

How To Write A Treatment

By Marilyn Horowitz

What Is a Treatment?

A treatment is a two to five page document that tells the whole story focusing on the highlights. This two to five page document should read like a short story and be written in the present tense. It should present the entire story including the ending, and use some key scenes and dialogue from the screenplay it is based on.

What Should Be in the Treatment?

1. A Working title
2. The writer's name and contact information
3. A short logline
4. Introduction to key characters
5. Who, what, when, why and where.
6. Act 1 in one to three paragraphs. Set the scene, dramatize the main conflicts.
7. Act 2 in two to six paragraphs. Should dramatize how the conflicts introduced in Act 1 lead to a crisis.
8. Act 3 in one to three paragraphs. Dramatize the final conflict and resolution.

The Three Act Structure

In his seminal book of fragments, *The Poetics*, Aristotle suggested that all stories should have a beginning, middle, and an end. The writing method I have developed uses the expressions Setup, Conflict and Resolution as more evocative terms for describing the movements of a screenplay.

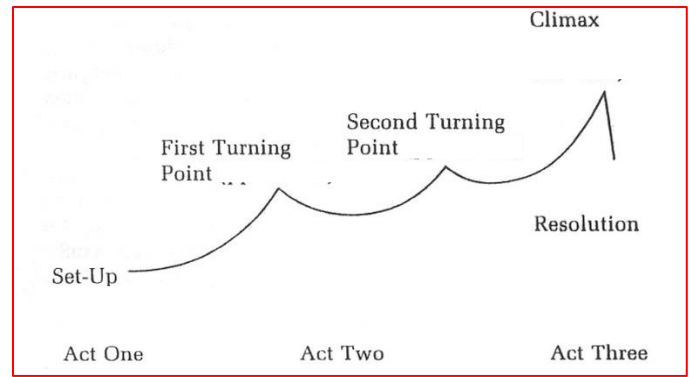
Breaking the movement of a story into three parts, gives us a **3- part or act structure**. The word "act" means "the action of carrying something out."

Many screenplays are organized into a 3-act structure. The tradition of writing in this form comes from the theater and was followed by filmmakers. Think of it as a foundation for building a house that others can easily identify, even if the details are new and original.

Act 1, called the **Set-up**, The situation and **characters** and **DRAMATIC CONFLICTS** are **introduced**. Fundamental questions and issues are raised in the set-up.

Act 2, called **The Conflict**, often the longest section, is where the conflict expands in both expected and unexpected ways until it reaches a **DRAMATIC CLIMAX**.

Act 3, called **The Resolution**, the conflict rises to one more crisis and then is resolved.



How To Write The Treatment

Develop A Strong Title

Whether the screenwriter is creating a new story or writing a treatment based on an existing script, the first step is to make sure that the screenplay has a good title. The first contact a prospective producer has with a script is the title. Pick a title that gives a clear idea of what genre the screenplay is written in. A good title can predispose a producer or reader to like a screenplay because it suggests the kind of experience that is in store and arouses curiosity. Great classic film titles include **It Happened One Night, Psycho and Die Hard**.

The title does not necessarily determine whether or the screenplay is good but it can be a great marketing tool. **HOWEVER**, if you want a producer to read your script, pick a name that creatively and captivatingly matches your story.

Write a logline

The second step is to write a **logline**. Preparing a log line for your screenplay is a basic marketing tool that I have repurposed for developing treatments. It is similar to the summary given in TV Guide. It is a technique for boiling down a plotline to its essence that has been described as trying to vomit into a thimble.

Follow the example below when writing a logline:

And Then Came Love is a character-driven romantic comedy about a high-powered Manhattan single mom who opens Pandora's box when she seeks out the anonymous sperm donor father of her young son.

Write a synopsis

The third step is to a **synopsis**. Begin by expanding the logline into a three-act story Start with the end. For example, Let's work with *The Silence Of The Lambs*:

Act 3: Clarice Starling catches the killer and saves the intended victim.

Then break down into three acts. For example,

Act 1: While still a student at The FBI, Clarice is asked to help on a case. She's eager to help and interviews Hannibal Lector who gives her a clue.

Act 2: With his help, she is able to overcome many obstacles, and finds the identity of the killer.

Act 3: She confronts the killer, saves his intended victim and atones for the death of the lamb. The scriptwriter should follow this break down for his or her story, and then expand this into a synopsis.

Follow the example below of *And Then Came Love*:

Julie (mid 40s), a successful Manhattan reporter-turned-columnist believes she has it all - a great job, a rent controlled apartment, a boyfriend and best of all, an adorable six-year-old son named Jake, whom she conceived via an anonymous sperm donor.

Her perfect world, however, is rocked when she's called in for an emergency parent-teacher conference and learns that her son has been acting up, needs to be 'tested' and is on the brink of expulsion. Overwhelmed, Julie instinctively blames herself... it's easy to do since her mother has made her feel inadequate for not being a stay-at-home mom.

Julie, however, will not concede that her mother could be right, so she places genetic blame on Jake's anonymous father. Through a private investigator, Julie learns the identity of the donor and meets him - Paul, a struggling actor and law school dropout. Julie has neither intention nor desire to reveal her identity to him, she simply needs to check her sources, get the facts, and move on.

A child psychiatrist tells Julie that Jake does not appear to have ADHD, but could benefit from a "father figure" in his life. Julie's boyfriend, a charismatic photo-journalist is up for the challenge and proposes. Julie believes her life is back on course until Paul, the donor, shows up, hoping she'll promote the offoff Broadway show in which he's performing.

Jake instantly bonds with Paul. No matter how hard Julie tries to keep Paul from complicating her life, the more he does as he begins to fall for her, and she finds she can not deny her feelings for him, and her boyfriend is pushing to set a date. (written by Caytha Jentis, writer/producer)

Writing the Treatment

Once the synopsis is written, the preparation is complete and the screenwriter can take the synopsis and expand it into a treatment by correcting structure and adding detail.

Sample Movie Treatment - Example Story Synopsis For A Film Script By Marilyn Horowitz

Lilly

It's 2011. The political climate in China is very unstable. When ANNA, the young pregnant wife of an outspoken journalist is left widowed after a vicious assassination, friends whisk her out of the country to sympathetic expatriates in Queens, New York.

In Queens she's given a grim room in the local syndicate headquarters. Anna is lethargic, lost in pain. JON VAN, the charming head of the syndicate comes to see how she's doing, and expresses romantic interest in her. Anna's lack of enthusiasm angers him, but he writes it off to her recent experiences.

Lost in shock and grief, Anna, is placed with JUNE, another widow, who has adjusted to the new life. They share a run-down apartment in a maze of tenement buildings, serviced by a few small markets in a bad part of town. June runs the local daycare center for the working mothers in this closed Vietnamese community.

Anna, now seven months pregnant, is speechless and depressed until early labor forces a bone-chilling howl of pain from her parched lips. The baby is born, Lily, a perfect little girl, but Anna is too deeply distressed to bond.

It's June who holds the tiny girl, and cuddles her.

As the weeks pass, Anna slowly recovers. She starts to ask questions about the new world she's entered. Anna sees the mothers drop off and pick up their children, tension and fear in their faces. When Anna asks why there is so much stress, June explains that everyone owes the syndicate, the local arm of the people who helped Anna escape. Jon Van is the boss.

June reveals her hatred of the syndicate, telling Anna of their exploitation of their own kind. "That's why I make so little money, Anna, half of it goes back to them. That's why everyone's afraid, they use threats of deportation or death to keep us in line." Anna denies this, insisting that since the syndicate saved her life and the life of her daughter, June must be exaggerating.

June helps Anna improve her English, warning her to keep it a secret. Their nightly practice bonds them together like sisters. But as time passes, June becomes more and more depressed and decides to run away. Anna feels for June, but warns her that it's wrong to flee. Late one night, June tries to escape. She's caught and is beaten to death.

Horrified at the death of her only friend, Anna's emotional agony returns and she takes refuge in her relationship with Lily. When Lily wants to know about her father, Anna makes up a wild story. She tells Lily her daddy was a famous patriot, who died to save her and many others from the oppression in their country. When Lily asks if he's really dead, Anna hasn't the heart to confirm the truth. She pretends that there's a big secret. She tells Lily that Daddy really escaped and came to America, where he is searching for them everywhere.

This fantasy helps Anna to resolve her trauma over the death of her beloved husband and she begins to mend. Jon Van visits, and puts

her to work. She takes over June's former duties and runs the local daycare center.

Jon Van lays down the rules: traditional food, dress and language. No English in the home, no western clothes, no contact with TV. Jon Van makes his usual pass, but Anna only looks at him with scorn.

Five years later.

Anna's daughter, Lily, is ready to go to school. On her first day, she's made fun of and returns home in tears. She begs her mother to teach her English and buy her regular American clothes. Lily's daily humiliation at school upsets Anna. She goes to Jon Van and asks that her daughter be allowed to wear American clothes and learn English.

Jon Van warns her to stop this revolt, reminding her of her illegal status. When she argues, he reminds her about what happened to June. He then offers to help Lily if Anna will respond to his advances.

Defeated and repelled, Anna returns home, realizing that June had told her the truth. The months pass, and Lily continues to attend school. Every day, she comes home crying. Lily becomes a faint shadow of her former cheerful self.

Anna can only attempt to comfort her. The only cure is a new story about Dad. Anna's helplessness turns to anger and depression, and she neglects her work and this causes her to lose her day care center.

Jon Van appears with his usual request, but Anna resists. She pleads with him to give her more time to respond to him, and to give her a job.

Meanwhile, after a rash of local thefts, the regular collector, another woman, is attacked and robbed.

Jon Van asks Anna to collect the deposits from the local stores and put them in the bank. She does this gratefully, and without question.

After a few months of doing this work, it's Lily's birthday. Anna steals the daily deposit and buys Lily American clothes and a gold necklace.

Meanwhile the thefts continue throughout the neighborhood.

When Jon Van confronts Anna about the missing money, she pretends the thief has attacked her.

Jon Van believes her, offers her safety in exchange for sexual favors. Again, Anna rebuffs him. She realizes that Jon Van was hoping this would happen, and it makes her even more determined not to give in to him.

DANIEL, the thief, burgles one more store, and is caught by the enforcers of the syndicate. They drag him to an alley and try to beat him to death. Ankle broken, severely wounded, he manages to escape into the maze of tenements.

Daniel breaks into Anna's apartment and hides. Anna is out collecting, and Lily is in school. He finds the necklace and pockets it.

Lily returns from school. She finds Daniel, and assumes he's her long lost father, just returned from a new adventure. Daniel's touched by her innocent acceptance and cannot hurt her. Anna returns. She's appalled to find Daniel in her house, alone with her daughter. She's about to turn him into the syndicate, when Lily joyously announces how happy she is to have found her father at last.

He's so badly beaten that he's not even a threat, and so, Anna doesn't have the heart to destroy Lily's joy. They have a little party, and Daniel and Anna pretend that the necklace is from her "father."

Anna is overwhelmed to see her little girl finally happy.

They continue to enact this uncomfortable charade until Lily leaves for school the next day. Finally alone with him, Anna tells Daniel to get out. He refuses. She threatens to call the syndicate. He threatens to tell Lily he's not her father. Anna realizes that she will be accused of harboring a suspect. She asks Daniel what he wants. Daniel tells her that all he wants is a chance to recover and get the hell away from there. Anna says she will let him stay if he will maintain the lie. Daniel agrees.

That night the charade continues. Daniel teaches Lily some cool English words and how to fight back. There is as much tenderness between them as though he were her real father. Anna is upset at the situation, but Lily goes to sleep, happy in the lie.

As the days pass, Lily and Daniel grow closer and closer. Lily changes and becomes more secure and outgoing.

After Lily leaves for school, Anna and Daniel talk. As the time passes, the conversation becomes more personal. Anna realizes they have a lot in common. She softens and takes care of him.

Daniel wants to know who beat him so badly. Anna tells him about the syndicate. Anna goes to the stores to collect the deposits. Friends warn her that the syndicate has found out that she bought the necklace.

She runs home and asks Daniel for help. He sees the poverty she lives in and demands to know where she got the money for Lily's gift. She tells him, commenting that they're both thieves.

Daniel realizes the danger Anna has placed Lily in, and tells her they must get Lily from school. They arrive in time to see Lily kidnapped on the way home by the syndicate. They pursue, but cannot follow inside the syndicate headquarters.

Daniel takes Anna to stay with his friends. He agrees to help her find Lily. They decide to turn the tables on the syndicate and break them up. The question is how? He and his friends are former soldiers, now fallen on hard times. They plan an elaborate scheme to break in and rescue Lily.

Anna must go in to the head-quarters alone and face Jon Van. She pretends to be ready to give in to his advances in exchange for Lily, and they go to bed.

Daniel breaks in with his team. A firefight ensues.

Daniel rescues Lily, but is shot down. As he dies, he tells Anna he was happy his life added up to something after all.

Now Anna must save her own daughter, and kill Jon Van.

She meets the challenge, leaving the syndicate shattered behind her.

With new resolve and confidence, Anna takes over the syndicate, but brings prosperity and a new modern tradition into the community. She never tells Lily that Daniel, the thief, wasn't her father.