

Info Guide

STORY DOCUMENTS



Australian Government



STORY DOCUMENTS – DRAMA

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Introduction

Funding applicants are often required to provide short versions of their film story: a logline; a one paragraph synopsis; a one page synopsis; an outline (3–8 pages); a treatment (8–20 pages); and/or a scriptment (up to 30 pages in the case of submissions to Screen Australia).

These notes have been prepared to offer a guide for the form and purpose of these short documents.

While some filmmakers may find these documents an onerous task, they can in fact be enormously useful in the development process. A lot of professional screenwriters use them as internal documents (for themselves and their team) throughout development. They are a way of discovering and defining the fundamental essence and structure of your story.

Many projects have stagnated or failed because of a flawed premise or weak story, which no amount of drafting can fix. These short documents can make the process of defining your core concept and strengthening the story around it much more efficient.

Core Concept

Whilst we don't require a 'Core Concept' document as part of your application, the criteria by which we assess projects means that we look for what might be the underlying Core Concept in the project you submit.

The term 'high concept' is a familiar one and usually refers to Hollywood movies which have an identifiable hook, sit within a recognisable genre and has a clear, entertaining and emotional pull for audiences. Examples of 'high concept' films include Jaws, Speed, Snakes on a Plane, and The Hangover. A 'high concept' is often used as a verbal or marketing pitch of the concept at the heart of one of these types of films. (see [Michael Hauge's High Concept Videos](#) for more information)

When we talk of the 'core concept' we are referring to something else. To arrive at a logline, synopsis, outline, treatment, scriptment or indeed, a screenplay, an online or interactive drama, or a high-end TV drama, there is a lot of thinking and preparation a writer and team does. The time spent in a development process often around the core concept of a project and often before writing, can be vital to a project's viability and success (in creative, audience and market terms).

Whether your first inspiration comes from a character, a situation, a theme, a 'what if' proposition, or an event, these, on their own, are not enough to form the foundation for a viable story. There is considerable thinking and work to do in order to arrive at a core concept that is a convincing foundation for a feature film, TV series or online and interactive project.

An idea in isolation does not necessarily lay the foundations for a viable project. It is important that short form documents are built on a solid foundation of thinking, planning and dreaming. This foundation is often referred to as the 'concept', 'core concept' or 'story concept'. Whilst writing is an organic and evolving process, unless the 'core concept' is known, tested, resolved for the project's stage of development and dramatically viable, projects are at risk of failing or stagnating in development, particularly from less experienced writers and teams. The screenplay, for many, is an expression of the 'core concept', and it is the concept that is used as a compass to determine decisions on areas such as theme, story, protagonist, relationships, tone, stakes, plot and structure.

Naturally audiences engage in a well-executed plot and the actions a character takes yet deep engagement, investment and meaning come from an audience's engagement in the themes and story and how it expresses the underlying 'core concept'. The 'core concept' is sometimes expressed as 'the hook' that attracts others to your work and its underlying idea. There is no 'checklist' for a 'core concept' as the expression of your concept is not explicit but embedded in all the decisions you make as you develop your project. Your core concept thinking will not become a verbal pitch but it is the necessary and often 'invisible' work that needs to be done by a writer and their team to ensure they do have the elements in their thinking that will build a viable feature film, or even short film, TV series or online project.

When developing the building blocks for your feature film (and where appropriate elements that inform TV series, shorts or multiplatform projects), consider if you have a robust and viable 'core concept' that underpins it (in no particular order, but all of importance):

- A point-of-view on the world that channels something human and emotional;
- A clear and rich theme (what you are really talking about, the meaning or the 'message' that deeply engages you);
- A sense of your audience and how the theme will emotionally resonate with that audience;
- A protagonist who has a problem;
- An antagonist or antagonistic forces that opposes your protagonist;
- The protagonist's problem giving rise to a goal, a reason to pursue that goal, and a goal that gives rise to a question for the audience (will they...?) which puts us in touch with the stakes;

- A goal that allows your protagonist to make a plan that they actively pursue which creates conflict, and gives rise to antagonism, obstacles or complications which work against that plan;
- An action line (plot) that unfolds the story, makes theme apparent and captures its genre and tone, including reversals in that action line (for example, a mid-point reversal, turn or revelation);
- The conflict and antagonism makes it harder, creating rising or complicating action;
- And that the conflict and antagonism gives rise to the possibility of change in your protagonist;
- A protagonist who is able to resolve the problem through action and demonstrates change by story's end, whether positive or negative;
- A relationship for your protagonist that works on their internal development to bring about growth, change, and often, stakes (for e.g. in the form of a romantic interest, a new 'buddy', an antagonist); and,
- Where appropriate, the structure of the world, the audience's navigation of that world and the linearity (or not) of the experience is platform appropriate.

Naturally, not every story or platform subscribes to the formulation of a core concept in this way, but it is valuable for the forward development of your project, to consider what elements you do have in place in your core concept. These building blocks, in whatever order you work them out, whatever priority you give them, will assist your thinking toward building a 'core concept' that underpins your story, and will provide you with your compass in order to make decisions, and give organisation to your characters and their relationships, the world in which they sit, the audience's experience and the action line and plot that expresses the deep pre-occupations that drive you. Concept is the undergirding thinking that will inform all of the documents to come.

Synopses

One-sentence synopsis or logline

Filmmakers often need to supply a logline or 1–3 line version of their story. This is a summary of your film that not only conveys the premise, but also gives emotional insight into what it is about. It is a creative tool that is used to both focus your idea and spark interest in others.

For example, here is a one sentence synopsis for *Somersault*:

A teenage girl runs away from home, hoping to find herself through love, but the people she meets are as lost as she is...

It gives us the character, the catalyst or starting event, the character's predicament and implies further events framed within the ongoing conflict.

As another example, here is a logline for *Back to the Future*, a more action-driven film:

A young man is transported to the past where he must reunite his parents before he and his future are no more.

Most loglines include a brief description of the protagonist, the key event that sets the story in motion, what the protagonist then sets out to do, and the main conflicts they face.

There are many tips for crafting captivating loglines available online, Wendy Moon and Lenore Wright are just two writers on this subject. But an effective logline is not simply a formula, its main aim is to excite the reader about the idea for your story. Try to be concise and choose adjectives wisely, to help convey the tone of your film.

One-paragraph synopsis

The one paragraph synopsis is useful in finding the essence of the story because it must state very briefly and simply *who*, *what* and *how*.

Within the space of a few sentences, the one paragraph synopsis should present the protagonist, their problem, what they do about it and the outcome. In other words, it should give a sense of the beginning, middle and end. It may also suggest what the character comes to understand, the thematic through-line.

For example, here is a one paragraph synopsis of *The Boys*, which describes not just 'what happens', but the story's thematic concerns as well.

Brett Sprague is released from jail and returns home to a family he feels has disintegrated in his absence. His attempts to dominate his brothers, his brothers' girlfriends, his own girlfriend and his mother by violence and the assertion of masculine solidarity result in the alienation and escape of the women. Finally, Brett leads his brothers in an act of revenge on one anonymous female, the scapegoat for their failures as men.

Here is a one paragraph synopsis of *Rain Man*, which outlines the premise, from the protagonist's point-of-view, and gives a sense of the film's structure.

A self-centered hotshot returns home for his father's funeral and learns the family inheritance goes to an autistic brother he never knew he had. So the hotshot kidnaps this older brother and drives him cross-country hoping to gain his confidence and get control of the family money. The journey reveals an unusual dimension to the brother's autism that sparks their relationship and unlocks a dramatic childhood secret that changes everything.

And here is a one paragraph synopsis of *Schindler's List*, which offers the thematic point as well as the intended emotional impact.

Oskar Schindler is a vain and greedy German businessman who becomes an unlikely humanitarian amid the barbaric Nazi reign when he feels compelled to turn his factory into a refuge for Jews. Based on the true story of Oskar Schindler who managed to save over a thousand Jews from being gassed at Auschwitz, it is a testament for the good in all of us.

Pitch version of the one-paragraph synopsis

Some writers choose to write their one paragraph synopsis as a more structured 'pitch' that covers the key beats of the film, such as:

This story is a...(you may wish to specify the genre i.e. romantic comedy, noir thriller, etc)
...about...(your protagonist, with a brief description of their setup / normal world / status quo)
...but then this happens....(the inciting incident / interruption / catalyst / starting event) At the end of Act One they.... (establish the protagonist's goal / want / struggle / plan) At the midpoint they... (a major shift that ups the stakes unexpectedly, revises the plan) At the end of Act Two... (a failure, loss or emotional bottoming out, alters perspective)
The climax... (an action on behalf of the protagonist that proves they've fundamentally changed) In the end.... (the resolution, what the character gained or lost, what he or she has learnt)

Again, this is not intended as a formula but more as a starting point (drawing on story principles since Aristotle) to help provide a basis for encapsulating your story in an easily communicable form. It will not work for every writer or every story. Writers of ensemble pieces for instance may wish to focus on the group as an entity and emphasize what the members all have in common. There are some great documents online regarding how to track the overall structure of ensemble films.

One significant advantage of creating a pitch version of your synopsis is that it can be used as a verbal pitch too. Pitching verbally can be very useful as it forces you to keep details to a minimum and get the heart of your story across. It also allows you to gauge at once if listeners are interested or not and at which points.

In preparing a verbal pitch, it is also useful to be able to distill the film's 'hook', the one thing you think will interest a financier or audience instantly. It may be the premise, but it may also be a character, a thematic or a director's vision. You should feel clear on what you believe is the most exciting, unique aspect of your project.

One-page synopsis

The one page synopsis deals with the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *how* of your story, as well as establishing the other major characters and lines of conflict, what is at stake for these characters, and the major turning points. The last is crucial; the key element of a one page synopsis is a clear indication of the story's structure.

The one page synopsis should demonstrate how the characters' narratives play out the main thematic idea of the film through structure. It should reveal the end, if only to convince readers that there is one and that it is a logical, dramatic outcome of all that comes before.

Perhaps most importantly, a one page synopsis aims to stimulate in the reader excitement about seeing this story as a film.

Similarly to the verbal pitch discussed above, a one page synopsis is generally expected to deliver all the key beats of the story, making it clear what the shape of each act is, building towards the climax and suggesting the resolution.

Some readers like one page synopses to be laid out in three paragraphs to indicate the three acts, others prefer it laid out in sequences. Regardless, the movement of the idea through the plot should be clear. The reader of the one page synopsis will want to see that the story progresses and escalates with rising conflict, and that something of value is riding on the outcome. The genre and tone of the films should also be clear, if only through the way in which story events are expressed.

Despite its very compressed form, the synopsis does give the reader a sense of the characters because it includes their key choices and actions.

It is important that the writer knows what theme the story dramatises, the belief or argument the whole story demonstrates and therefore 'proves'. It is the filmmakers' reason for telling the story and it is a way of convincing others that the story is worth telling.

Outline

An outline for a drama film (in Australia) is generally a document of 3–8 pages. It expands the one page synopsis to incorporate motives, demonstrate cause and effect and show the design of the narrative as it unfolds on screen. As such, the outline places a greater demand on the writer's storytelling skills and requires that they 'see the whole film playing out in their heads'. It will demonstrate, for instance, how the premise plays out through the structure and how the character's trajectory dramatises the theme.

In writing the outline, it may be helpful to break down the story into sequences. Writing a list of key scenes, for example, may make it easier to bracket scenes together into sequences or blocks to see how they build.

For example, here is a version of *Proof* seen in this way.

- Block 1: Flashback: Martin the blind child. Establish mistrust.
- Block 2: Adult Martin, the photographer; his normal world; intro Andy & Celia.
- Block 3: Chance meeting: Martin and Andy take the cat to the vet and bond.
- Block 4: Martin rejects Celia's sexual overtures.
- Block 5: Andy describes Martin's photographs and invites Martin to the drive-in.
- Block 6: Friendship sealed: the drive-in and after.
- Block 7: Celia learns she has a rival for Martin.
- Block 8: Andy meets sexy Celia and lies to Martin.
- Block 9: Celia ups the stakes: she blackmails Martin into going to a concert.
- Block 10: Martin rejects Celia again.
- Block 11: Celia seduces her rival Andy.
- Block 12: Flashback: Martin's Mother dies.
- Block 13: Martin finds out the truth about Andy and Celia.
- Block 14: Andy realises that Celia loves Martin.
- Block 15: Martin fires Celia.
- Block 16: Martin and Andy reconcile.

A consequent outline for *Proof* could be 16 paragraphs of prose, clearly showing the cause and effect of the narrative and how the purpose of each sequence is working within the whole.

Obviously, this is a very broad-strokes way of describing the story; it does not cover every single scene. But it does give an indication of the overall structure and how the concept builds, moves and resolves.

Other outlines can be grouped into the 7 or 8 structural beats of the film story, or even divided into, for example, 'pages 1–10, pages 10–25, pages 25–40...'. Whatever best suits the writer and the project. In compressing 90–120 minutes of screen story into 3–8 pages, there is little room for detail of course, and this may be restrictive for some writers, or something they would only use as their own internal working document.

Scene breakdown

A scene breakdown can be a dry and technical document to read, but it can also be useful to storytellers as it provides a skeleton version of the film, a clear structural map for the whole script.

A scene breakdown is literally a scene-by-scene outline of the entire screenplay, which presents a step-by-step summary of each scene in prose.

It can be along the lines of a 'one-liner scene list' (one line per scene) or expanded 'beat sheet' (more of an overview based on key story beats) or 'step outline' (a term more commonly used in the UK).

It can simply list (and even number) every single scene of the film – with one line for each scene, or two lines for each scene, or a paragraph. Some scene breakdowns are laid out as dot-points for each scene, listed under act headings. Some writers choose to put their one-liners on filing cards so they can shuffle them around and try different configurations, as more of a working scene breakdown.

Scene breakdowns can even include notes on dialogue, character development, dramatic actions played on each other, points of change. They can be a valuable way to check scene order and to eliminate repetitions, red herrings, dead ends or superfluous scenes. They can also allow writers to check that each scene is 'earning its keep'.

Many important choices can be made at scene breakdown stage, for example about point of view, timing of information, reveals, setups, payoffs, surprises, characters trajectories, tone and even relationship to genre.

They need not be drab mechanical documents, they can in fact be seen as important creative blueprints, which help filmmakers decide how form will be used to most effectively express their own particular worldview, in other words how the structure will be personalised.

Treatment

A drama (as against documentary) treatment sets out the dramatic and cinematic way you intend to 'treat' your story in terms of style and unfolding narrative. In Australia, treatments are generally between 10 and 20 pages, and it is advisable to write at least a few of the short documents already described before writing a treatment.

The treatment is, like the outline, a 'selling' document, intended to convince a reader that there is a cinematic story here and the writer has a firm grasp on its telling. It should do this by *demonstrating* the strength of the concept, the story and characters in action, rather than describing what makes them great.

A treatment aims to give the reader a semblance of the experience they would have watching the film. If, for instance the film intends to shock, the reader will ideally be shocked, if its intended to move, thrill, confront, enlighten and so on, then the aim is to create that impact on the reader.

Most importantly, a treatment should describe the action or plot of your story, in the order in which it unfolds. All the key structural beats should be covered, and the character's change should be apparent. As a longer document, the treatment will also include subplots, indicating how they integrate, and reverberate, with the main plot. It should also convey mood and tone.

Other elements you may wish to check are covered in your treatment include: plot premise; central question; core conflict or act two engine; key characters' trajectories; thematic argument; third act with resolution; clear tone and respect for conventions of your chosen genre.

Here is a portion of a treatment for *Lantana*. It is written in a fluid style with a clear tone and describes what the viewer is experiencing as it unfolds, even while wrangling multiple points of view:

When Leon gets home – late – he is guilty and anxious. He lies about where he's been. Sonya knows something is wrong – and he knows she knows – but she says nothing. Next morning, Leon is out jogging, driving himself, proving that he does not have a bad heart – or perhaps courting disaster. He runs smack into another man – a stranger. Leon abuses him, but then is shocked when the man cowers and weeps. At home, hurt and smeared with the other man's blood, Leon cannot bring himself to describe this glimpse of male vulnerability; he lies to Sonya, claiming he fell.

At work, he lies to Claudia too: he says he hit his head on the clothesline. Claudia makes it very clear that she won't cover for Leon with Sonya again. Exasperated (and lonely herself), she berates him for putting his marriage in jeopardy.

Meanwhile, Valerie has another session with her patient Patrick. She has difficulty remaining objective and finds his description of his gay lover's wife disturbing. She finds herself identifying with this woman and compelled to defend her... Later, she tries to broach her uneasy feelings to John, but he blocks discussion, guesses that Valerie is judging Patrick and advises referral to another therapist...

There are standard definitions of what a treatment is, such as: "the telling of the story in the present tense, in a cinematic way – that is, confining the telling to only what can be seen and heard." Such definitions may not be strictly adhered to, but the intention is to describe what is happening on screen without relying on actual scene-writing or dialogue, to keep the focus on what the characters are doing (including doing to each other). It is legitimate to describe some thoughts and emotions, but detail within scenes and dialogue are generally avoided. What is more of a priority in the treatment is not what the characters say but what their dialogue does, changes or achieves.

As another example, here is a version of a key development in *Proof* in treatment form:

As a test, Martin asks Andy to describe his latest batch of photographs – which Martin labels with stickers in Braille. Andy's descriptions are pithy and amusing – with a tinge of cynicism, which Martin finds congenial. Martin is still guarded, but he is beginning to trust his new friend. To Martin's surprise, one photograph is of Celia. Martin is dismissive, even cruel, about his housekeeper, but he can't see that Andy is intrigued and attracted. Enjoying his role, Andy takes it further: he will describe moving pictures to Martin – at the drive-in.

Andy's descriptions of Martin's photographs are not reported; rather it is the nature of the descriptions and how they develop the relationship between the characters that is important. Celia's photograph is only included because it is a key set-up and hints that Andy may not be as trustworthy as Martin thinks.

The more complex the plot, the more detail you may want to go into. But the more mechanical 'explaining' that's included, the less likelihood of the reader staying engrossed in the story.

Some screenwriters say they hate writing treatments, and they can be limiting and difficult, but they also demand discipline. In the script, the reader may be beguiled by a beautifully written scene or witty repartee, for example, but in the treatment a writer can only rely on events in the developing narrative.

A strong treatment, where the story is doing everything it needs to, often makes the drafting process much easier. When the whole story and its meaning have been interrogated by the team and are clear in the filmmakers' minds the script itself can be written with much more efficiency, command and depth.

If, however, the writer wants to employ a level of detail that includes specific ideas for scene visuals, dialogue, locations etc, they may be better suited to preparing a scriptment.

Scriptment¹

A scriptment, as used by Screen Australia in context of our guidelines, refers to a document that is part script, part treatment, and may include visual materials. It is likely to be a more expanded and detailed document than a treatment or scene breakdown, and incorporate some scene writing and possibly images as well as prose.

A scriptment may be approached as an expanded treatment, it can include scene headings and key dialogue, but is not a full script. It may be used to demonstrate that the writer clearly envisages particular moments and scenes in the film.

In a scriptment, scenes and shots may be separated as paragraphs or sentences and, if it is the writer's style, can also include an occasional explanatory note, such as might be important in an adaptation or a sequel. Important words or phrases of dialogue can be included within the description, or longer scriptments may contain dialogue scenes that are fully developed, formatted as a regular screenplay.

Some scriptments may use summarised scenes such as:

INT BONDI BEACH APARTMENT DAY: Joan, smoking, nervous, barefoot, pacing, in a sexy beige dress. Late afternoon light slants through the skylights. The bed is unmade, Revi's art pieces - some on easels, others stacked. Revi's in jeans, no shirt, on a bar stool, watching her. They've just made love. R: Yeah? J: Yeah, what? R: You've wanted to tell me something from the moment you walked in here. Revi gets off the stool and walks to her, taking her into his arms. Off her resistance: J: Ted knows about us. This stops him. J: I don't how he knows but he does. R: What'd you do, blurt it out? J: Of course not. R: You like to hurt him. That gets her. She crosses to where she's left her shoes and bag. R: Where are you going? J (slipping into her shoes, extracting her keys) I can feel a fight coming on. R: No, please, I promise. I'm - I don't know what I am, but don't leave. Please? They stare at one another.

James Cameron's scriptments tend to also include concept art, such as for *Avatar*.

Kriv Stenders, inspired by James Cameron, financed and shot his micro-budget feature *Boxing Day* from a scriptment he created with his lead actor Richard Green².

Here is an excerpt from the scriptment for *Boxing Day*:

SCENE 3 : 5 MINS (Running time = 10 mins +)

The loud "thud, thud" sound of a car stereo, as a car pulls up outside.

CHRIS and ALAN's conversation is then interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

CHRIS opens the door to find their friend OWEN, obstreperously drunk and holding a case of beer. OWEN invites himself inside, and starts unloading the beers in the kitchen fridge. The tension inside the house rises dramatically.

It soon becomes clear that CHRIS, ALAN and OWEN are all old friends, and that OWEN is still struggling with his alcoholism.

From the way CHRIS and ALAN act, they are intimidated by the dangerous OWEN and his manner towards them indicates that at some point in the past, he was the leader. As they talk there are allusions to their criminal pasts.

OWEN announces that he has come to spend the afternoon with CHRIS and to keep him company.

We also now learn that CHRIS' wife, DONNA has left him and taken his two young sons with her.

CHRIS is clearly uncomfortable, he promised himself not to touch a drop, and anyway it's strictly forbidden under the conditions of his house detention. When did that ever stop CHRIS, challenges OWEN provocatively. "It's fucking Christmas."

¹ This section on scriptment draws on the research of Dr. Alex Munt - Screenwriting research – Stenders in Munt 2008, [Senses of Cinema](#)

² Screenwriting research – Stenders in Munt 2008, [Senses of Cinema](#)
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Stenders said he wanted a more “intuitive approach at telling a story, writing and making a story”:

“If you have something that mechanically works, as a story, then you are ‘home and hose’. You come into problems if you have an incomplete story. You have to something that is watertight a narrative... The story is your ‘roadmap’: you have to start here, go down this highway, take that road but we are going to be here by the end of it... Some scenes are fully written, some scenes are not. What it is, primarily, is a script in that you have each scene numbered (like a scene breakdown) but it’s written in a treatment style. The story is very precisely mapped out from scene to scene. You can schedule it: you could basically shoot it... Working in this organic way: the characters, the casting, the location – everything influences the script, rather than the other way around.” (Sense of Cinema, 2008)³

Scriptments may also be used to showcase important visual aspects of the story, and include illustrations, concept art, photographs etc. They may be more suited to some filmmakers as a way to express their style of storytelling and what will make their project special.

³ Screenwriting research – Stenders in Munt 2008, [Senses of Cinema](#)
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