

*Kathie Fong Yoneda*

# THE SCRIPT- SELLING GAME

*Getting Your Script Sold and Produced 2nd Edition*



### Chapter 3

## Pitching: A Necessary Evil

*True story from a writer who wishes to remain anonymous: When he was getting started in the business and wanted to make an impression on a high-powered producer, the writer came in to "pitch" his baseball movie dressed in a baseball uniform, complete with ball and mit. To start out his pitch he tossed the ball to the producer to get his attention and to emphasize that the name of the project was The Catch. Unfortunately, the writer's aim was off and the ball hit the producer's coffee mug, spilling java all over the place. The writer admitted he needed lessons in how to pitch — both literally and figuratively.*

**Pitching** is the art of communicating (verbally or in writing) the essence of your screenplay or project, usually to an agent, studio executive or producer. While fewer projects are optioned on a pitch alone, more writers are pitching their wares as a means of enticing potential buyers to read their completed scripts.

**Pitchfests** — marathons of pitching to potential buyers — are also major components of many screenwriting conferences. **One-on-Ones**, ten-minute meetings with featured speakers or presenters, are also guaranteed “draws” for writers to attend and have the opportunity to tell Hollywood execs about their latest and greatest project.

Pitching, especially the verbal kind, does not come naturally to most writers. After all, writers seem to prefer to let their words-on-paper do most of the talking for them. With the high volume of scripts flooding the studios and major production companies every month, pitching has become “a necessary evil” for screenwriters to face and conquer.

Did you know that there are different types of pitches? And do you know when to utilize them to “sell” your work? Let’s go over the types of pitching tools you are most likely to use.

### Tool #1 — The “Log Line.”

Your **log line** must tease the potential buyer, making him want to hear more of the story. In the following examples for the blockbuster *Avatar*, the quirky independent film *Away We Go*, and the whimsical animated movie *Finding Nemo*, notice how you can develop a log line by starting out with a short simple sentence.

#### *Avatar* — Log line.

Marine is given new assignment.

Paraplegic Marine is sent to a foreign moon on assignment.

Paraplegic Marine is dispatched to a foreign moon to infiltrate a colony of aliens.

Paraplegic Marine is dispatched to a foreign moon to infiltrate a colony of aliens who pose a threat to Earth.

Paraplegic Marine is dispatched to a foreign moon to infiltrate a colony of aliens who pose a threat to Earth, but eventually questions his mission.

Paraplegic Marine is dispatched to a foreign moon to infiltrate a colony of aliens who pose a threat to earth, only to question his mission when he realizes this peaceful new world poses no harm.

#### *Away We Go* — Log line.

Pregnant couple goes on road trip.

Pregnant couple, anxious about parenthood, goes on a road trip.

Pregnant couple, anxious about parenthood, takes a road trip, visiting various friends and relatives.

Pregnant couple, anxious about parenthood, takes a road trip, visiting various friends and relatives, hoping to ease their insecurities and find a place to settle down.

Hoping to ease their insecurities over the impending birth of their first child, a couple takes to the road, visiting friends and relatives in an effort to find their new home.

Hoping to ease their angst over the impending birth of their first child, a couple takes to the road, visiting an oddball assortment of friends and relatives — an odyssey which ends when they find the real meaning of family and home.

#### *Finding Nemo* — Log line.

Young fish is captured.

A father fish witnesses the capture of his young son.

When his young son is “fish-napped,” a father clown fish sets out to rescue him.

Timid and cautious, a father clown fish sets forth on a danger-filled journey to rescue his impulsive son Nemo, who’s been fish-napped and imprisoned in a dentist’s aquarium thousands of miles away.

You will note that in each of the above examples, each successive sentence gains more importance and gives us a better understanding of the characters and a notion of the escalating storyline. The use of colorful, descriptive adjectives and verbs as well as creative restructuring of each sentence gives the log line more weight, flow, intensity, and interest.

### Tool #2 – The “Elevator Pitch.”

Similar to the log line is what is known as the **elevator pitch** — an expanded log line.

Imagine that you are attending a film festival. You get into the elevator of a posh hotel and notice there is only one other person in the elevator with you. It is the handsome Australian heartthrob, Sam Worthington, who just happens to be the perfect actor for the lead role in your very latest action project. He presses the tenth floor button. You recognize that this may be your golden opportunity. You have approximately fifteen to twenty seconds to tell him about your movie.

While this scenario may seem highly unlikely, having less than a minute to tell someone about your project is a very common situation. Would you be able to tell your story in less than a minute? For many writers, this is sheer terror. But, with preparation, the “elevator pitch” can be one of your most useful selling tools. Here is an “elevator pitch” which might have enticed Sam Worthington into taking the lead role in *Avatar*.

**EXAMPLE:** *Assigned to infiltrate a potentially dangerous colony of aliens on a foreign moon, a paraplegic Marine is torn between obeying his orders and protecting the spiritual tribe with whom he has bonded. His friendship with a female alien deepens into love, and in a final showdown, he risks all to help the aliens save their homeland.*

An elevator pitch should not take more than fifteen to twenty seconds to pitch and should be no more than a few sentences in length. You will notice that the first sentence clearly lays out the major storyline and even brings in the main character’s motivating backstory which will propel him throughout most of the movie. The second sentence

also provides the groundwork for the subplot: the romance between Sam Worthington’s character and the female alien. The overall pitch signals an intriguing plot that combines danger, action, suspense, and romance featuring a deeply torn lead character who must risk his life by changing his long-held loyalties.

The elevator pitch is what many writers use at the fast-paced pitchfests where the producers and development execs only want to hear a couple of sentences about your project before deciding if they want to hear more details. The elevator pitch is a slightly longer log line that can serve as a setup for your three-minute pitch.

A written version of the elevator pitch can also be used as a major component of a writer’s query letter to producers or agents, which brings us to the next tool in a your arsenal.

### Tool #3 – The “Pitch On Paper.”

Many a well-prepared writer has given thanks to those fickle screenwriting muses for having a **P.O.P.**, or “pitch on paper.” A pitch on paper is a brief, one-page synopsis of your project which has just enough details to whet a producer’s or agent’s appetite and to distinguish your project from others.

Basically the P.O.P. consists of the following:

- > A log line that gives the potential buyer a general idea of the storyline.
- > The first paragraph contains the setup of the story — the main character, his present situation, his enemy/foe, where the story takes place, and the characters and incidents that move the main character into action.
- > The second paragraph is an overview of the various challenges the hero or heroine must face in the midsection of the movie.
- > The third paragraph is a quick summation of the ending or a summation of Act Three that ends with an intriguing question or situation designed to leave the climax to the imagination of the potential buyer.

Here are examples of a P.O.P. from two successful films — the classic romantic comedy *Sleepless In Seattle* and the blockbuster, futuristic action-adventure flick *Avatar*.

### ***Sleepless In Seattle* — Pitch On Paper**

**LOG LINE:** *A young boy's call to a radio psychologist sets into motion a series of events which could unite his widowed father with a magazine writer. Only a couple of things stand in the way: The boy and his father live in Seattle and the writer is already engaged and lives in Baltimore.*

**SAM** is a Seattle architect, a widower, and father to young JONAH. Jonah recognizes that his father is lonely. Troubled, Jonah calls one of those late-night radio psychologists and talks about how worried he is for his dad. In Baltimore, magazine writer ANNIE and her FIANCÉ have just announced their engagement to her family. As she is driving home, she tunes into the talk show and feels a connection to Sam. Annie's best friend BECKY suggests that she do an article on radio talk shows. Realizing that Jonah is right and he needs to get on with his life, Sam contemplates dating again.

Sam takes the plunge and calls the DECORATOR on one of his projects. She ends up asking him for a date. Annie writes a letter to "Sleepless in Seattle," the radio psychologist's nickname for Sam, but tosses it in the trash. Becky rescues the letter and sends it off to Seattle. Unable to get "Sleepless in Seattle" out of her mind, Annie arrives in Seattle to do her story. She sees Sam embracing another woman and quickly returns home.

Annie plunges back into her wedding planning with her Fiancé, while Sam makes plans to spend the weekend with the Decorator, much to the disappointment of Jonah, who sneaks out of the house and takes a flight to NYC, hoping to meet Annie at the top of the Empire State Building. Will Sam realize where Jonah has gone? Will Annie listen to her heart? And will Sam and Annie finally meet?

### ***Avatar* — Pitch On Paper**

**LOG LINE:** *Assigned to infiltrate a potentially dangerous colony of aliens on a foreign moon, a paraplegic ex-Marine questions his mission when he is torn between obeying his orders and protecting the colony, which he has come to regard as his new home.*

Paraplegic ex-Marine JAKE SULLY takes his late twin brother's place in a scientific project on a foreign moon. Jake will be part of an important program where he will become a genetically-bred Avatar so he will look like a Na'vi alien. The program is run by DR. GRACE AUGUSTINE, who also has an Avatar body. Jake meets corporate security head COLONEL QUARTICH, who claims the Na'vi are dangerous and must be killed. He tells Jake that if he uses his presence among the Na'vi to get him information on their culture, he will make sure Jake will get the surgery he needs to walk again. Jake agrees to do so. Awkward at first, Jake gets used to his Avatar body. He stays from Grace and reacts violently when confronted by a pack of Yipervolves. Na'vi princess NEYTIRI saves him, but chides him for being a baby and for killing unnecessarily. But she senses he has a strong heart and has no fear. Her assessment is validated when the sacred seeds of Eywa gravitate to Jake. She takes him to Hometree, the Na'vi's main habitat, and he is accepted when Neytiri's mother MO'AT declares that Jake can live with them, and that Neytiri will be responsible for teaching him their language and customs. Neytiri accepts this responsibility with reluctance.

Meanwhile, corporate rep PARKER SELFIDGE is under the gun to start mining for a valuable mineral, Unobtainium, the largest source of which is located under Hometree. He thinks the Avatar team is moving too slowly in getting the Na'vi to move to a different location. Grace moves the Avatar team to the floating mountains, closer to the Na'vi. Jake learns the language quickly and comes to understand the Na'vi's connection to the plants and animals. Neytiri declares he is ready to connect with a Banshee, a flying creature. It is a dangerous rite of passage, but he succeeds. While riding his Banshee, he learns to avoid TORUK, an even larger flying creature. Neytiri says her grandfather rode Toruk to unite the five Na'vi tribes many years ago. Neytiri is proud of Jake's progress, but Quaritch now has the information he needs to destroy Hometree. At the sacred Tree of Souls, Jake and Neytiri finally mate and accept their love. The next morning, bulldozers come to destroy the area at the Tree of Souls. Jake stops the bulldozers, but Quaritch recognizes Jake. Jake returns to the lab and begs Parker to let him persuade the Na'vi to move away. He is given an hour. Unfortunately, Jake and Grace are bound to a stake by the Na'vi. Quaritch and his flying platoon destroy Hometree. Mo'at releases Jake and Grace and begs them to save the Na'vi. Neytiri's father is killed. Back at base, Jake and Grace are arrested.

*Pilot TRUDY CHACÓN, who did not sign on to kill innocent aliens, frees Jake and Grace and flies them to the Navi. They are met with skepticism, but Jake asks them to save Grace, who was wounded in the escape. They take her to the Tree of Souls, but it is too late and she dies. Jake successfully bonds with the Toruk and returns to the Navi. But is he too late to help the Navi rally the other tribes? And how can the Navi possibly win against Quaritch and his massive high-tech weaponry?*

In both examples, you will notice that most of the storyline is set up in the first paragraph and fewer details are given in the second and third paragraphs. Each of the paragraphs coincides with the basic three-act structure: beginning, middle, and end.

Some writers prefer to do one long paragraph for their pitch on paper, which is basically three to five sentences on each act. A P.O.P. is sometimes given to a potential buyer at the end of a pitch meeting to help the producer or exec refresh his or her memory after a day of hearing several pitches. Some agents or smaller production companies might be intrigued by your query letter, but are not yet willing to take the time to commit to looking at a 110-page script, in which case they may ask you for a one-page summary (P.O.P.) of your project.

#### Tool #4 — The “Synopsis.”

There will be times when you will need more than a one-pager, but less than a treatment of your project. This document is called a **synopsis**.

#### What is a “synopsis”?

A synopsis is very much like those book reports we used to do in high school. It is a summation of the major highlights of the story, told in a positive, hopefully engaging manner that will convince someone to read your treatment or screenplay.

#### Why is it important to have a synopsis of my project?

While attending a number of recent writing conferences, pitchfests and screenwriting events, I have noticed that book editors, agents and production execs on the prowl for hot new material are

limited by the amount of time it takes to read a full-length screenplay or a several hundred page manuscript. In some instances, they have requested a synopsis, stating that a two- to three-page synopsis would be a more helpful document for them to consider than a P.O.P.

In addition to the fact that a synopsis is a timesaver, execs found that reading a synopsis could also give them a better idea of a writer’s “style.” As one agent confided, it was her experience that some writers could come up with a great log line, but many times she would be disappointed when she read the actual screenplay or manuscript. Having a synopsis not only helped to flesh out the storyline, but gave her a much better idea of the writer’s storytelling style and his ability to develop characters and advance the plot.

While a one-pager is a good way to know the basic plot of the writer’s material, a two- or three-page synopsis is an even better indication of more specific elements that could possibly set this project apart from others of the same genre.

#### But isn’t a synopsis the same as a treatment?

A synopsis is generally no more than two to three pages in length, whereas most treatments are at least five to ten pages or more in length. A synopsis has more details of the plot than a P.O.P., but treatments will be even more detailed and sometimes will include a line or two of dialogue to give “color” and “flavor” and a sense of drama/comedy, or attitude that will typically run through the entire project. Treatments will spell out every major plotline and every subplotline and will include nearly all characters with speaking parts.

#### What are the key elements of a selling synopsis?

- ▶ Like a P.O.P., a synopsis usually starts off with a log line or elevator pitch.
- ▶ The first paragraph should give an indication of the time period, unless the story is set in present day, which needs no such indication.
- ▶ The first paragraph or two should include the area(s) where a majority of the action takes place.

- ▶ All major characters should be introduced in the first few paragraphs.
- ▶ The main character's goal should be clearly apparent by the end of Act One.
- ▶ The "B" storyline is usually set up by the end of Act One, or, at the latest, in the first half of Act Two.
- ▶ The midsection of your synopsis is where you will spend about three to four paragraphs setting up the escalating obstacles and challenges that your character(s) will face in Act Two.
- ▶ At the end of Act Two, your synopsis should indicate the ultimate challenge being faced by the protagonist.
- ▶ The last couple of paragraphs of your synopsis should cover the denouement of your story and wrap up any loose ends of your major plotline and any subplots.
- ▶ It is up to you if you would like to "tease" the potential buyer by ending the synopsis with an intriguing question or two that "lead" the reader to the appropriate ending. Some writers prefer to use a conventional approach that gives us a clearer sense of how the story ends.
- ▶ Please note that certain genres help to define the length of a synopsis. Shorter synopses are used for romantic comedies, love stories and family-friendly films, while mysteries, thrillers, action-adventure, historical pieces and sci-fi/fantasy projects tend to increase the length of a synopsis.

### How can a synopsis be used?

If you are attend a writing conference or pitchfest, an agent or producer may ask for a synopsis (or occasionally, a treatment) of your project if they liked your log line, elevator pitch or verbal pitch.

But probably the most important use of a synopsis is to register your project with the Writers Guild of America to establish a timeline for your creative efforts. Most professional writers will immediately register a synopsis of their latest project, even if they have not yet

completed the entire screenplay. Once they have finished their script, they will register the screenplay. Registering your material comes in handy, should that rare situation arise when you feel your project has been compromised or stolen.

Word to the wise: Do not submit a synopsis of your project unless it is requested. If an agent or potential buyer requests a full-length screenplay, do not submit a synopsis to accompany the script. Unfortunately, if a buyer happens to spot both a synopsis and the full material of the same project, and if she is under a time crunch, she may be tempted to read only the synopsis and may very well leave your actual script unread.

Using the previous P.O.P. examples of *Sleepless In Seattle* and *Avatar*, here is how you can expand your pitch on paper into a synopsis (PLEASE NOTE: Most of the text is from the original P.O.P. examples; sections in **bold** are the additions to the one-pager):

### *Sleepless in Seattle* — Synopsis.

**LOG LINE:** In this romantic comedy, a young boy's call to a radio psychologist sets into motion a series of events which could unite his widowed father with a journalist. Only a couple of things stand in the way — the boy and his father live in Seattle and the writer is already engaged and lives in Baltimore.

**SAM, early 30s**, is a Seattle architect, a widower, and loving father to young **JONAH**. As the Christmas season draws near, Jonah recognizes that his father is lonely. Troubled, Jonah calls one of those late-night radio psychologists, **DR. MARSHA**, and talks about how worried he is for his dad. Dr. Marsha asks Jonah to put Sam on the phone. Reluctant to open up, Sam eventually is coaxed into talking about his late wife and we realize he is still grieving, even though it has been almost two years since his wife died.

In Baltimore, journalist **ANNIE** (late 20s) and her fiancé **WALTER** (as nice as they come and allergic to nearly everything) have just announced their engagement to her loving but eccentric family. Annie's **MOTHER** takes her to the attic where Annie tries on her Granny's vintage wedding dress. Annie's Mom talks about her own romance with Annie's **FATHER** and mentions the "magic" between them from the start, but Annie doesn't seem to be experiencing that same "magic" as she contemplates

*her future with Walter. As Annie is about to take off the wedding dress, it tears and she can't help but wonder if this is a "sign" of some sort.*

*As she's driving home, she tunes into the talk show and feels a connection to Sam, who mentions the "magic" he felt with his late wife. Following the holidays, Annie attends an assignment meeting, chaired by her best friend and coworker BECKY, who talks about how the phone lines in Chicago were tied up over Dr. Marsha's call with "Sleepless in Seattle." Annie admits that she couldn't stop listening to the show and Becky suggests that she do an article on radio talk shows, much to the chagrin of her male coworkers WYATT and KEITH, who make jokes about how desperate women are these days.*

*Realizing that Jonah is right and he needs to get on with his life, Sam contemplates dating again. He has a man-to-man talk with good friend JAY, who warns him that dating is very different now. Meanwhile, Annie talks to her brother DENNIS about her pre-wedding jitters and she talks herself into thinking her worries are unfounded.*

*Sam takes the plunge and calls VICTORIA, a decorator on one of his projects. She eagerly ends up asking him for a date. Annie does research on the computer and learns that Sam's last name is Baldwin. She hires a detective to learn more about him. Although the detective sends her a blurred photo of Sam having dinner with Victoria (we can only see the back of her head), Annie can't quite get Sam out of her mind and she writes a letter to "Sleepless in Seattle," but tosses it in the trash while she and Becky are watching the romantic melodrama *An Affair to Remember*. Becky rescues the letter and sends it off to Seattle, where it arrives with dozens of sacks of letters, all addressed to "Sleepless in Seattle." Jonah and his friend JESSICA love Annie's letter, which mentions meeting at the top of the Empire State Building on Valentine's Day. Without consulting Sam, they send a reply to Annie.*

*Becky calls Annie in the middle of the night to let her know that Jonah has called Dr. Marsha again. Annie listens and realizes that she is unable to get "Sleepless in Seattle" out of her mind. Annie arrives in Seattle to do her story. Sam, who has just seen Victoria off at the airport, spots Annie and is attracted to her, but loses her in the crowd. Later, Annie sees Sam embracing*

*another woman (actually his sister) and she quickly returns home, thinking all is lost.*

*Annie plunges back into her wedding plans with Walter, meeting him in NYC during Valentine's weekend to select their wedding china at Tiffany's. It becomes apparent to Annie that although Walter is one of the nicest men around, their future would be too predictable and there does not seem to be any "magic" in their relationship. She has a heart-to-heart talk with Walter, who assures her that he does not want to marry her if she is only "settling" for him. She decides to throw caution to the wind and takes a taxi to the Empire State Building.*

*Meanwhile, Sam is packing to spend the weekend with Victoria, much to the disappointment of Jonah, who sneaks out of the house and, with Jessica's help, takes a flight to NYC, hoping to meet Annie at the top of the Empire State Building. As Sam is instructing the Babysitter, he realizes that Jonah is missing. Will Sam realize where Jonah has gone? Will Annie listen to her heart? And will Sam and Annie finally meet?*

#### **Avatar — Synopsis.**

**LOG LINE:** *Assigned to infiltrate a potentially dangerous colony of aliens on a foreign moon, a paraplegic ex-Marine questions his mission when he is torn between obeying his orders and protecting the colony, which he has come to regard as his new home.*

*After a combat spinal injury, paraplegic ex-Marine JAKE SULLY finds himself in a "Catch-22" situation — he cannot work because of his injury, and he is unable to afford the surgery to repair his spinal cord so he can find a job. Then he is offered an opportunity to take his late twin brother's place on a scientific project on a foreign moon. Jake's DNA is the same as his brother's, which means he can become part of an important program where he will become a genetically-bred Avatar so he will look like a Navi alien. The Navi are ten feet tall, with blue skin, and a long thin tail. They are extremely agile. The program is run by DR. GRACE AUGUSTINE, who also has an Avatar body, as does program teammate NORM SPEELMAN. To become an Avatar, Jake, Grace and Norm must lie in a pod where their brain waves are connected to the Avatar bodies which are specially equipped*



to adapt to the breathing needs on Pandora. Grace, Norm and Jake are to learn the language and as much as they can about the Na'vi, their culture, beliefs, and the unique world in which they live on Pandora. Jake is also required to do daily video updates on his experiences with the Na'vi people and their sacred region.

Jake meets staunch, inflexible corporate security head COLONEL QUARITCH, who claims that the Na'vi are dangerous and must be killed. Appealing to Jake's military background, he tells Jake that if he uses his presence among the Na'vi to get him information on the aliens, he will make sure Jake will get the surgery he needs to walk again. Jake agrees to do so. Aboard at first, Jake gets used to his Avatar body. Jake meets TRUDY CHACÓN, a retired pilot, who drops off the Avatar team on Pandora. While on assignment, Jake strays from Grace and reacts violently when confronted by a pack of Viperwolves. Things become more dangerous when a larger creature pursues him and he has to jump from the top of a waterfall to escape. Na'vi princess NEYTIRI, who has been tracking Jake, saves him, but chides him for being a baby and for killing unnecessarily. But she senses he has a strong heart and has no fear. Her assessment is validated when the sacred seeds of Eywa gravitate to Jake. She takes him to Hometree, the Na'vi's main habitat, and he is welcomed by EYTUKAN, Neytiri's father, and accepted when Neytiri's mother MO'AT declares that Jake can live with them, and that Neytiri will be responsible for teaching him their language and customs. Neytiri accepts this responsibility with reluctance. As night falls, Trudy, Grace and Norm must abandon their search for Jake until the next morning — if he is lucky enough to survive the night.

Meanwhile corporate rep PARKER SELFRIDGE is under the gun to start mining for a valuable mineral, Unobtanium. The largest source is located under Hometree. He thinks the Avatar team is moving too slowly in getting the Na'vi to move to a different location. Angry that Parker and Quaritch are unable to understand the importance of the Avatar program, Grace moves the Avatar team and its lab to the floating mountains, closer to the Na'vi. With Neytiri's help, Jake learns the language quickly and comes to understand and respect the Na'vi's spiritual connection to the plants and animals. Neytiri declares he is ready to connect with a Banshee, a large green flying creature which each

Na'vi warrior has. It is a dangerous rite of passage, but he succeeds and gains the begrudging respect of the other Na'vi warriors, including TSUTHEY, who would likely succeed as leader of the Na'vi in the event of Eytukan's death. Tsu'Tey has also made it known that he is attracted to Neytiri. While riding his Banshee, Jake learns to avoid TORUK, an even larger magnificent red flying creature. Neytiri says her grandfather rode Toruk to unite the five Na'vi tribes many years ago.

Neytiri is proud of Jake's progress and it is evident that there is an attraction between them. Jake has come to love and respect the Na'vi and their peaceful way of life, realizing that they are not the violent aliens which Quaritch wants to decimate. However, Jake's change of heart comes too late as Quaritch now has the information he needs to destroy Hometree, thanks to Jake's video logs. At the sacred Tree of Souls, Jake and Neytiri finally mate and accept their love. The next morning, bulldozers come to destroy the area at the Tree of Souls. Jake stops the bulldozers, but Quaritch recognizes Jake. Jake returns to the lab and begs Parker to let him persuade the Na'vi to move away. He is given an hour. Unfortunately, none of the aliens believe Jake and Grace and they are bound to a stake by the Na'vi. Quaritch and his flying platoon destroy Hometree. As she flees Hometree, Mo'at releases Jake and Grace and begs them to save the Na'vi. Neytiri's father is killed. Back at base, Jake and Grace are arrested and thrown in confinement.

Pilot Trudy, who did not sign on to kill innocent aliens, frees Jake, Norm and Grace and flies them to the Na'vi. They are met with skepticism by the Na'vi, but Jake asks them to save Grace who was wounded in the escape. They take her to the Tree of Souls in an attempt to transfer her human soul into her Na'vi body to save her, but it is too late and she dies. Determined to keep his vow to Mo'at to save the Na'vi, Jake uses his Banshee and, in a daring maneuver, he successfully captures and bonds with the Toruk and returns to the Na'vi. He pleads with Tsu'Tey, Neytiri, Mo'at and the rest of the Na'vi to help him. He will unite the other tribes. Because he knows the kind of weapons and equipment used by "the sky people" (the human security forces led by Quaritch), he will help the Na'vi, even if he has to die with them. Before the battle begins, Jake goes to the Tree of Souls and prays to Eywa that the Na'vi will survive.

*As Quaritch and his forces fly into battle, Jake and the Na'vi warriors on their flying creatures attack from above. The battle becomes heated and Neytiri is thrown from her beloved banshee. Trudy swoops in and opens fire, wrecking havoc. But eventually her ship is hit and she plummets to her death. Jake finds Neytiri on the forest floor. Quaritch's troops on the ground are coming closer, but are suddenly overwhelmed by stampeding herds of Pandora's animals. Jake successfully launches a few well-placed grenades which down the bombship before it can get to the Tree of Souls, but Quaritch escapes in his mega exo-skeletal shell. He and Jake do battle and the shell is rendered useless. Quaritch dons a breathing apparatus and heads for the Avatar lab to try and detach human Jake from his Avatar. Neytiri uses her poisoned arrows and kills Quaritch before he can kill Jake. She gives Jake a breathing device to save him.*

*With the corporate military base under Na'vi leadership, the remaining humans are returned to earth, while several of the more sympathetic and enlightened humans decide to stay on Pandora. In his final video log, Jake voices his decision to permanently become a Na'vi. The aliens surround him at the Tree of Souls as he successfully passes through the "eye of Eytwa" and awakens in his Avatar form, to become their leader, with Neytiri by his side.*

#### Tool #5 — The "Big Pitch."

For those situations when you have a one-on-one consultation or you are meeting with a potential buyer who is intrigued by your log line or elevator pitch and wants to hear more, you should be ready for the "Big Pitch."

Writers should approach the Big Pitch as a "verbal trailer" for the film they envision. Like the visual "trailer" of "coming attractions," the Big Pitch should contain the highlights of the story you are telling and it should be told with confidence and style.

Going to websites like *moviephone.com* or *indh.com* can be of huge assistance. Once you are at one of the two websites, do a "search" for a successful movie in the same genre as your project. Then click on the link to the movie's "trailer" and watch it. You will notice that most

trailers last roughly two or three minutes (coincidentally, about the same amount of time as a pitch) and usually contain anywhere from five to eight "highlights" of the storyline. This should give you a general idea of the plot points or character revelations that you might want to extract from your very own script for your pitch.

Some writers will compose a one-page outline of their pitch, using brief phrases to describe the highlights they wish to use in pitching their storyline. Other writers use a similar technique, but divide up their outline into Act One, Act Two, and Act Three, making it easier to refer to the outline, should they become momentarily lost during the presentation of the pitch.

It goes without saying that a concise, well-told story can either open or close those career doors for a writer. Here are some pitching pointers if you are fortunate enough to be invited to pitch your project at a studio or production company:

#### Be concise.

Know in advance that most pitch meetings will last less than a total of twenty to thirty minutes tops. Most of the meeting will consist of general introductory small talk before the pitch. In most cases, the actual pitch will take anywhere from five to seven minutes. In a pitch-fest where there is a shorter time frame, you will need to keep your pitch closer to the three-minute mark. After the pitch, time is allowed for any questions or suggestions from the potential buyer, followed by some parting comments or questions from you, the writer.

#### Know your audience.

Research the studio or production company where you will be pitching. What kinds of movies or television projects do they produce? More importantly, what kinds of projects do they *not* produce?

For example, a writer once made the mistake of pitching a slasher movie to the execs at Walt Disney Pictures. Needless to say, it was an immediate "Pass" and left the executives with the impression that the writer had not spent much time researching the studio's development slate.

There is no excuse for not researching a studio or production company in advance of a meeting. *The Hollywood Creative Directory* lists

credits for produced work beneath each production entity's name. And many production companies now have websites listing their produced credits. The key is to look for studios and production companies who have shown an interest in producing films/projects in the same genre as your own.

In addition, it is important to keep up to date on any "deals" that a studio or production company may have made recently, especially with actors or directors who may have a production company on the premises. Reading the trade papers (*The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*) can often yield this type of valuable information. Again, *The Hollywood Creative Directory* has a section in the back that cross-references personnel with the names of production companies and studios with whom they are connected.

### Practice makes perfect.

It is common sense: Practice your pitch beforehand. It is best to practice in front of people who are *not* familiar with your story. This rehearsal will help to focus on any sticky plot points or confusing storylines.

While practicing in front of your parents, spouse or siblings can provide some comfort and reassurance, you will get a much more honest appraisal of your work if you pitch your project in front of your writers group or a friend who works in marketing or sales.

Be sure to ask the following questions after practicing your pitch in front of anyone:

- > Did they have any comments or suggestions?
- > Did they get a feel for the characters?
- > Did they understand what the hero/heroine was trying to accomplish?
- > Did any sections of the pitch feel too slow or too fast?
- > Was the storyline logical and clearly laid out, or were there any confusing pieces of plotting?
- > Is this a movie that they would pay to see?
- > If not, why not?

### Have a backup.

Be ready to pitch two projects, knowing that you will probably only have time to pitch one. This preparation is especially handy when you have invested time and money in attending a pitchfest.

Why have a backup pitch? If the executive or agent you are pitching to does not appear attentive when you are halfway through, you can quickly wind up your story and go on to your next project.

Also, you never know when a potential buyer will ask if you have other projects in the works. A true writer always has several projects in the works.

### Show some style.

Be enthusiastic when you pitch. Keep in mind that studio and production execs listen to as many as five to six pitches every day. Having heard thousands of pitches, I can assure you that there is nothing worse than someone who is mumbling his story into his lap.

You can ham it up a bit, but do not let your theatrics overshadow your story. Here's an instance of someone who went "over the top":

The project was a modern-day version of the popular fairy tale *Cinderella*. Every time the Fairy Godmother was mentioned in the pitch, the writer threw "magic dust" into the air and waved a "magic wand." By the end of the pitch, my hair and my office were covered with gold and silver glitter. I remembered the pitch — but obviously, not for the right reasons.

Here's a case of someone who used just the right amount of theatrics:

To emphasize her nostalgic 1960s setting, a writer started out by playing the first sixteen bars of a popular song from that era before launching into her pitch. She's not sure if the musical introduction was responsible, but it got the executive to listen attentively to her pitch.... which was optioned on the spot!

Remember to speak clearly — not too quickly and not too slowly. Look at the buyer when you are pitching. It is fine to refer to your notes or your pitch on paper or pitch outline from time to time, but do not "read" your movie to us.

**Start with a log line.**

Start off with your log line, which should accurately convey the essence of your movie as well as a sense of why the public should rush to see your project. Think of the “one-sheets” (giant posters) that advertise the movies.

Some writers often use other successful projects to convey a sense of story and tone. I don’t know if this rumor is true or not, but I was told the execs at ABC Network loved the following log line for a TV series, which utilized two well-known produced properties:

**EXAMPLE:** In this dramedy series, *The Stepford Wives* give the gals from *Sex and the City* a run for their money! (*Desperate Housewives*)

**Go on to the basics.**

Next, state the genre, time period, and where a majority of the action takes place.

**EXAMPLE:** This contemporary, bicastal romantic comedy takes place in Seattle and Baltimore. (*Sleepless in Seattle*)

It is important to state the genre at the beginning of the pitch as a means of setting the scene and the tone of the project. I once had a meeting with a writer who obviously hated pitching and did not show much inflection or emotion in his pitch. Thus, I thought the project was a drama and informed him that we had recently bought a number of dramatic projects. We both were embarrassed when he declared that his project was, in fact, a comedy!

**Introduce your main characters.**

Introduce your main characters with a brief but “telling” description that gives us the following information: age range, major personality traits, job/career, etc.

**EXAMPLE:** Harry Potter, 11, is anxious, but eager, to leave the confines of his room-under-the-stairs at his Aunt’s and Uncle’s house to discover his destiny at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*).

And while there is no need to introduce every single character in your screenplay, do not forget to include the antagonist and any secondary characters who have a major impact on the storyline.

**Hit the high notes.**

Stick to the major plot points and character revelations only. There is no need to describe each and every scene, but any subplot that is key to the main storyline should also be mentioned to give an idea of the depth of the story.

It is also helpful to indicate where you are from time to time.

**EXAMPLE:** By the end of Act One, Bob Parr decides to give up his boring job as an insurance claims adjuster to return to the excitement and adventure he enjoyed as the superhero “Mr. Incredible.” (*The Incredibles*)

This technique lets the executive or producer know you are aware of key plot points and story structure.

**Allow for discussion.**

Afterwards, allow a few minutes for any questions and comments from the executive or producer. You may be asked and should be prepared to answer the following:

> Do you have a completed script or treatment on this project? (Most potential buyers will not schedule a pitch meeting unless you do.)

> Does your project have any **attachments** (that is, a committed producer, actor or director)? Do not worry if you do not have attachments, as many venues prefer projects with as few encumbrances as possible.

Some buyers play it close to the vest and may not have any comments other than “We’ll get back to you.” On occasion, some will pass on the spot.

However, if a producer/executive liked your previous work, and if your pitch was well told, you may be asked to contact the producer when your next screenplay is close to completion, even if the project you just pitched does not fit into their present development plans.

This is also the perfect time to ask what is on the studio’s or production company’s “wish list” of projects. What genre of films are they looking for? If you have a project that might be suitable, it is

appropriate to mention it. If the potential buyer has the time, he may even ask you to tell them a little bit about it. But if he does not ask you about the project, do not force the issue.

### **Be receptive.**

In general, be open to all comments and responses given. You might file suggestions in a feedback file.

More specifically, if the same plot point is questioned by different potential buyers, consider reworking and clarifying that particular area of the project.

Do not be surprised if an executive or producer tells you that he or she (or another studio/company) has something similar in development. Similar story ideas seem to come in waves — remember *18 Again*, *Vice Versa*, and *Big*? Few people remember the first two films mentioned, but most people fondly remember *Big*, which was released last, but was the most successful of the three “body switch” movies. “Something similar” does not mean someone has “stolen” your idea. “Something similar” can mean a project is set in the same historical period or has a very similar “hook” as your idea.

### **Be prepared.**

If the buyer shows an interest in your pitch, ask if she would like to see the screenplay. If you have not completed your screenplay, give her an idea of when it might be completed.

Legally, the buyer cannot ask a writer for written material without the agent's or entertainment attorney's knowledge, but many writers carry a P.O.P. with them and hand it out at the end of the meeting. Just be sure that your name, your agent's name (if you have one), address, email and phone information are also included.

Since executives and producers hear dozens of pitches each week, they may need a summary to refer to if they want to take further action on your project. Most writers would rather have a potential buyer refer to a summary they have written, rather than to rely on the exec's or producer's memory.

If a buyer is “high” on your pitch and asks to see the script, have a copy available. If you do not have an agent, request a release form

(see page 185 for more information on release forms). If you have an agent, call the agent immediately after the meeting and let her know that a script of your project is with John X at Z Films, so your agent can record the information and follow up on it.

### **Do not give up.**

Keep in mind that there is more than one studio or production company around. One rejection does not indicate failure.

If, however, you have pitched your project to several entities without so much as a nibble, you may want to consider shifting the focus of your efforts on your next project and put the first one aside.

Distance and time will sometimes yield new ideas and insights that can improve your initial work.

Remember that a pitch meeting is usually only given to writers whose work has been favorably read. If you are fortunate enough to have obtained a pitch meeting, please make sure that you are well prepared. Because time is at a premium, writers (especially those who are less experienced or “unproduced”) may not get another opportunity to pitch to the same person again, unless that initial pitch was exceptionally well told.

With the onset of technology and to address the growing interest in screenwriting around the world, be sure and check Chapter Fifteen for more information on optional ways to get your projects noticed by utilizing the Internet.

For those of you who are eager to test the waters of Hollywood, here are some recommended websites regarding pitching and pitchfests:

The Great American Pitchfest — [pitchfest.com](http://pitchfest.com)

Hollywood Pitch Festival — [jademonline.com/events/hollywood\\_pitchfest](http://jademonline.com/events/hollywood_pitchfest)

Screenwriting Expo — [screenwritingexpo.com](http://screenwritingexpo.com)

PitchQ — [pitchq.com](http://pitchq.com)