

What is my Premise?

Blog Post 4-30-15 Premise examples

We are at the VERY BEGINNING of the writing process for a great story idea you have been toying with for years. Do you buy screenwriting software and plug in your characters and start typing away? Answer: NO. THIS IS THE DEATH KNEEL FOR A STORY. AFTER A FEW PAGES, YOU WILL BE LOST.

TAKE YOUR TIME AND...Start with the Premise. A premise in screenplay writing is also called a Log Line. If you stand in a parking lot and yell across to a friend and tell the friend what the story is about, you should require only one or two sentences. In Premise talk, you should be able to tell what your story is about in approximately 25 words or less.

A Premise is a combination of character and plot. It is NOT theme, not a character's weakness, not every detail in the story, not a sequence of events. It should include the following:

1. The inciting incident
2. The main character
3. The outcome (highly summarized) of the story

A Premise gives you the "High Concept" of the

story. The “high concept” is the premise with a flip. The Premise should also enable the reader to tell what the genre is in those concise 25 words. The Premise should NEVER be the same as a movie you have seen. The Premise should never be an idea that you cannot develop into a story that has all the structure beats.

Here are examples of some famous Premises:

JAWS – Great white shark eats tourists off a small East Coast island community; a conflict-avoiding, water-phobic sheriff has to go out and kill it. (24 words)

The Inciting Incident in **JAWS** is when someone is eaten alive by the Great White. The main character is the sheriff. The outcome of the story is that the Great White is killed.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE – a Divorced Dad who misses his kids disguises himself as a British nanny and is hired by his ex- so he can see his kids more. (26 words)

The Inciting Incident in **MRS. DOUBTFIRE** is when the divorced dad is told by a judge that his wife has sole custody of his kids. The main character is the divorced dad. The outcome of the story is that the divorced dad will be able to see his kids.

THE FIRM – A young lawyer joins a law firm, only to be told by FBI he’ll be indicted soon since it

is Mafia-owned; no one quits. (25 words)

The Inciting Incident in THE FIRM is when the young lawyer joins a law firm. The main character is the young lawyer. The outcome of the story is that the young lawyer will find a way out of the Mafia-owned firm without getting killed.

Please open the pdf attachment in our Blog: Premise Examples. This is a page from a typical cable t.v. listing of films for the week. Note that several films are about 50 years old. The Premise Line concept was not as prevalent with the older films. In the 1980's, the Premise Line concept started to be a requirement by the Hollywood studios.

Practice writing down the 3 main components of each Premise Line. Be aware of the "High Concept" and the genre for each film. The more you do this exercise, the better equipped you will be to start writing your own Premise Lines.

["If not now, when?" Who was Hillel the Elder?](#)

... and what does he have to do with the goals of JCAD (American Friends of the Jerusalem Center for Artistic Development)?

Hillel the Elder, born in Babylon, in 110 BCE, lived in Jerusalem during the time of King Herod and the Roman Emperor

Augustus. Both Hillel and Moses lived 120 years!! Unlike Moses, at the age of forty, Hillel went to the Land of Israel; forty years he spent in study; and the last third of his life he was the spiritual head of the Jewish people. His activity of forty years likely covered the period of 30 BCE to 10 CE, when he died.

Hillel the Elder contributed to a famous treatise called the Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot).

The book was a compilation of famous rabbis' wisdom for mankind to aspire to the highest level of ethical and moral behavior. Hillel is credited with the following thought-provoking questions, which have been passed down for more than 2,000 years:

"If I am not for myself, who is for me?" Hillel tells us that we must love ourselves enough to be "for" ourselves, since there is no one else who would or could do this on our behalf.

"And when I am only for myself, what am I?" We should not be tempted to be self-absorbed and forget about the Almighty and our fellow man.

"And if not now, when?" We need to get going and soar like birds and take leaps of faith!

All you have to do is take a walk on the stone streets of Jerusalem and read the street signs, the door posts; see the indentations in the doorways where ancient Mazzuzot were affixed; gaze at the rooftops in certain sections of town, and walk down the narrow alleyways where only a donkey and a cart can still pass. Today you will see young people with their Smart Phones and cellphones; you will see wine glasses and hear the laughter of crowds on a warm summer evening; or see a mound of snow caressing a stone wall that is a thousands years old; or walk into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and smell the incense; step out onto a wide piazza and buy fresh-baked pita or laffa bread spread thick with chummous.

- The stones upon which Jesus walked and preached during the Second Temple period (538 BCE- 70 AD) are located on an enormous mount, now called the Temple Mount.
- The stones upon which Avraham offered Itzhak to God, (an area called Mount Moriah in the Bible), are on the Temple Mount.
- The stones where The Holy of Holies is buried are under the Temple Mount!
- The stones leading to King David's tomb are in Jerusalem and close to the Temple Mount.
- And the City of David, where King David's palace is under excavation is in Jerusalem, close to the Temple Mount!
- The remains of The First Temple and The Second Temple are in Jerusalem, under the Temple Mount.
- The retaining wall of the First and Second Temple is part of the foundation of the Temple Mount.
- And cisterns, sarcophagi, tunnels, pottery, coins, artifacts, jewelry, human and animal remains from thousands of years ago are in Jerusalem!

If you have a story to tell, "If not now, when?" is what you might ask yourself. Walking amongst the stones of the Bible may inspire you. A character in the Bible might inspire you to tell a modern parable; think up an action/adventure story; come up with a political intrigue or drama or love story. It's all under your feet. Those stones all tell a story. It's time!!

The Character Bio Can Be

Tricky©

When doing a character bio the trickiest thing to do is to create an area of misunderstanding or misguided belief in your protagonist, (the one who changes the most) and in your antagonists (the characters who obstruct, impede, challenge, love, hate, annoy and generally impact the protagonist.) It means you have to know the difference between what they actually need, and what they believe they need. They need to believe that if only they had this, or were that, or could get the other, or weren't this that or the other, then their worlds would be hunky dory and they wouldn't have any problems. This barking up the wrong tree is the basis of all desire in your characters, and *desire is the motive energy behind all action.*

This is where the next question comes in:

What does the protagonist *think* will happen if he/she *doesn't* get what they

want?

In books (and to a much greater extent in movies) your protagonist needs to want something really badly. They want it more than we do. In our lives we make compromises. We usually follow the path of least resistance because we can't endure the conflict. We generally want easy lives. In stories, characters want stuff so badly that they actually go about getting it, doing whatever it takes to get it, in ways we probably wouldn't. If a protagonist doesn't want something badly enough, he or she won't do anything about trying to get it, and then there won't be any story.

A "play" with the words "want" and "need" and "think you need":

But when your character reaches the climax of the story, will he actually get what he *thought* he needed? Maybe so. But maybe not. Here's where the epiphany comes in. It's the realization that at the final moment the character has been

fighting for, working toward, racing forward, jumping over highways and byways to get to...Maybe it *was* what he wanted, but maybe there's something that he needed but he didn't realize that he needed it, but now that he has achieved the end goal, he just may get what he *needs*, as opposed to what he *thought* he needed!!

So when you are creating your character, he/she must have a history that is not perfect by any means. There are triumphs and there are flaws; highs and lows; good days and bad. You need to describe these in as much detail as you can. Make pages of this information. Have fun. What did your character have for breakfast when he/she was little? Where did he/she live? Describe the house/apartment/street. Maybe your character lived in a shelter. Describe. Did your character go to school? If not, what did he/she do during childhood? Maybe like Charles Dickens' Oliver, he stole for a living and lived under the thumb of a ruthless Fagan

character. Maybe your character was an orphan. Maybe from a family of ten. Were they religious? Did they go to a house of worship with their family? Or did the parents send the kids and stay home? Or did the parents go and leave the kids home? Was your character rich, poor, or somewhere in-between?

- Describe the neighborhood, town, country where your character grew up.
- Describe physical and emotional characteristics, including age.

**** Note: *All characters in your story should have a bio.*** The main character (protagonist) and the antagonist and the point of view character will get the widest amount of attention. Round them out and make them as real as possible. Try to employ empathy when creating them. Get into their skin!! If they did something that was unusual that was not something you would have done, it is important to go with this. This character is not you. This character has

a life of his/her own.

**** Come up with some very high and some very low points of each character's "back story." Sometimes, people say that "a certain high point" or "low point" defined them for the rest of their life. Whether or not this ends up being true, the character may *think or believe* this!**

Learn About Values

A JCAD "Learn About Values" Workout

A thought-provoking exercise to hone your characters, your story idea, your theme

First, let's differentiate between **ethics, morals, and values**

Ethics = A generally accepted set of moral principles

Morals = The good or bad or right or wrong of actions

Values = Individual or personal standards of what is valuable or important

Next, we decide what our values are. Sounds elementary? Take a test:

- Write down the major challenges (both positive and negative) you have encountered in your lifetime. This could be a page long or ten pages long. No time limit. It's just for your eyes.**
- Now, answer this question: How did you overcome or meet these challenges. Are you still dealing with them?**
- Next question: If you could be a main character in a story, what challenges (positive and negative) would you like to give to your main character?**
- Next, how do you think your main character could overcome/meet these challenges you have given to him/her?**
- Next, write down some of the values that "speak" to you. For example,**

1. Honesty

2. Trust

Kindness

- 4. Integrity**
- 5. Courage**
- 6. Perseverance**
- 7. Personal Responsibility**
- 8. Empathy**
- 9. Tolerance**
- 10. Anything else you can come up with!**

Now, let's do a WHAT IF exercise with values:

We know that problems may arise where individuals allow their personal values to interfere with their actions, thereby potentially bringing their actions into conflict with stated ethical standards.

WHAT IF individuals allow their personal values (which are the opposite of what we wrote above) to interfere with their actions?

For example, let's say personal values are: Dishonesty, immorality (the opposite of what we wrote).

Now, we have a law firm that specializes in dishonesty and immorality, such as the one in The

Firm. Why? Because it's a firm that is a front for the mafia: Nobody ever leaves!!! (except in a coffin)

So we've just taken a value system and corrupted it, and what is the result? **We have CONFLICT.** John Grisham, who wrote *The Firm*, has given the hero (in the film, the Tom Cruise character), a young, idealistic lawyer, CONFLICT. He doesn't know about what this firm really does when he takes the job. His wife has an inkling that all is not quite right, but Tom Cruise, young lawyer, is swayed by the offer of a Mercedes, a home, a mortgage that comes with a nice down payment, and a huge first-year salary with all the perks. Is it greed on the hero's part? Or is it the lure of a poor boy finally "making it" and being accepted by his wife's wealthy (and snobbish) family?

Then we look at the values of the hero: Integrity, Honesty, the complete opposite of the firm.

And now we know the challenges Tom Cruise's character is going to have to overcome to SURVIVE because the Firm is going to murder him, as they have done to other attorneys who discovered just who they are.

How many of us are confronted with DISHONESTY AND IMMORALITY? Do we consider ourselves to be honest and moral? Are we ever tempted to be dishonest and immoral? What happens to the Tom Cruise character as he confronts all of his challenges in

the story? Is he tempted by immorality? Yes. Is he tempted by dishonesty? Definitely. So, how does he resolve his challenges? We find out in the climax, in Act 3!