

Here is an example of a one sentence summary of the theme of the 1940 John Ford film, THE GRAPES OF WRATH, based on the John Steinbeck novel. We'll try to give some idea of what the whole story is all about:

This American epic is the chronicle of a family of migratory farm workers in its struggle to survive after it was dispossessed by the upheaval of the Great Depression, and how this family had to eke out an existence in its quest for dignity and gainful employment.

This is a fair statement of the theme of THE GRAPES OF WRATH, but it sounds a bit too bookish and sociological -- if we read this kind of plot summary in the TV listing of our local papers, it probably wouldn't strike us as the kind of film we'd care to spend two hours watching tonight. Yet we know THE GRAPES OF WRATH is one of the most powerful and compelling films ever made, so where have we failed to capture this excitement in our summary of the film story?

Well for one thing, the diction of that one sentence summary is so impossibly erudite, and the word choices are so pretentious, that they throw up a fog around the real drama of the story and make it sound more like a book report or a term paper than a living story about real human beings. And that's not the sort of thing that would really excite an agent or a producer. So let's try it again, and see if we can't make the film story come more alive:

This is the story of the Joads from Oklahoma -- Ma, Pa, Tom, Rose O'Sharon, Grandpa and Grandma -- and how they all have to leave their land, pack their belongings on a rickety used car, and drift from one makeshift shanty town to another, looking for an honest day's pay and a little fair play as they make their way out to the promised land of California.

That's a little better -- perhaps because we were able to cut down on all those generalities and get in a few more specific image details. Place names help, and so do proper names. Notice also we put the whole thing in the present tense, which gives it more reality and immediacy. Also, we chucked all those ten dollar Latinate words and tried to use as many plain style monosyllable Anglo-Saxon words as possible.

Writing this kind of summary statement of a theme isn't easy, and one has to keep tinkering with it to create a sentence that will be both accurate and compelling. But once one masters this simple exercise, one has gone a long way towards mastering the skill of turning out a persuasive screenplay treatment.



William Packard: THE ART OF SCREENWRITING
Franklin-Watts, 1985