

**Excerpted from**  
**LOGLINES AND TAGLINES ARE DIFFERENT**  
**And You Need Both For Your Novel**  
**by R. Ann Siracusa**

**THE TAGLINE (the big hook)**

Author Stacey Nash describes a tagline for books as “a one-sentence summary of your story. Its goal is to intrigue and make the person that you are delivering it to want to read the story. The most important thing about the tagline is that it needs to be high concept. It should sum up the entire plot in one quick compelling sentence.”

The samples of taglines (all for movies) used by Lucy V. Hay are:

- “*An epic of miniature proportions*” (A Bug’s Life)
- “*EARTH—take a good look. Today could be your last.*” (Independence Day)
- “*The Toys are back in town.*” (Toy Story 2)

The longest is ten words. We’re talking short and high concept.

Whatever art form they’re selling, taglines are one or maybe two sentences that describes the product. That sentence utilizes puns, clever wording, and images that the average person already knows about to intrigue the individual into wanting to read the book. For me, the key is using imagery most people know and understand to convey an expectation of what the book is about. It’s the Big Hook. The Attention Grabber. And your book needs one.

**THE LOGLINE (30 word elevator pitch)**

The logline, while short, is longer than the tagline and presents a basic description of your plot in about twenty-five to thirty words. It should contain all the necessary elements for telling a good story. It’s tough to condense 90,000 words into twenty-five. It’s a two-story elevator pitch or a thirty-second time bite in real time. And you need one of these for your novel, as well.

**Stanley D. Williams** believes a good logline is a single sentence which includes five elements.

The subject of the sentence will describe (1) an imperfect but passionate and active PROTAGONIST. The verb will depict (2) the BATTLE. And the direct object will describe (3) an insurmountable ANTAGONIST who tries to stop the protagonist from reaching (4) a physical GOAL on account of (5) the STAKES, if the goal is not reached.

**Christopher Lockhart** writes “A logline conveys the dramatic story in the most abbreviated manner possible”:

- Who the story is about (protagonist)
- What he/she strives for (goal)
- What stands in his way (antagonistic force).”

**Stacey Nash** sees it as 3 sentences in which you sum up your plot answering these questions:

- Who is your main character?
- What does he/she want? What is his/her goal?
- Why does he/she want this (motivation)?
- What are the obstacles in his/her way?
- What makes the story unique?

**Cindy Carroll** (screenwriter and author) recommends using one of these structures to answer the address the elements of the logline.

- To stop A, character B must do C, but D happens.
- When A happens, character B must take some action (C), but D happens.
- Character B does something, then when A happens they must do C, but D happens.

She gives the example of one of her own loglines, which is twenty-three words.

*“When an informant turns up dead, a by-the-book undercover cop models men’s underwear to uncover the killer and stop a DVD pirating ring.”*

**Kimberly Killion’s** pitch format works as a way to structure a logline (fill in capitalized words).

“TITLE is a GENRE about ADJECTIVE/DESCRIPTION OF MAIN CHARACTER, who wants to DEFAULT ACTION. But when CALL TO ACTION, he must STORY GOAL, which seems impossible because CENTRAL CONFLICT.”

### **Rules of Thumb**

- Be succinct without being sparse. The trick is to create a logline that is pithy but has substance. It must be clear that the antagonistic force is an obstacle to the major goal. It must imply that something is at stake; it must suggest that something can be lost.
- Don’t use the main character’s name.
- Use a descriptive adjective to give the main character depth in a word or two. Instead of describing the main character as “a detective” use “a cynical fifty-year-old detective” or “a young, enthusiastic detective.” Using “an ex-superhero” tells a lot more than “a superhero.” “An alcoholic ex-superhero” conveys even more to the reader (or listener).
- Make the genre clear in the text. If your novel is a romance, you need a hero and heroine in the logline. Whether science fiction, comedy, or mystery, the logline should tell the reader what the genre is.

- Present a succinct description of the protagonist’s main goal and place it as close to the beginning as possible.
- Make your protagonist pro-active. Show the action of the story. Even if the protagonist is reactive, that’s not the same as passive.
- Include the stakes or a ticking time-bomb. Urgency. Show that something can be lost. I like the example used by Erik Bork in his article.
  - *To save his reputation, a secretly gay fraternity boy must sleep with fifteen women by the end-of-semester party.*
- Include the set up, particularly science fiction or paranormal where the rules are different. More Erik Bork examples:
  - *In a world where all children are grown in vats...*
  - *Driven to a mental breakdown by an accident at work, an aquarium manager...*
- Don’t reveal the twist or surprise at the end. The logline (and the book) should work by itself without the “bonus” surprise at the end.
- Make every word count.
- Sell it, don’t tell it.

One final suggestion from a number of screenwriters and authors: Write your Log Line before you write your novel, or at least at the beginning. James Burbridge writes that the bad news is that if you can’t make the logline work, it’s probably because the story doesn’t work.

**EXAMPLE: FROM THE PRESS KIT FOR *CLOSE QUARTERS*.**

• **Tagline**

A film about sex, betrayal, friendship, jealousy, love, hate, death, and coffee.

• **Logline**

Forced to work an extra shift, two young baristas must come to terms with their own relationship while being bombarded by the very different issues of their diverse customers. (29 words)

• **Short Synopsis**

BARRY and ABBY are two baristas in a Chicago coffeehouse. Barry is passionately and blindly in love with Abby. She knows this all too well, but is hardly ready to move into any kind of formal relationship with him. This does not stop Barry, though, who has decided that the best way to win her over is to propose to her in front of the largest group possible. This evening will be his opportunity. It is Abby’s birthday and her friends are planning a surprise birthday party for her. Barry is planning an even bigger surprise.

**EXAMPLE: THE MOVIE *JAWS***

• **Tagline**

Don’t go in the water.

• **Logline**

A sheriff struggles to protect his beach community after a grisly shark attack, but greed rules the Chamber of Commerce. (21 words)