

Professional Suggestions: Tips on Writing a Treatment for the SAICFF Treatment Competition

How to write a three-page treatment:

TALK YOUR STORY OUT ON PAPER

*A flawed but sympathetic protagonist
summons moral courage to face and then overcome
increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable moral tests
to achieve a compelling desire.*

"My story is about (PROTAGONIST) who wants more than anything else in the world to, (DESIRE) But, (OBSTACLES AND ENEMIES) will try to prevent this, but (MORAL COURAGE) helps the hero overcome in the CLIMAX.

Make sure you have an intelligent beginning, middle and end.

Work hardest on your ending.

Is your plot coherent?

Is story built on the plot full of meaning?

Can you explain why the story deserves the attention of the investor and audience?

Can you explain the most important element of your story and why they are important?

Some Examples:

Two Examples from Esther:

1. Pop Teeny Bop Esther

This like really cute girl is like seen by a beauty scout and gets to be in this like pageant and like the winner gets to be the queen of this really rich country and have these great makeovers and jewels and servants and stuff and not only that but the king is like this really really really cute hunk and he thinks she's the cutest girl in the whole kingdom they have this really far out wedding like the biggest in history and it's like her special special day and when she says important things like this really liberated woman he listens to her and she gets to save her people and stuff from this bad man who hates Jews and they live happily ever after. It's like the coolest fairy tale with these really spooky charismatic like moments where God shows up and stuff.

Comment: This treatment tells the reader a lot about the writer's intentions: the film will sound like a juvenile film and have little Biblical content or wisdom.

What would a serious treatment look like?

2. Mature, World-class Diplomat Esther

In a mature drama faithful to biblical and historic texts, a young Jewish maiden is kidnapped into the vast harem of the maniacal Xerxes, where she serves him in a graphic depiction of true biblical submission as queen of antiquity's most curious superpower. By God's sovereign plan, Xerxes elevates Esther's God-fearing cousin, a faithful subject, to Prime Ministership, replacing a murderous conniving Amalekite, and arming the Jews to stand against genocidal conspirators in the greatest infantry combat ever brought to cinema.

Comment: The tone of this treatment tells the reader about the serious intentions of the author and gives specific information the reader must have to evaluate the ability of the writer to understand the true Biblical content of the story.

A treatment is written in prose, paragraphed to look like a short story, but it is not a short story. An acceptable regalement makes the events of the story visual. Always write in present tense. Stay concise and to the point. Use short sentences. Use an absolute minimum of dialogue. Write in a normal, conversational manner.

A one-page treatment doesn't tell someone THE story ... it tells them ABOUT the story. A three-page treatment adds some plot and story structure, and explains the importance of the ending.

Your three-page treatment should cover the story angles and the reasons the film will be different from every other film.

Three other examples, based on a recent film with which you may be familiar:

1. A Poor Treatment

Viktor Navorski, a man from an Eastern European country arrives in New York but after he left his country; war broke out and because of that Navorski is a man without a country that the U.S. cannot recognize, thus he is denied entrance to the U.S. However, he also can't be deported so he is told by the Security Manager that he has to remain in

the airport until his status can be fixed. And also Navorski doesn't speak English well, so no one can talk to him and he can't talk to anyone. But he somehow adapts and sets up residence in the airport, which makes the man who placed him there unhappy cause, it seems he is line for a promotion but Navroski's presence might complicate that. So he tries to get Navorski to leave but Navorski remains where he is. Navorski makes friends with some of the people who work in the airport and is attracted to a flight attendant he runs into whenever she comes in.

Comment: This treatment exhibits bad writing and poor story handling. Sounds like a loser of a film.

2. A Better Treatment

“The Terminal” is the story of Viktor Navorski, a traveler who’s stranded at John F. Kennedy International Airport after a coup topples the leadership of his homeland, the fictional Krakozhia. The new rulers aren’t recognized by the United States, so Viktor finds himself stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to enter the U.S. and unable to fly home because his passport is no longer valid. He’s told ‘America is closed’ and is forced to wait out the war in the international terminal, passing the time learning English, hanging out with a few sympathetic airport workers, falling for a stewardess, and trying to avoid causing further problems for the airport’s homeland security official.

Comment: Hmm. I'm intrigued and want to know more about this dramatic scenario. Great premise. I want a full three-page treatment to get an understanding of what this good writer has in mind.

3. The Best of the Three, (*with helpful comments from a treatment judge*)

The Terminal tells the story¹ of Victor Navorski², a first-time visitor³ to NYC from Eastern Europe, whose homeland erupts in a fiery coup⁴ while he is in the air en route to America on a mysterious⁵ mission⁶ to honor⁷ his late father⁸. Stranded⁹ at JFK Int'l Airport¹⁰ with a passport from nowhere¹¹, he is de-authorized¹² from stepping onto American soil¹³ and must improvise¹⁴ his days and nights¹⁵ in the terminal's international transit lounge¹⁶ until the war at home is over¹⁷.

As the weeks and months stretch on¹⁸, Victor finds¹⁹ the compressed universe²⁰ of the terminal to be a richly complex world²¹ of opportunity, generosity, ambition, amusement, entrepreneurial experimentation, camaraderie, social status, Divine providence²² and even potential courtship and marriage²³ with a beautiful flight attendant named Amelia.

Within a small commercial wing of the airport, Victor's story unfolds as one of cinema's most colorful²⁴ emigrant adventures²⁵. Victor²⁶ not only learns about America from

¹ You need to captivate me in the first sentence. Your treatment needs to tell more than the story. Tell me about the story and about your mind.

² Make a clear protagonist visible and understandable early.

³ Three words that tell volumes about the scope for the experiences awaiting a stranger in a strange land.

⁴ Vivid language suggests a vivid story with vivid drama.

⁵ Not all will be revealed in Act I: you know the value of revealing information at the right stages.

⁶ Let me know that the protagonist has a definable goal.

⁷ Show unique virtue and moral distinctions that will set your film apart from all others.

⁸ Family relationships connections help box office

⁹ One word introduces tension, obstacles and moral tests, all of which I want to see.

¹⁰ This familiar location makes me comfortable that I know I can judge the merits of the story personally.

¹¹ Colorful phrase helps me see the bleakness of the dramatic challenge

¹² Something curiously active is being done to a helpless protagonist

¹³ Familiar phraseology helps me see and touch an emotionally sentimental concept and goal

¹⁴ A resourceful hero matching wits against misfortune is good cinema because it helps a hero in passive misfortune hold his fate more directly in his own hands.

¹⁵ I can see the structure of the adventure

¹⁶ Now I can see the colorful setting more clearly

¹⁷ Now I have a ticking clock that shows me a most immediate goal: hero has to get out

¹⁸ Much opportunity here for character growth and development

¹⁹ We have an observant hero through whose eyes we can learn vicariously

²⁰ What moviegoer would not want to look through this window?

²¹ Now I know what kind of world will be carefully created by the script

²² Show me you understand God's framework of creation and truth and will include it in the film

²³ All ten complexities are staples of good cinema, and all in one film?

²⁴ Show me your confidence in the film's commercial superiority

²⁵ A potential classic: a grand selling point

²⁶ Help me develop a love for your hero

sacrificial and ambitious immigrants, he learns about the promises of the American dream known only to those who taste the rewards of real struggle, real community and real freedom²⁷.

Even as he yearns for home, melting-pot America is *dazzling* to Victor ...and *good* to Victor²⁸. It is in this triumphant context that the film introduces the unbridled cruelty²⁹ of a fierce new villain³⁰ to cinema³¹: the statist bureaucrat who wields the unlimited powers of “homeland security.” Tense and irritable³² airport official Frank Dixon hates the gentle³³ Victor because Victor is a non-textbook bureaucratic glitch, a problem Dixon cannot control and wants desperately to get off his desk³⁴ and out of his resume³⁵. Dixon’s efforts are a mastery of tyrannical absurdity and insolence, over which Victor triumphs with active³⁶ patience, active wisdom... and active friends who know only too well the face of tyranny.

Victor’s genial nature and energetic resourcefulness earn him the respect of airport staff, including the security officers who watch his every move, every adventure and every unjust³⁷ persecution on security monitors. In a thrilling climax³⁸ these bonds of friendship overpower the unlimited muscle of the tyrant. Victor steps onto American soil to pursue his family obligation.

²⁷ The free enterprise history of American rugged individualism is rich, rich, rich.

²⁸ Let me see into your worldview: you are not an America basher or rebel with a hateful, cynical attitude.

²⁹ This shows me your appreciation for the extremes that must exist between villain and hero.

³⁰ Not only do you understand conflict, you know intense conflict.

³¹ Another first? This is shaping up to be a groundbreaker, not a knockoff...a leader, not a follower film.

³² Yes, I can see the villain now.

³³ Yes, I can see burning coals on the villain’s head

³⁴ The villain needs a goal too, and now I see you understand dramatic tension.

³⁵ Aha. Insight into the dark soul of the ladder-climbing bureaucrat. One word and I know all I need to about the villain.

³⁶ Heroes can’t be passive, even if they are confined and contained. One word shows me you know this.

³⁷ You’re giving me more strong reasons to care for the fate of the embattled hero, even with one word.

³⁸ Possibly the most important phrase of the treatment: I need to know you have an intelligent ending.

Now, at last³⁹, the great mystery⁴⁰ of the film can be solved⁴¹. Why *had* Victor traveled to America? What *was* his single-minded duty which would not deter him? Victor is loyally committed to his father's great ambition and deathbed request: the gathering of a full collection of autographs from America's jazz greats, the men who inspired Victor's father with visions⁴² of Western freedom⁴³. As Victor adds the last remaining autograph to the unique legacy⁴⁴, he returns home with the triumphant⁴⁵ satisfaction of a dutiful⁴⁶ son in whom a father can be well pleased.

³⁹ Show me you have an ending and that you know how to handle it intelligently.

⁴⁰ Great unknowns can keep audience interest until the end.

⁴¹ I need to know you have more to offer than thrills of endings or twists. What is meat of the story that can penetrate hearts?

⁴² The father's request enables the son to live out the dreams of the father.

⁴³ Rich backstory with insights into Victor's soul shows me a level of intimacy few films can reach.

⁴⁴ Keep enticing me with your understanding about faith, family, freedom, theology.

⁴⁵ The triumph of virtuous heroes needs to be comprehensive.

⁴⁶ Show me virtue upon virtue.