidently of the potential to platform your production, of your ability to start small with special-interest or niche audiences that you believe will turn out (or stream) in droves, and then be able introduce it to wider audiences.

Don't make the argument that your mumblecore navel-gazer will be in more than 4,000 theaters. Decision-makers in Hollywood might see a more convincing case for certain

films making money by avoiding a theatrical release entirely, and going straight for the streaming market. Sounding grounded but confident will actually help your pitch deck help you. Not that you want to go out of your way to make your project sound tiny, either. What's most important is that your confidence sounds anchored by perspective and strategic vision.

....

As you discuss your project's breakout potential, you need to understand your audience. Consider drawing up a detailed profile for your own notes and then write a high-level profile (minus the minutiae from your notes) of this audience in order to convince potential investors/producers that this audience actually exists.

....

- **Consider product tie-ins.** For example, perhaps your show is about competitive skateboarding. Skateboard companies might want to invest in the series and promote it to the skateboarding community. But make sure your tie-ins are compelling; don't get silly with this and suggest that a silverware company would be inspired to invest massive bucks in your project because it has a dining room scene. As with everything, if execs sense you have no sense of proportion, they will take your project less seriously.

SERIES OUTLINE

The SERIES OUTLINE is a series of summaries of the episodes that compose the season's story arc.

For each episode, you can list the specific characters taking center-stage and enter two different descriptions:

- **Short Description (10 – 100 words):** Think of the summaries that accompany episodes of a series on a streaming service. Depending on the complexity of your story, you can be as brief as those (about the same length as a LOGLINE) or provide more detail with a short paragraph like a SHORT SYNOPSIS.

- **Long Description (300 – 1,000 words):** This is a more fulsome synopsis of each episode or act — typically about one page like a feature's FULL SYNOPSIS, laying out a detailed sense of where the plot and subplots are going in this chapter of the story.

You should at least provide a Short Description for each episode in your SERIES OUTLINE if you want your show to be considered development-ready (but be warned that some management companies encourage their clients to write a Long Description for *every* episode in the SERIES OUTLINE).

ScriptHop's Packet allows for you to include the Long Description for each episode such that they can be seen on-demand, rather than chewing up dozens of slides in a deck.

Example: Ozark (Netflix, 2017), Episode 1: "Sugarwood"

Short Description

Marty Byrde, a financial advisor, has gotten in over his head handling dirty money, and makes a deal with the Sinaloa Cartel (in exchange for his and his family's lives): He'll move to the Ozarks to launder for the cartel. Just as he's forced to hole-up with his family in the sticks, Marty learns his wife was having an affair, adding tension to this upheaval.

Long Description

A flash forward teaser: Summer. A lake's isolated cove, ringed with thick woods. Marty Byrde, his unshaven face battered, emerges from the woods pulling two large Coleman coolers. Against Marty's money-centric voice over, he makes his way by boat across the huge lake, passing million-dollar homes and shanties, completing his trip via mini-van to an old barn. Inside the barn Marty finishes stuffing the contents of the Colemans into the hacksawed pontoon of a derelict boat — millions of dollars, cash.

Present day Naperville, IL, suburb of Chicago. Liddell and Byrde Financial Advisors. A clean-shaven, shirt-and-tie-wearing Marty tries to sway a pair of would-be investors while keeping one eye on his computer screen: amateur porn. Meet Bruce Liddell, the more dynamic half of L&B. We learn Marty and Bruce are thinking of moving into larger digs; there's more to L&B than meets the eye. Marty, unsettled, doesn't respond to Bruce's pep talk or to the mention of Bruce's recent trip to Southern Missouri, the Lake of the Ozarks. We follow Marty home, meet his teen kids, Charlotte and Jonah. Marty's a cyclist, history enthusiast, backyard gardener, mole fighter. Marty goes for a bike ride, burning off steam, something roiling beneath the surface. On his way home he's met by his minivan-

driving wife, Wendy Byrde: the woman in Marty's office porn. She's cheating on him. Marty weathers the evening, storming out of the house at night, his family unaware of his absence. He considers a hooker before being summoned via phone by a frightened Bruce. Marty needs to meet him. Now. "Del's here."

Hanson Trucking. Night. Marty finds a shaken Bruce, fiancée Liz, and the Hansons, Senior and Junior. Meet Arturo "Del" Del Rio, manager with the Sinaloa Cartel: the second-largest drug cartel in Mexico and employers of Liddell and Byrde. Del accuses Marty and Bruce of stealing five million from him, wants it back. Marty protests, Del responds by killing Liz. Confessions follow: *eight* million, not five, was stolen, Marty ignorant of the theft. Both Hansons and finally, Bruce, killed. Marty escapes death with a last-second ruse: persuading Del that he's been planning a move to Southern Missouri — the Ozarks. A place he can hide from federal agents, launder cartel money in peace. Del spares Marty but wants his stolen money returned, all eight million. In cash. 48-hour time limit imposed. Marty tells a frightened Wendy they're moving to Missouri, about the killings. She's known about his job all along. The kids object to the news of relocating, he overrules them.

Marty scrambles to put eight million together, liquidating investments, IRAs, college funds, a running total in his mind and onscreen. Meanwhile, Wendy looks for a way out, turns to her lover, the man in the amateur porn video and a lawyer, for help. The pair in love, a naughty nickname given. Marty learns Wendy is working against him, has cashed out their savings/checking account. Incensed, he rushes to her lover's Chicago high-rise to confront her, is stopped when her lover hits the pavement at his feet, thrown from his 60th-floor window by Del's assassin, Wendy's current captor. Del offers to kill Wendy, makes the case for it. Marty refuses, delivers — mostly — on his promise to deliver eight million in cash. Del satisfied, gives the cash back, tells Marty to clean it. In the Ozarks. Del issues a warning: If he has to journey to Missouri, if Marty fails to clean, he'll kill him and his entire family.

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Treasury agent Dominic Petty collects his listening
devices, wonders at his missing confidential
informant, Bruce Liddell. Petty is on the trail of
one Martin Byrde, money-launderer.

Minivan crammed with their possessions and eight
million in cash, Marty and the Byrdes arrive at their
new home: Southern Missouri's Lake of the Ozarks.
```

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Through research with various management companies and agencies, we've determined that it's difficult to get a series sold without presenting the details of the first season in detail. (This is what agents and managers tell their own clients). So at least consider providing a Short Description for each episode.

Some execs may not even want a pilot or script, but they *all* want a sense of the vision for your show, and that necessitates a sense of where the story is headed. They want to know your project has "legs" that will carry and sustain your story through its limited or longer series run.

....

Some execs want to flesh out the pilot with you and/or other writers, so they might not want to read your actual pilot.

....

For your own writing process, planning the episodes for your series *without* writing out a SERIES OUTLINE as your road map is going to generally leave you lost. You need a game plan — at least a Short Description of a couple of sentences for each episode* so that you can track your characters and

their story over a season — what they're doing, how they're changing, etc.

....

Episode, Act, etc.: You decide how to organize your series

While the Ozark *example above suggests a SERIES OUTLINE composed of episodes (and this is a fairly standard approach), you can organize it in other ways: Perhaps each item in your OUTLINE is an act (as in Act I, Act II, etc.) that spans multiple episodes. Or you might use a different term entirely — e.g., the sitcom* The Good Place *presented each episode as a "Chapter" to make it feel less stand-alone, more like the next turn-of-the-page in one big story.*

For the sake of brevity, the remaining content below will stick to the term "episode." Just remember that you are not tied to using this term or this approach.

....

IT'S DIFFICULT TO GET A SERIES SOLD WITHOUT PRESENTING THE DETAILS OF THE FIRST SEASON IN DETAIL.

STRATEGIES

- **Remember your LOGLINE.** An episode's Short Description can be the same length as — or a little longer than — a LOGLINE (depending on your story's complexity), but the same principles apply. If you're not sure how to write a LOGLINE, see our LOGLINE tips and examples.

- **Stick to the facts.** What actually *happens* in your story? Which is to say: *Don't editorialize.* Agents and execs will mentally demote your project if you add personal critique to a description of a scene or sequence — e.g., "By the way, this scene is really funny!! :)" A SERIES OUTLINE is purely The Facts, so let your plot descriptions speak for themselves.

  You can add commentary about your approach and the *effects* of your writing in other sections like WHAT IT IS, THE CASE, and PACE, VISUAL STYLE, AND TONE.

- **Stay present-tense.** As in the screenplay itself, you should generally write your Short and Long Descriptions in the present tense, using *active* language that emulates the tone, energy, and movement of your story.

  If you have flashbacks (or flash-forwards) that are crucial to mention, state the time-shift but keep your language present-tense: "We flash back to: Sarah in 1985. She's at a Madonna concert where she meets Jim for the first time. Back in the present, we see Sarah and Jim feeling the strains of marriage..." Breaking these temporal (time) shifts up into separate paragraphs can further delineate this so it's more navigable for the reader. (See the first two paragraphs of the *Ozark* Long Description example above.)

- **Keep each Short Description short...** Don't get too into the weeds with your Short Descriptions; keep these compressed to a few sentences or shorter. Instead of walking the reader through all the beats of a plot element, pique their interest with easily digestible doses of what to expect. Keep your main characters in the spotlight, but also hint at how secondary characters and subplots will take the story in new directions.

- **...And save most detail for the Long Description.** *Do* get into the weeds in each Long Description, summarizing the major and minor storylines in this episode. In the Long Description, you'll want to detail the subplots as well. Cover the major beats of your character arcs — in other words, chronicle how your characters are evolving (or *de*volving) from the events and plot they cause or endure.

- **Remember the big picture.** Reading through the series of either Short or Long Descriptions should "track," meaning the reader should be able to follow the major transitions, pivots, and *arcs* of your season's storyline. They should have some sense of how the conflicts/dilemmas play out over the season, as well as how the main character(s) are changing over the course of the show.

  While writing an individual description of an episode is relatively easy, **reading the sum total of these episode descriptions *together* will likely have you revising them to make the plot threads weave more effectively**. If this sounds like (yet) more work, remember it's also a godsend that will strengthen your insights, plans, and your script(s)!

- **Conflict = substance.** If there isn't enough happening to generate a Long Description, the culprit in that uneventfulness is likely the *conflict* in your story (or rather, the lack of it). If you don't have an understanding of conflict and you're struggling to write a Long Description, now would be a good time to go back to the basics with any number of good screenwriting books.

....

Conflict between protagonist and antagonist is your show's lifeblood. This antagonist might be internal (such as an illness — physical or mental — or an existential crisis) or external (such as a business rival, a serial killer, or an apocalypse). That tension between hero and villain is the driving force and the golden thread you should see running through each episode.

....

● **Action = character.** Most of what we learn about your characters from the SERIES OUTLINE should be eventful: What is a plot if not a sequence of *events*? That being said, tell us the *plot-affecting traits* of your main character(s); your SERIES OUTLINE (and its Long Descriptions especially) should chart some aspects of the lead characters' arcs: how they change or grow, or suffer the consequences of *not* changing. (As stated previously, Shakespeare made a living crafting unchanging — yet incredibly potent — characters for his tragedies.)

....

Save your full CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS — personality, appearance, backstory, etc. — for your packet's CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS section. In your SERIES OUTLINE, stick to details crucial to the characters' actions, the episodes' events, and how these details factor into the character arc(s). Some examples of character details to mention here (because of their clear role in the story's events):

● *Your lead is an overweight, nerdy kid suffering at the hands of bullies.*

● *Your lead is a chronically shy woman who decides to become a standup comic.*

- *Your lead adheres to a strict religion, which brings no end of complications to his job at a slaughterhouse.*

....

- **Forget the forgettable.** If you've written an episode's script, a good way to approach its Long Description (and perhaps its Short Description too) is the following:

  1. Reread that script in its entirety (in one sitting).

  2. Close the script, then (without referring back to it) jot down the salient *events that stick in your memory* from what you've read.

  3. Imagine you're *telling* these events to someone (if it helps, do so out loud) and write that story-*telling* down.

  4. Refine what you've written so it's efficiently, crisply, yet compellingly told.

What's effective about this approach? You're forcing yourself to rely on what is memorable about your story; there's a universal human trait that tends to limit your memory to the truly eventful (important) moments of your script(rather than clog it up with incidental details). You don't want the proverbial "everything but the kitchen sink" here. To reiterate: You want an *eventful summary - a summary of what is important in terms of the actions being taken by your characters*.

WHERE IT'S GOING

WHERE IT'S GOING foreshadows or gives a more specific sense of the next season of your series. Lay out a few tantalizing plot-points that will occur in the future or suggest some drastic character transformation(s) that will keep an audience in your story's clutches.

Example: Ozark (Netflix, 2017)

With each season, the stakes rise. The unexpected slaughter of Del and his men at the hands of a lethal clan of hillbillies prevents the Mexican enforcer from seeing Marty's casino swell to the sixth-largest gambling operation in the Midwest. Marty's confrontation with the same feral group results in a mass killing via electrocution and a late night swim.

Wendy's ascent to the top of the real estate food-chain conflicts with Marty's acquisition of mom-and-pop businesses, construction companies, condominiums, and nightclubs. His takeover of a credit union increases his ability to manipulate the economy, borrowers, and…his wife. Ruth becomes the instrument of her uncle's death, spurring a brass-knuckled rampage from a grieving Treasury agent. Buddy's death, the long-buried secret under his basement, and his returned affection for his upstairs family help secure fraying family ties.

Ultimately, Marty's and Wendy's greatest accomplishment will be raising two well-rounded children who defy conventional wisdom — poised to succeed in life not in spite of their father's occupation or their Ozark experiences, but because of them.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Seeing even further into your show's future can help you further refine the overall storyline for the current/first season. Seeing where your characters pick up next year might help you revise and even discover your cliffhanger for Season 1.

Though the market has opened up for the acquisition and development of *limited* series, execs are generally looking for shows they'll be able to produce for more than just one season. It takes a lot of work to produce a show, so execs want to know their investment won't fizzle after just one season. Similarly, agents and actors are interested in finding roles that will last for their clients. WHERE IT'S GOING is an opportunity to sell beyond the first season, to really show that your vision has some serious "legs" — i.e., enough substance and momentum to carry it through multiple worthwhile seasons.

STRATEGIES

- **Don't give away everything.** Concise tends to win the day here, especially if you're capitalizing on a cliffhanger from the end of your first season. You want to pique execs'/ agents'/actors' interest, so you might be a bit coy and "tease up" the next season with a suggested plot-point (event) or two while still giving a sense of what the general focus will be. While your first season's SERIES OUTLINE needs to really spell things out, WHERE IT'S GOING can leave your readers a little hungry; just be sure you're revealing enough that they want to know more.

- **Consider a serious departure from Season 1.** Suggesting a major transformation in the life of one of your characters in the next season is one way to stir an exec's interest. For

example, if readers are loving your SERIES OUTLINE for the first season, telling them that "we'll discover that Terry is actually secretly one of the extremists she's been 'investigating' and will betray her partner" might be irresistibly intriguing.

What you *don't* want to do is suggest that Season 2 will simply be more of the same, even if you believe you have a good thing going. Change is the order of the day with WHERE IT'S GOING.

- **Try THE TEASER approach.** Refer to our chapter on THE TEASER and write one for your subsequent season(s).

THE TEASER

Time to excite! Point your descriptive lens at a key moment or two. This is your space to tease up through description a specific scene, such as a cold open* (in the case of series), or even an appetizer sampler of moments. Spur the reader's or listener's interest with a sense of immediacy for your project: Immerse them in at least one specific, pivotal moment to make the potential of your story tangible, flavorful, tantalizing.

....

*Cold open: an opening scene in a series that throws you into the story with no context — often at the height of drama (without the benefit of any buildup or assisting info). The effect of a cold open is to literally tease up the story with a burst of cryptic but intriguing drama or action that hooks you enough that you want to watch more of that episode.

....

Example: Breaking Bad (Sony Pictures Television, 2008)

We open on an RV careening down a desert road. Behind the wheel, a man wearing a respirator and a visor, panicking as he tries to race as best as one can in an RV — without driving off the road. A wary glance or two behind him suggests he's being followed. Importantly, we notice he's only wearing his underwear — and next to him in the passenger seat is another man, more fully clad, but worse for the wear — unconscious or dead.

Our driver appears to lose control, steering into a
ravine. He exits the vehicle to catch his breath, as
if he's been inhaling noxious fumes. Hearing sirens
in the distance, he takes a deep inhale, re-enters
the RV where we see another man, face down in the
back of the RV. He takes the gun from this man's hand
and finds a video recorder. Outside again, catching
his breath, sirens getting closer, the man takes out
the small camera and records himself.

He introduces himself as "Walter White," provides his
address, and pleads with "all law enforcement
entities…this is not an admission of guilt. I am
speaking to my family now." He proceeds to tell them
that they'll learn some things about him in the
ensuing days, but that he only had them in his heart.
As the sirens grow even closer, more imminent, Walter
stops filming, walks out into the middle of the road
with the gun pointed toward whoever dares approach.

Cut to opening credits.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

THE TEASER is where you show how your series will make an impactful first impression on viewers. If WHAT IT IS sells your project comprehensively with a *macro* view, THE TEASER pinpoints a very specific example of a set piece or dramatic payoff on your show, zooming-in for *micro* attention on a scene or plot point. This is where you have a real *moment* with your reader. If they enjoy that moment, the likelihood increases that they're going to want to dive in deeper. This is your chance to give a decision-maker a taste of what the audience will see and feel.

THE TEASER reveals what you think one of your most interesting scenes is. You're revealing one or more cliffhanger moments, revelations, etc. that generate interest in, or excitement about, the story.

THE TEASER PINPOINTS A VERY SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF A SET PIECE OR DRAMATIC PAYOFF ON YOUR SHOW, ZOOMING-IN FOR MICRO ATTENTION ON A SCENE OR PLOT POINT. THIS IS WHERE YOU HAVE A REAL *MOMENT* WITH YOUR READER.

STRATEGIES

- **Immerse the reader.** Write a paragraph or two with enough *visceral* detail that the reader feels like they're *there* in the moment. Bring the dramatic stakes of your project into sharp focus by describing a crucial exchange, event, action sequence, or scene.

- **Illustrate what's urgent.** This doesn't mean a bomb has to be ticking. The urgency — i.e., what's at stake — *could* be life-and-death, or it could be romantic, comedic, etc. But that imperative incident should leave a felt sense for the reason we'd tune in, like a thermal handprint on our mind.

- **Show your character(s) on a precipice.** Describe a high-stakes moment that confronts them...then *shove* them plummeting toward the conflict. We should be dying to know whether they'll survive (physically or emotionally).

- **Consider the tone of your delivery.** Cut to the chase with your project and make the reader/listener feel like they're practically participating in the immediacy of a moment of

your story, or at least witnessing, the scene (see our *Breaking Bad* example above). It can be one or more chase scenes, dramatic beats, etc.; they needn't be adrenaline-inducing (not every story is action-packed), but should be interesting, even enticing. While you don't want to over-direct THE TEASER (leave elaboration of technical minutiae to your director), this is a section where a bit of camera/p.o.v. description can contribute to bring the moment you're presenting alive.

....

Though generally we recommend you use the present tense (to put your reader in the moment), the bible for Ozark *uses a very active* future *tense to make each event feel like an looming predicament:*

"We'll watch Marty invent increasingly inventive ways to launder money..."

It feels like you're watching a scene unfold. You're there. If execs wonder what your characters do throughout any given day on this show, try writing THE TEASER in this Ozark *style (that lists several incidents) to help them get an image of that.*

....

- **Choose a *representative* moment.** What kind of action or drama is the signature flavor of your story? Can we expect a chamber piece? A historically illuminating romance offering sumptuous period detail? A gritty, nitrous-fueled rush that sends the main character on careening car chases? Choose a representative scene that gives a sample of the sensory experience viewers can expect.

- **Open a window into your character(s).** Some writers choose scenes that illustrate certain character arcs to give a sense of how that character will change and how we'll feel about the characters and their potential jeopardy. What are their drives, their exigencies (what is at stake), and what can we expect to see them doing in moments like this on the show?

- **Choose multiple moments artfully.** If you choose to showcase multiple scenes or events — like THE TEASER did for *Ozark* (see below) — consider how they interrelate and how the reader's experience of one moment will impact their experience of the other(s). Perhaps they build upon each other to create a major moment? Whichever events you select shouldn't feel like a disconnected sampling, but rather facets of a single piece.

MORE TEASER EXAMPLES

La La Land (Lionsgate, 2016)

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The story opens on a traffic jam. Not just any
traffic jam, mind you. This is an L.A. freeway
traffic jam: the kind of clusterf*ck that makes
Angelinos the cynical people we know and sometimes
love. As the camera takes in the lay of the
godforsaken land — a 70 mph zone turned into a
sunbaked parking lot that snakes off into the
desolate horizon — we half-expect a commuter to jump
out with a handgun. Instead...is that the sound of a
piano?

It must be someone's car stereo. There's the listener
in her car. She's singing along. And suddenly she's
getting out of her car — dancing. She's actually
dancing on the freeway as that jazz rhythm and melody
seem to fill the asphalt atmosphere itself. And just
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as suddenly, she's joined by other commuters —
they're all getting out of their cars on this freeway
overpass from Hell and dancing an intricately
choreographed number.

These drivers, who started out mired in
transportation constipation in a tableau of city
angst, are now all dancing together, working off
their malaise, turning it into creative
collaboration, twirling off their car hood, hopping
off of a hubcap into a *jeté!* As this set piece
crescendos, we realize this is a Los Angeles firmly
grounded in its signature angst, and yet it will
transcend this urban malaise through music and dance.
This is *La La Land.*

Ozark (Netflix, 2017)

In a successful bid to escape a cartel bullet in the
brain, Marty Byrde relocates his family from Chicago
to the Ozarks of Southern Missouri. Emphasizing the
bonds of family, we'll track the highs, lows, wins,
failures and fights of the Byrdes and the cast of
characters that enter and exit their lives. We'll use
Marty's obsession with money, his justifications as a
mirror to reflect our own desires, vices, self-worth.
How the acquisition, retention of money determines
not only whether he lives or dies but defines his
perception of himself as a successful father,
husband, person.

We'll watch Marty invent increasingly creative ways
to launder eight million in cartel cash before summer
runs out, corrupting all who enter his orbit. His
marriage will scab over even as a romance between a
pursuing gay Treasury agent and homophobic local
blossoms. We'll root for the crumbling Blue Cat Lodge
and its crew, a lakeside ground zero for Marty's
money-laundering efforts, wince as his relationship
with the Cat's long-suffering owner deteriorates
before turning sexual. We'll play voyeur on The Lake
of the Ozarks, wallow in the hedonism of Party Cove,
stroll through multi-million-dollar cliffside homes,
and thunder across the water in Go-Fast boats. We'll

scheme with Marty, be threatened by outlaw bikers,
feel the ticking clock pressure of a looming Labor
Day deadline and sweat the knowledge that the most
dangerous cartel enforcer in Mexico has entered
Missouri. By season's end, a chain-wrapped rival
rests at the bottom of the Lake, 10 severed heads
roll down Interstate 54, and Marty has a new problem:
50 million dollars in cartel cash. Clean it.

SOUNDTRACK

Applicable to ScriptHop packets, this is music in the form of a Spotify, Apple Music, or SoundCloud file that you can attach to a scene or sequence in your script.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Talk about being empowered to create a mood! Placing music in a scene or sequence really sets the tone for a scene, and can communicate emotion that might be eluding a particular decision-maker.

STRATEGIES

Choosing music that sets a scene is an art form unto itself and worthy of far more contemplation than we have room for here. If you have a composer friend, or know how to compose music yourself, that can obviously be a huge asset. The Packet offers an artistic point of entry for the musically inclined.

Being musically inclined doesn't mean you're necessarily a musician or a composer. It can simply mean that you have a good ear, that you can identify music that evokes an emotional state that fits the scene(s) in question. Linking music from Apple Music, SoundCloud, or Spotify to your packet, you can assemble a soundtrack of the music you hope to get the rights to for the actual production. You can

also use the music to serve as an example of the future score you envision.

One thing to keep in mind is the difference between *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* music:

- *Diegetic* music is music a character would actually play within the scene — in other words, a character might literally press play on a boombox in a scene and you'd hear what they're hearing. (One of the most iconic diegetic music moments in cinematic history: John Cusack holding a boombox over his head cranking Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" in the 1989 film *Say Anything...*)

- *Non-diegetic* music is music outside the characters' universe — otherwise known simply as *soundtrack*.

If your music is diegetic (being played in the scene) and it's important for the reader to know that, your script should make this clear. (E.g., "Gary presses play on the boombox. What comes out of the speakers proves he's entirely misread his father-in-law's taste in music — as well as his worldview...")

NOTES ON STYLE

The most important aspect of style when creating a series bible or pitch deck is knowing when to editorialize, market, promote, "sell," when to measure out the necessary quantities of The Pitch and The Facts. (See HOW TO USE THIS BOOK for a reminder on the distinction between the two.) You know you have skill with your style when you can do each of these things *at the right time*. This book has taken pains to parse when to lean into marketing language and when to pull back.

Admittedly, we've also taken pains to qualify the notion of there being any "pure" approach. A pitch deck or series bible's first aim is (obviously) to promote your work, and there's an incredible amount of art — via both words and images — to all of this.

Some writers will insist on praising their own "hilarity" or "muscular dialogue" in their SHORT SYNOPSIS, when that would be far better left to implication in WHAT IT IS or THE HOOK. They would do well to heed the contents of this book that guide them to measure their passion with the clearheaded attention to detail that the industry uses to assess how grounded that passion is.

Other more expansive volumes could explore in greater depth actual marketing language, right down to rhetorical devices; perhaps in subsequent editions we'll expand on this complex subject. We have provided you with a guide that makes distinctions about when you should really utilize rhetorical devices like hyperbole, irony, metaphor (they apply more to The Pitch sections), but a truly skilled writer will find they can wield some of these devices in their The Facts sections — after all, a truly good script will likely have some irony embedded right in the premise itself.

On the question of how eloquent a writer should be — more specifically, what degree of verbiage or literary flair should be in evidence in your marketing materials: This is another complex subject worth volumes. After all, your entire pitch deck is a presentation of your writing.

What's important to keep in mind is that being concise and *resonant* is more important than being arty, poetic, or verbally cute; really connecting with the reader in an emotional way is key. Most good sales and marketing function on an emotional level rather than an intellectual level; still, some of the more interesting pitch decks are ones that posit an interesting intellectual idea as well...but those ideas are conveyed in a way that is readily apprehended by the reader.

Being pedantic with a lot of five- and ten- cent words or with abstract, academic theory isn't going to carry the day as much as being concise and persuasive. Being truly clever with your verbiage amounts to your zeroing-in on what's clever about your story itself, amplifying some of its conceptual brilliance and really positioning the reader so that they can see it.

Being concise demonstrates one of the most important skills required to be a good screenwriter.

YOU MIGHT NOTICE WHEN REMINDING YOURSELF OF YOUR OWN LIST OF FAVORITE MOVIES, THAT VERY FEW OF THEM ARE "MEMORABLY LONGWINDED."

Sure, you might have *Glengarry Glen Ross* or a Tarantino flick on your list, but the monologues in Mamet's adaptation and Tarantino's action-packed movies are still beloved because they're pithy, because there's something extremely cogent, as sharp as a knife edge about them.

Scripts are praised in the hallways of agencies as being "tight." The only time a script is mentioned for its loquacity tends to be either because it was an anomaly or it's implied that a client has had a departure from sanity or their talent...and it's generally likened to torture. Our very medium is predicated on the power of the image to transcend language and communicate a thousand words per frame. If screenwriting is all about the art of pithiness, then demonstrating your ability to communicate with efficiency in a series bible or pitch deck is tantamount. Prove that the weight of your words punches above their number, because that's what the industry looks for.

And that's what they'll be looking for in your presentation materials.

POST-SCRIPT

The trade winds that govern how projects move in Hollywood are often shifting, but the current movement taking place in the industry appears to be more tectonic. The avalanche of content generated by streamer demand has further fragmented already compromised attention spans. This has caused "the Golden Age of TV" to become "the Age of the Series Bible." Executives are grasping at an ambush of ideas and need a digestible form to gauge if they have the bandwidth to consume an entire project.

This brings to a head the notion that how you present your script has become as important as the script itself. (As we've mentioned in preceding chapters, some series execs don't want a script at all, instead preferring a bible.) This has become all the more true for anyone who isn't (yet) an A-list writer. And even A-list writers will tell you that they had to create some sort of presentation to get their original concept greenlit.

But beyond the practical, more business-minded marketing aspects of pitch deck creation, there's something more artistically crucial about the materials this book encourages you to create. As we've mentioned throughout, creating a deck can be foundational to the writing process itself, opening a writer's eyes by shining a clarifying (and sometimes harsh) light on the script or concept they've become infatuated with.

The good news is that unlike receiving dispiriting notes from friends or strangers, the harsh light here is self-generated. The process of summarizing, of distilling, of boiling the sprawl of your script down to micro-narrative description and the pitch itself provides you with merciful objectivity.

Like a topographical view, it can make the artistic artifact — which you're almost necessarily too close to — resolve from a

blur into an identifiable shape. It's almost like a reverse-engineered version of the outline you should have written in the first place. It often will become the saving grace that revises that outline and subsequently your script.

Industry folklore focuses on the winners in the writing business. But actual industry folk will tell you they are surrounded by writers who got lost in the woods. They'll tell you that even the most humble writer suffers from hubris that grips them once they re-enter the normal stratosphere of waking life, after living in their own fever dream for a year or more. They'll tell you stories of that friend who just finished a 200-page behemoth and wants the world to know about it…never mind that 200 pages is awfully long for their romcom. That writer would have benefitted from the epiphany that it's impossible to express their script in the form of a logline, let alone in the form of any language they might have used for any of the other sections discussed in this book.

Allow us to get lofty with a literary reference: Marcel Proust said, "The true voyage of discovery consists not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes." We'd argue that creating a pitch deck provides both. The pitch deck's ultimate gift is the attainment of objectivity, distance from one's own suffocating creative forces. Despite being a necessary skill, the ability to attain objectivity is unfortunately not taught, even in the best of film schools.

INDUSTRY FOLKLORE FOCUSES ON THE WINNERS IN THE WRITING BUSINESS. BUT ACTUAL INDUSTRY FOLK WILL TELL YOU THEY ARE SURROUNDED BY WRITERS WHO GOT LOST IN THE WOODS.

Nine out of ten times, writers will discover through the process offered by this book that something crucial about their story is keeping it from fully functioning. Sometimes there's a plot-hole you can only discover through the process of writing a synopsis. Other times there's an entire narrative gear that's come loose — such as your main character being too passive — that you can only discover through the generation of a synopsis or character descriptions (where you realize that there are almost no actions being driven by that character — and consequently little of dramatic consequence — or no inner conflict and therefore your main character is lacking dimension).

Of course, the most productive step you can take to gain objectivity once you've finished a script is to get notes from those you trust. But we recommend you include the exercises laid out in this book as a part of your healthy writing regimen, to spur what can amount to the first pass of notes written about your script *by yourself.* Creating a pitch deck is free self-analysis; it's not merely playing solitaire with your story. Fulfilling the sections of this book results in a litmus test that will help you gain perspective on the narrative mirages that have led you astray.

CREATING A SERIES BIBLE OR PRESENTATION DECK IS A WAY TO DISCERN THE INDIVIDUAL THREADS THAT CREATE YOUR YARN, TO SEE THE ONES THAT ARE FRAYED, AND EVEN THE ONES THAT ARE ENTIRELY MISSING!

We wrote this book because our organization is made up of writers and former story executives who learned invaluable lessons from the process of writing and summarizing other writers' scripts. We learned that such distillation methods are invaluable ones that should become part of the toolkit of every writer, not just of script analysts.

We're confident this book will help you on your journey to get closer to the greenlight!