SELLING

YOUR STORY IN

60 SECONDS

THE GUARANTEED WAY TO GET YOUR SCREENPLAY OR NOVEL READ

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THE 10 KEY COMPONENTS OF A COMMERCIAL STORY

1

The secret of a successful 60-second pitch is to convey the most powerful elements of your story clearly, succinctly and passionately — to get the buyer emotionally involved enough that he demands to read the script.

But what are those elements? How do you decide, when you only have a minute or so, what to say, and what to leave out? And how do you abide by the cardinal rule of all telephone pitches: *Don't try to tell your story!*

Now comes the confusing part. Right out of the gate, it's going to sound like I *am* suggesting that you tell your story. Because the first step in preparing your pitch is to define all the most important elements of your screenplay or novel. Not so you can then race through them all in the hopes of grabbing your listener, but so you'll be able to choose which of these ten items will best convey the power of your story.

The choices will differ for each project. Some pitches will emphasize character, some action. Some will focus on blockbuster potential; some will rely on your personal passion. But all good pitches draw on at least three or four of these ten qualities.

So here are the ten questions you must answer about your story before you even begin to think about what you'll say during your pitch:

1. *Who is your HERO?*

Who is the protagonist who drives your story? What's the name and role (cop, teacher, college student, alien, hospital

patient, etc.) of the main character, the one the audience is rooting for through the entire story?

It's possible that your story has more than one hero — that there are two or more characters whose desires drive the plot, as in the novels *Bel Canto* and *A Long Way Down*, or the films *Wedding Crashers*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Crash*. Just make sure there's at least one.

2. *Why will the reader — and audience — EMPATHIZE with your hero?*

Movies, screenplays and novels are participatory events. In order to experience the emotional roller coaster they offer, audiences can't just observe the action, they must *become* the hero as she faces all the obstacles standing between her and her goal. In other words, they must empathize and identify with the hero.

To insure that your reader has this experience, you must immediately employ at least two of five key methods for establishing this psychological connection:

- **Create sympathy**. Readers identify with characters they feel sorry for, so make your hero the victim of some undeserved misfortune. Harry Potter being forced to live under the stairs by his horrific relatives in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*; Dewey Finn getting fired by his own band in *School of Rock*; Josey Aimes' abuse by her husband in *North Country*; Viktor Navorski being stranded in *The Terminal*; these events are all designed to get us rooting for each movie's hero.

- **Put the hero in jeopardy**. We identify with characters we worry about. *The Bourne Supremacy*, *Kill Bill* and all of the James Bond and Indiana Jones movies open with their heroes in life-threatening situations. And the heroes of *Bel Canto* are taken hostage by guerillas at the beginning of that novel.

This jeopardy doesn't have to involve physical danger, as long as the hero is facing the loss of something of vital importance. The possibility of Peter La Fleur losing his gym in *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*, or of Peter Parker losing his job and flunking out of college in *Spider-Man 2*, are equally effective at increasing our emotional ties to those heroes.

- **Make the hero likeable**. If you show your hero as kind, loving and supportive, you'll increase your reader's empathy with that character. *Elf*, *The Station Agent*, *Mean Girls*, *Prime,* and *Finding Nemo* all introduce us to big-hearted heroes — each one is immediately shown doing something nice for another character. And Susie Salmon, the 14-year old narrator/hero of *The Lovely Bones*, speaks lovingly about her family at the opening of the novel (plus we quickly learn that she was a murder victim, and is speaking to us from Heaven, creating sympathy for her as well).

  A neat trick for exhibiting this quality in your hero is to show him as well liked by other characters in the story. *Road to Perdition* and *Munich* portray professional killers. Yet each hero is introduced as deeply loved by his family. It's only after empathy has been established that we see each one with a gun in his hand.

- **Make the hero funny**. A hero doesn't have to be lovable to be empathetic. *As Good as it Gets*, *Bad Santa,* and *The Bad News Bears* all portray heroes who are bigoted, insulting and generally pretty nasty. But we identify with them because they make us laugh. These are heroes we want to spend a couple hours with, and who we might even secretly admire, because they have the nerve to hurl all these mean and politically incorrect insults that we would never admit we sometimes feel.

- **Make the hero powerful**. Audiences like to root for characters who can get the job done. Not only for superheroes, but for anyone who's very good at what she does. Max's skill as a cab driver in *Collateral* serves this function, as do The Bride's fighting skills in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and Nathan Algren's marksmanship in *The Last Samurai*.

Notice that every successful movie or novel reveals at least two of these qualities for its hero as soon as the character is introduced. Ann Darrow in *King Kong* is sweet and kind, starving, and loses her job within ten minutes of when she's introduced. She's also a skilled vaudevillian and acrobat (a great example of *foreshadowing*, by the way, but you'll have to read my other book for an explanation of that, since it's unrelated to pitching). And we know she's in jeopardy because she's about to go meet a giant killer ape, though our anticipation of that is due more to the advertising than to the screenplay.

Empathy is something you must create *when the hero is introduced*. Making your hero a victim in the middle of the movie or showing him *becoming* kind and loving may make your story richer, but it doesn't create empathy and identification.

3. *What is the SETUP of the story? Where is your hero when he's introduced, before the forward movement of the story begins?* For a story to fully engage us, we must enter it before the beginning of the hero's journey. We want to see who and where the hero is before these extraordinary events begin to occur. Whether it's a young, turn-of-the-century factory worker in the novel *Specimen Days*, an author on the rise in *Capote*, a superhero in *The Incredibles*, or an electronics store employee who's secretly a *40-Year-Old Virgin*, the opening of your story must introduce us to your hero living his everyday life. It's as if you're saying to the reader, "*This is who my hero was yesterday, and for a long time before that.*"

During the setup, you must create immediate empathy for your hero, using the techniques outlined in #2 above. The setup is also where you exhibit the beginning of your hero's arc. Think of it as the BEFORE side of the BEFORE AND AFTER picture you're going to reveal to the audience through the course of the story.

In the novel and film *In Her Shoes*, Maggie Feller transforms from a self-involved, thoughtless and overly dependent party girl to a woman who stands up for herself, assumes responsibility for her life and considers the needs of others. But we wouldn't appreciate the courage and growth she achieves if we hadn't seen the emotional cowardice and limited existence she exhibits at the beginning of the story.

4. *What OPPORTUNITY is presented to your hero?*

In a properly structured screenplay, some major event will occur 10% of the way into the story — something that will get the story into gear, and begin the hero's forward movement. In *The Ring*, Rachel learns about a mysterious videotape that might be connected to her niece's death; in *Munich*, Avner is asked to head a team of assassins; in *Million Dollar Baby*, Maggie asks Frankie to be her trainer; and in *13 Going on 30* Jenna is sprinkled with magic dust.

The 10% rule doesn't necessarily apply to novels or plays. But the need to present your hero with some opportunity early in the story, to take the plot in a new direction, is essential.

In the Nick Hornby novel *A Long Way Down*, the four heroes, intent on committing suicide, all go to the top of a well-known jump-to-your-death building on New Year's Eve. Meeting each other and being stopped from jumping is their opportunity, even though it occurs almost immediately — far sooner, relative to the length of the novel, than it would — or will — in a movie adaptation.

As a result of the opportunity, your hero will move to some new situation. When the guerillas take over the Vice President's home in the novel *Bel Canto* (the opportunity), the hostages must now figure out what's going on, and somehow survive their captivity (new situation). And in almost every Spenser novel Robert B. Parker has ever written, the opportunity occurs when a new client walks into Spencer's office, leading to the new situation — he begins his investigation.

Very often geography will follow structure in this regard — notice how many movies and novels change the location of the story right after the opportunity, so the hero begins a literal, as well as psychological, journey. Ann sets sail for Skull Island in *King Kong*; the animals leave the zoo in *Madagascar*; Bree leaves to find her son in *TransAmerica*. These new situations begin at the 10% point of each film.

Even if the story location remains the same, your hero must be placed in some new situation as the forward movement of the story begins. In many love stories and romantic comedies, like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Fever Pitch* and *Shopgirl*, the heroes' involvement with their love interests is what gets the ball rolling. In all of these films, the two lovers begin dating at the 10% mark.

Entering this new situation creates a need for your hero to figure out what's going on, and to acclimate herself to her new surroundings or relationship. It is out of this New Situation that your hero's most important quality will emerge….

5. *What is your hero's OUTER MOTIVATION?*

If you've ever heard me lecture, or if you've read *Writing Screenplays That Sell*, you know that I consider the hero's goal the foundation of any story.

Stories are driven by *desire*. Whether it's finding the Golden Fleece, hunting the White Whale or solving the Da

Vinci Code, the hero's desire determines the plot and structure of the story.

In more than 90% of all Hollywood movies and TV episodes (and in the majority of books and plays), this desire is *visible*. It is easily envisioned as soon as we hear it, and it immediately establishes a finish line we're rooting for the hero to cross by the end of the film. Hence my term *Outer* Motivation — it is outwardly visible to the audience, as opposed to desires for self worth, acceptance, fulfillment or revenge, which are invisible.

It gets even more specific than that. Almost all Hollywood movies are about heroes pursuing one of only four visible goals:

- To win — either a competition, as in *Remember the Titans* and *Miracle*, or the love of another character, as in any love story or romantic comedy.

- To stop — meaning to stop something bad from happening, as in *Silence of the Lambs* or *Red Eye*.

- To escape — as in *Panic Room* or *The Island*.

- To retrieve — meaning to venture out and search for something of value, in order to bring it back safely, as in *Ransom* or *National Treasure*.

In addition to its richness of character, its statements about the nature of love and family, its examination of a controversial social issue and its universal themes, *Million Dollar Baby* is first of all a story about a fading fight manager who wants to guide a boxer to winning the world championship. Without that visible desire driving the plot, none of those other qualities, and none of the depth of the story, could emerge.

Perhaps because character and theme are fun to talk about after seeing a good movie or reading a good book, or because, as storytellers, we want our work to *mean* something,

this basic principle is very difficult for many writers to master. They can talk endlessly about their stories' bigger themes, or what will make them visually stylish or politically charged, but they can't answer the simple question, "*What are we rooting for?*"

6. *What's the CONFLICT?*

Desire may drive your story forward, but the obstacles your hero faces are what elicit the greatest emotion. To get your reader to feel something as he reads your story, you must make it seem impossible for your hero to get what she wants.

This conflict can come from nature (*A Perfect Storm*, *The Grudge*, *Awakenings*), from other characters (*The March*, *The Plot Against America*, *Crash*), or from within the hero (*Walk the Line*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and any other story where the character goes through an emotional arc). But whether it's from the sheer power of the external obstacles, the chasm that divides the two lovers or the characters' own inner flaws and emotional fears, when buyers hear your pitch, you want them to immediately think, "*There's no way this hero can possibly win*." Then they'll read your script to find out whether — and how — your hero succeeds in spite of all that conflict.

7. *What is your hero's ARC?*

Character arc simply means a character's inner growth and transformation through the course of the story. How does your hero (and perhaps other characters in your story as well) change inwardly as he pursues the visible goals and faces the visible obstacles you've given him?

Character arc is a journey from fear to courage — from living an emotionally safe but unfulfilled existence to risking everything to find one's destiny. It's your character's transformation from someone who's defined by others (parents, the past, society) to someone who stands up for himself.

In *Shrek*, the hero may act as if his life is perfect, but living a solitary, isolated existence in a swamp, protected by a sign that says KEEP OUT, is really just his way of avoiding the pain of rejection that he's been subjected to since childhood. He's defined by a society that regards him as ugly, scary and incapable of love — and he buys into it.

This is the BEFORE picture of Shrek we're presented with in the setup. But his transformation comes when he befriends Donkey, and then falls in love with Princess Fiona. His desire for her is so great that he's willing to risk the thing that has terrified him most — declaring his love and risking rejection. So his arc takes him from isolation to connection, from a protected existence to living his destiny.

Your hero's arc must always be *universal*. Like Shrek, we all fear rejection, and we all must exhibit courage if we want to experience connection and fulfillment. This is how the hero's arc defines the theme of that film.

A hero's arc requires great emotional courage and takes the entire book or movie for the hero to achieve transformation from a self-involved existence to one of loving generosity in both the novel and the movie *About a Boy*; Daniel's journey from a physically and emotionally isolated agoraphobic to a man willing to face his fears in order to find true love and family in the novel *The Pleasure of My Company*; and Dewey's learning to take responsibility and to give up his own ambition for the sake of the students in *School of Rock*.

Of course, in some stories, the hero doesn't find that necessary courage. Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* and Truman Capote in *Capote* are examples of such tragic heroes.

And in some stories, there simply is no character arc. Your primary goal is to elicit emotion, and if the action is exciting enough and the visible conflict great enough to accomplish that goal, it isn't necessary to delve deeply into

the inner needs and conflicts of your characters. But in most novels and films, especially dramas, love stories and romantic comedies, character arc is essential.

8. *What deeper ISSUES does the story explore?*

Don't confuse character arc and theme with your story's *message*. Some novels and films make political statements, revealing some social issue or injustice that the writer wants to expose and address. *The Day After Tomorrow* addresses global warming. *Erin Brockovich* paints a picture of corporate greed and corruption. *Crash* examines the tragic consequences of racism. And *Hotel Rwanda* makes a powerful statement about the West's complacency and moral failure in the face of African genocide.

But these are social and political issues, not universal themes. The hero of *Hotel Rwanda* is portrayed as a man who goes along to get along, who plays it safe and avoids making waves for the sake of his family and his own personal comfort and status. But by the end of the film he will evolve into a courageous hero who risks everything to protect and save the people taking refuge in his hotel.

This arc is universal; you don't have to be a victim of war or genocide to exhibit this same courage and transformation in your own life. To fully realize our humanity, we must all find the courage to risk or sacrifice the things most important to us — even our own lives if necessary — for the sake of the greater good. That's the theme of the film.

9. *What are the successful ANTECEDENTS for your story?*

At some point, with every writer or producer I ever coach, I ask the question, "What two or three recent books or movies can you point to and say, '*Because that made money, mine will make money*.'" Far too frequently, writers have no idea what to answer. And until they can, it will be almost impossible for them to sell their stories.

Mentioning successful stories that are similar in genre, tone, plot and/or demographic give buyers a much clearer picture of your own story's commercial potential. These reference points put buyers in a positive mindset. Subconsciously they're thinking, "*Yeah, I want a hit like that*."

I once heard a pitch for a movie I thought had a lot of possibilities. "That could really be hilarious," I said. The writer looked at me like I'd just giggled during an execution, and revealed that the story was supposed to be a serious drama. Not surprisingly, the company I worked for didn't option the script.

This may speak more to my twisted sensibilities than to the quality of the project. Nonetheless, a couple of antecedents would have prevented the misunderstanding, and enabled me to consider the writer's story on its own terms.

Antecedents also give buyers a clearer sense of your story's emotional elements. So does having a couple stars in mind who could play your hero, in case a buyer asks you for casting possibilities. If you convey the idea that your movie shares common elements with *The Ring*, *Dawn of the Dead* and *Saw*, then they immediately understand that your script is for a moderately budgeted movie that will scare the crap out of people — and make truckloads of money doing it.

Movie financiers and publishers want to do everything they can to insure a profit on their investment. They do that by replicating success. As soon as they begin listening to your pitch, they're thinking about what other movies or novels have made money by following the same path that you're suggesting.

You want to do that work for them, by making it clear that yours is the next in a line of similar movies or novels that have turned into cash machines.

Sometimes writers, groping for even a single successful precedent for their story, will answer, "There aren't really any antecedents for my project. I want it to be completely original."

Wrong answer.

Hollywood isn't looking for total originality. Neither is Random House. They're looking for movies and books they know how to market. Certainly you want your story to be unique and interesting; buyers aren't really just looking for clones of other best sellers and blockbusters. But if you can't point to at least a couple recent hits that verify your story's commercial potential, you're gonna have a tough sell.

10. ***What is your PASSION for this story?***

What do *you* love about this story? What grabs you emotionally? What made you want to commit at least a year of your life — probably a lot more — to writing and selling this? What makes it a movie you'd want to see? What makes this a great movie, or a great novel (not just an interesting story)? Why is it a movie that *has* to be made, or a book that *must* be published?

Your passion is not so much something you'll announce during a pitch; it's an *attitude* you'll convey with everything you say to the buyer. Passion is contagious, and your excitement, focus and tone of voice must all convey your enthusiasm for your story.

So there you have it — the ten most important elements of a novel or screenplay. But just to beat you over the head with Rule #1: *Don't try to tell your story*. A pitch — even a 60-second one — is not a race to see how many of these you can convey in a minute. Using the methods I'll outline in the next chapter, you will select only the ones which convey the essence of your story to buyers, the ones that will get them emotionally involved enough that they'll start to share your passion for it. When you do that, they'll demand to read it.